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The following mammoth document of over 600 pages contains commentary on the four Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, the Pauline and Catholic letters, and the Book of Revelation. These books of the New Testament are arranged, not as they appear in the bible, but chronologically according to their composition date (according to some scripture scholars; all of whom don't agree).

In order that you not have to scroll down to arrive at the place you might want to consult, you can hold the control key and hit the "f" key. Then type in the number of the book which you want to locate. Those numbers are (be sure to use the asterisk before the number):

- \*01 Forward and Introduction
- \*1 Gospel according to Mark
- \*2 Gospel according to Matthew
- \*3 Gospel according to Luke
- \*4 Acts of the Apostles
- \*5 Gospel according to John
- \*06 Forward and Introduction to the letters
- \*6 First Letter to the Thessalonians
- \*7 First Letter to the Corinthians
- \*8 Second Letter to the Corinthians
- \*9 Letter to the Philippians
- \*/10 Letter to Philemon
- \*/11 Letter to the Galatians
- \*/12 Letter to the Romans
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- \*/26 Second Letter of Peter
- \*/27 The Book of Revelation

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# Turn the World Upside Down

by Praying and Living and Preaching

# the Gospel

and Acts of the Apostles

**Keith Clark, Capuchin**



Nihil obstat  
Francis Dombrowski, O.F.M., Cap.  
Censor librorum  
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Imprimi potest  
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## Foreword

This book is not an exegesis of the scripture texts; it is a reflection on the four gospels and the Acts of the Apostles has been informed by the exegesis of several scripture scholars. It is something of a compendium of what I have learned from those who are capable of serious exegesis. My only contribution is the perspective from which I have read the scriptures and the commentaries of others; I believe that the stories of Jesus and his teaching are given to us in order that we might turn the world upside down by the way we pray, the way we live and the way we preach.

In the body of this text I have given cross references to parallel passages in the other gospels, except in the case of the Gospel of Mark. Since Mark was the first gospel to be written, there was no source in the other synoptic gospels from which he could draw; Matthew and Luke, however, clearly had the Gospel of Mark at hand when they produced their own work. John seems almost entirely independent of the other evangelists.

Neither Matthew nor Luke had at hand the writing of the other. But the cross references to Luke's and Matthew's gospels are given so the reader can see how Mark was understood by two independent sources. Consulting the cross references to Luke and Matthew may give the reader a further understanding of their stories, but that will not give a fuller understanding of the theology of each evangelist; even when narrating the same incident in Jesus' life and ministry, each evangelist is interested in conveying his own theology, and so may have a different point to make while narrating the same story.

The gospels are presented here in the chronological order of their composition, rather than in the order in which they are found in the New Testament. Acts of the Apostles follows immediately after Luke's Gospel, because it is a continuation of Luke's narrative.

The title of this book is: *Turn the World Upside Down*. Most people come into contact with the Gospel only in church. The Gospel is not going to turn the world upside down if it stays in church. If the Gospel is going to turn the world upside down, it will need to be prayed and lived outside of church. I hope this volume will be an aid to that happening.

I will not be giving any suggestions about what you might pray or preach about in order to turn your own or others' world upside down. I will, however, put this sign (‡) in the text whenever I believe the evangelist saw his writing as something which turned *his* world upside down. At other times I will insert the sign as a suggestion that what the evangelist wrote might be something we could think about in our own efforts to follow Jesus' invitation to turn *our* world

upside down. Scripture scholar Raymond E. Brown would call this the “plus factor;” even though the evangelist would have been entirely unacquainted with situations in our world, what he wrote might have application to what we know and experience.

So, whenever you see this sign (‡), I invite you to stop and think about how the passage of the gospel might have something to say to our world which would turn it upside down.

For the synoptic gospels, I have printed the text before the commentary. For John’s Gospel, I have reversed the order. Because John’s Gospel is so complex, I will give the commentary before giving the text, to better prepare you for understanding the text as you read it.

Read these reflections as something coming from a friend who studied about the gospels and got enthused about what he learned, and now is enthused to share what he learned with you.

Keith Clark, Capuchin

## Introduction to the Gospels

### What is a Gospel?

It's the "good news" of Jesus the Christ. In written form, the Christian community accepted four such narrations as normative for the Christian faith. There were a lot more gospels written in the early days of Christianity. The believing community was aware of many of them, but eventually only four were accepted by the community as authentic.

In the Catholic Church, sections of the gospels are read at every celebration of the Eucharist. In the announcement before the reading of the gospel passage, the brief dialogue between reader and congregation contains this phrase: a reading from the holy gospel *according to* Matthew, Mark, Luke or John. While the gospels are our primary source of information about the events of the life of Jesus, they were not written to be a history in the sense that modern scholarship understands history. The writers of the four gospels had bits of history at their disposal in the oral tradition of the believing community, some of the writings of Paul, and some other written material, mostly collections of the sayings or miracles of Jesus. But writing a history in our sense of the word was not the intent of any of the four evangelists. They were reporting the good news *as they understood and believed it*.

Toward the end of Saint John's gospel we have this statement: "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples that are not written in this book. But these are written that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through this belief you may have life in his name." This is the purpose of the gospels: that you may believe and have life. The stories of Jesus' earthly life were remembered and eventually written down by the evangelists because those stories answered some question their audience might have had. Each evangelist took from the oral tradition the material which he thought would help his audience believe and have life. In reading the written gospels, it is helpful to consider what question believers or prospective believers might have had, for which questions the stories in the written gospels are an answer.

It is, therefore, futile to try to make a concordance of the four gospels. Each evangelist gives his own slant on the good news of Jesus the Christ. If it weren't for the Gospel according to John, for instance, we wouldn't know that Jesus' public life lasted for three years; we couldn't know that from the three synoptic gospels.

Any general characterization of each of the four gospels is imposed on the works of the evangelists from conceptual frameworks existing in the minds of those who do the

characterizations. No general characterization adequately or completely captures the full essence of any one of the gospels. However the general characterizations reflect the growing understanding within the early Christian communities of the *mystery* of the *historical* Jesus, as the Christian community matured in its faith.

Mark, the earliest gospel which has come down to us (around the year 65 to 70 AD, written in Rome for mainly Gentile believers), reveals to us the earliest understanding of the *mystery* of Jesus in the most primitive narration of the *history*. Mark's Gospel includes descriptions of a very human Jesus and very human disciples. Luke's Gospel (around 80 to 85 AD) narratives are more heavily theological than Mark's and in many ways he "sanitizes" Mark. Matthew's Gospel (around 85 to 90 AD, written in Antioch for a community of both Jewish and Gentile believers) indicates that the believing community's needs and reflections on the mystery of Jesus had become more refined. And by the time John's Gospel was composed (late 1st Century), the narrative includes a heightened theological reflection and a mystical content to the stories of the historical Jesus.

While these are merely general characterizations, they can provide a mind-set for the reader and student of the gospels as one begins to take seriously a study of what the authors have left us.

The early Christian community was very dissimilar to our own experience of Christianity. Today's theology, spirituality and understandings are very developed. We have dogmas from which one must not depart if one wishes to be called a Catholic or a Christian. In the First Century, there was no such certainty. The Christian community was just coming to understand Jesus and itself. As we shall see, Mark's Gospel became something of an embarrassment to the author of Matthew's and Luke's Gospels, and they felt obliged to nuance and even correct some of the things which Mark wrote, making things more politically correct.

### **Preaching the Gospels**

Those who preach on the gospel texts need first to know what the gospel passages *say*. Then they need to reflect on what the gospel passages *say to them*, and what they might profitably *say to their hearers*. Preaching what the gospel passages *say* could be heard as merely a report on an esoteric study of the texts. Personal reflection on what the gospels say to the preacher and might say to the hearers can become a moving homily. This book provides an aid only for the first part: what the gospel passages say.

Frequently the evangelists don't tell us what *we* might want to know (the history); they tell us what *they* want us to know (the mystery). Filling in details of a given text with one's imagination is fine, even laudable. Because so many of the stories which are found in Matthew's and Luke's gospels are taken from Mark's, in my reflections on Mark's Gospel, I have included some examples of what our imaginings might look like. These imaginings can place us in the scene described in the gospel, and that can be helpful for our praying of the gospels. Frequently those imaginings may fill in the events which may have preceded the story the evangelist narrates or what may have happened subsequently. While our imaginings may fill in details of the story which Mark didn't give us, our imaginings ought never contradict the text.

Toward the end of each of the three synoptic gospels Jesus gives a discourse about the end-time. These passages of the gospels are not meant to be taken literally; they gather together pieces of what is found in the prophets and other places in the Hebrew scriptures. The point of the discourses is not a description of the sights and sounds of the end-time, but the assurance that the coming of the kingdom will turn the whole world upside down. Jesus' words and ministry prior to his death and resurrection inaugurated that kingdom. What he said and did already turned the whole world upside down.

He said things like to lead is to serve. Imagine telling that to Caesar! That would turn his world upside down. He said love your neighbor as yourself. That would turn anyone's world upside down. He said love your enemies. That would turn the world upside down for sure. He said to forgive. Can you imagine? The disciples of Jesus were commissioned to go into the whole world and tell the good news. So why doesn't preaching the gospels sound like someone is trying to turn the world upside down? Perhaps our familiarity with the gospel texts has subdued and domesticated them to such an extent that they no longer challenge or greatly inspire. We can read them with absolutely no expectation that our doing so will change the way we live or view our lives.

Some of us romantics find the command to preach the Gospel mirrored in the final scene in the stage play and movie *Camelot*. King Arthur has inaugurated a kingdom of peace and goodness. Lancelot has been the dividing influence within that kingdom, who finally brings it down. At the end of the play and movie, Arthur and his knights are encamped outside of the castle where Lancelot is. They are waiting for dawn to attack. Arthur realizes that his going to war against Lancelot is the destruction of all he has believed in and tried to establish. Young Tom of Warwick appears. And the scene unfolds.

Arthur: Who is there? Who's there? Come out, I say.  
Tom: Forgive me, your majesty. I was searching for the sergeant of arms and got lost. I did not wish to disturb you.  
Arthur: Who are you? Where did you come from? You ought to be in bed. Are you a page?  
Tom: I stowed away on one of your boats, your majesty. I came to fight for the Round Table. I'm very good with the bow. *He holds up his bow.*  
Arthur: And you intend to kill people with this bow of yours?  
Tom: Oh, yes, my lord. A great many I hope.  
Arthur: But suppose they kill you?  
Tom: Then I shall be dead, my lord. But I don't intend to be dead. I intend to be a knight.  
Arthur: A knight?  
Tom: Yes, my lord . . . of the Round Table.  
Arthur: Now tell me, what do you think you know of knights and the Round Table?  
Tom: I know everything, my lord. Might for right. Right for right. Justice for all. The Round table, where all knights would sit. Everything.  
Arthur: Ah . . . come here. What's your name?  
Tom: It is Tom, my lord.  
Arthur: Where do you come from?

Tom: From Warwick, my lord.

Arthur: Now listen to me, Tom of Warwick. You will not fight in the battle, do you understand?

Tom: Yes, my lord.

Arthur: You will run behind the lines and hide until it is over, and then you will return home to England . . . alive . . . to grow up and to grow old. Do you understand? You will remember what I, the king, tell you, and do, do as I command.

*Sings* Each evening from December to December, before you drift to sleep upon your cot, think back on all the tales that you remember of Camelot. Ask every person if he's heard the story, and tell it strong and clear if he has not, that once there was a fleeting wisp of glory called Camelot. Camelot. Camelot.

Tom: Camelot. Camelot.

Arthur: Yes, Camelot, my boy. *Sings* Where once it never rained till after sundown. By eight AM the morning fog had flown. Don't let it be forgot, that once there was a spot for one brief shining moment that was known as Camelot.

*Old King Pellinore appears on the scene.*

Pellinore: Your majesty . . .

Arthur: Give me that sword. Kneel, Tom, kneel. With this sword, Ex Caliber, I knight you, Sir Tom of Warwick, and I command you to return home and carry out my orders.

Tom: Yes, my lord.

*Tom runs off.*

Pellinore: Arthur, what are you doing? You have a battle to fight.

Arthur: I have won my battle, Pelli, and here is my victory. What we did *will* be remembered. Now, run, Sir Tom . . . behind the lines!

Pellinore: Arthur, who was that?

Arthur: One of what we all are, Pelli, less than a drop in the great blue motion of the sunlit sea. But it seems that some of those drops sparkle, Pelli. Some of them *do* sparkle. Run, boy. Run, boy. Run. Oh run, my boy.

This scene from the play and the movie brings tears to many people's eyes. Do you suppose our accepting of a commission to tell the story and not let it be forgot could remove from us whatever routine or complacency we might currently have in praying and living and preaching? Maybe we don't realize that we are telling a story which turns the whole world upside down.

My suggestion, my wish, my exhortation, my command if that were possible, is that you read and savor the gospel text before you read my reflections on that text. These reflections will give you only ideas about how to understand the text, but hopefully they will orient your mind and heart to absorb the life which can be yours from savoring the text. On these pages I have shared my reflections after having shared the gospel text. The exception to this pattern is in John's Gospel. There I have shared my reflections before the text in the hope that my reflections will help you understand and savor the text more adequately.

I have called these my reflections on the gospels. I cannot honestly call them commentaries. Others who know Greek and who have studied the scriptures professionally can

write commentaries; I cannot. I have read several commentaries, and they have influenced my reflections. Yet I hope my reflections are true to what the gospel texts *say*, even when they include what they *say to me*.



\*1

# A Reflection on the Gospel according to Mark



## **Introduction**

### **Who is Mark?**

In Acts of the Apostles, and in the letters of Paul and Peter, this evangelist is referred to as “Mark,” “John Mark,” and “John.” The references to him by these writers suggests that he was a young man, probably about seventeen years old at the time he began to hang around with the apostles. One gets the impression that he was enthusiastic for the work of ministry, but he may have lacked some follow-through on his enthusiasm. This angered Paul, who refused to take Mark with him on his second missionary journey. He may have had contact with Jesus, although he probably was not among the disciples.

Saint Paul calls Mark a cousin of Barnabas. His mother was Mary of Jerusalem, a friend of Saint Peter’s to whose house Peter went when he was freed from prison..

And Mark didn’t wear pajamas! He is thought by many to be the young man in Mark 14:51-52 who was in the garden when Jesus was arrested, wrapped only in a linen cloth; when the guards tried to grab him, he left the cloth behind and ran away naked. Raymond E. Brown, the scholar who has most thoroughly researched and written on the passion narratives in the gospels, describes this as an imaginative flight of fancy; but it does make a good story.

Mark is identified in Christian writings as early as the year 100 as the companion of Peter, who accompanied Peter to Rome. (1 Peter 5:13 - “my son Mark”) Papias of Hierapolis wrote just after 100 AD, “Mark, having become Peter’s interpreter, wrote down accurately whatever he remembered of what was said or done by the Lord, however not in order.”

### **When was the gospel written?**

Mark wrote after Peter’s death, so the first form of Mark’s gospel would have been written somewhere between 64 and 67 AD.

### **Where was it written and for whom?**

Written in Rome for the Roman Christians.

### **What was going on at the time Mark wrote?**

There was unrest in Jerusalem, and the Roman forces were beginning to plan for a forceful invasion. Because of the unrest, the Jews in Rome were not permitted to worship publicly. The first Christian believers were Jewish; but by the time Mark wrote, many Gentiles had joined the

community. About ten years earlier, the Emperor Nero had begun to persecute Christians. Tough times!

In the course of Nero's persecution, some Christians fell away. Others who were arrested and tortured gave the names of other believers in Jesus, who were then also persecuted. Both around the Christian community, and within it, things were iffy at best.

### **Literary structure of the Gospel according to Mark**

Different commentators see a variety of ways to divide the structure of Mark's Gospel. I will use my own. After the prologue (1:1-15), in which Mark says that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, the Gospel is divided by two other statements that Jesus is the Son of God or the Messiah. In Chapter 8, verse 27, after Jesus asked the disciple who people said he was, and then asked the disciples who they said he was, Peter said, "You are the Messiah." At the end of the Gospel in Chapter 15, verse 39, the centurion who pierced his side said, "Truly this man was the Son of God." Those are the only two professions of faith found in Mark's Gospel. Other people were told that their faith saved them from their infirmities, but no one else spoke the act of faith in Jesus as the Messiah or the Son of God.

Beyond that, the Gospel is divided sort of geographically. From 1:16 to 10:52 Mark reports on Jesus's activity in Galilee and his move to Jerusalem. Beginning with 11:1 and continuing to 13:37 Mark describes Jesus' Jerusalem ministry. Then there is the description of the events of the end of "Holy Week" (14:1 to 15:47). This "Holy Week" narrative had circulated in oral form from the time of the resurrection onward. Mark shapes the oral narrative a bit to fit the Roman situation and mind-set, as the other Gospel writers shaped the oral tradition to fit their audiences. But the basic narrative of the passion, death and resurrection had circulated by word of mouth since the beginning.

### **What was Mark trying to say to his audience (Roman Christians)? What was his theology?**

Mark's telling of the story of Jesus is not very complex, as compared with John's telling of the story. The reader's task is to understand what Mark meant and what his audience understood.

The most basic message is found in Jesus' announcement in 1:15: "This is the time of fulfillment; the Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel (good news)." Mark portrays Jesus as the messiah who was awaited by the Jewish people. He refers to Jesus in many titles which were in common usage among his disciples: Messiah, Son of God, Son of Man, Lord, Son of David, Suffering Servant, and Suffering Just One.

Mark was writing for the Roman believers in Jesus, to bolster their faith during persecution, and to give them a way of talking about Jesus to their family members, neighbors and friends. In Jesus the Kingdom of God is inaugurated and is already among you.

Many at Jesus' time thought that meant the overthrow of the Roman occupation of the Holy Land, and the conquest of the world by the Messiah. Well, obviously, that didn't happen in Jesus lifetime. So the Roman families, neighbors and friends wanted to know, "Why should we believe that Jesus is the Messiah when his own people rejected him? C'mon, guy, be real!"

Mark seems to have two responses to the Romans' legitimate question. The first response is to describe how Jesus was opposed by the religious authorities of his time. The scribes and Pharisees opposed Jesus at every turn, first in Galilee and then in Jerusalem. No matter what Jesus

did, the religious authorities were against Jesus. So Mark's gospel is full of reports of controversies between the religious authorities and Jesus.

Mark's second response is what has become known as the "messianic secret." Mark insisted that Jesus, who claimed to be the Messiah, didn't want others to know that he was, because their idea of "messiah" was not the kind of messiah Jesus was going to be. So Mark wrote about Jesus' telling people over and over again not to tell anyone he was the messiah. If people began to think of Jesus as the messiah, they would misunderstand what kind of messiah Jesus was. Keeping Jesus' identity hidden was not Mark's idea; he wrote that it was Jesus' idea.

One more idea which seems to be in Mark's mind is to tell the Romans that coming to faith in Jesus isn't easy. Throughout his gospel, Mark records people's reaction to Jesus' teaching and miracles. Here are some of the words Mark uses to describe people's reaction: astounded, amazed, awe, astonished; that's from just the first part of the gospel. It isn't until the end of chapter 8 that we hear a profession of *faith*. Peter says, "You are the messiah." The only other expression of faith comes at the end of the gospel, when the centurion who pierced his side says, "Truly this was the Son of God."

### **So what happened in the 30 years between Jesus' passion, death and resurrection and Mark's writing his gospel?**

Well, the disciples *talked about* what they had experienced of Jesus during his earthly life, and especially about his passion, death and resurrection. They told the stories as they remembered them. That's called the period of the "oral tradition." Different people remembered different things. And Paul, after he had met Jesus on the road to Damascus, and after he had lived with the disciples who remembered Jesus, wrote about Jesus and his message, and the meaning Jesus and the message had for the community of believers. Others besides Paul had taken the initiative to write down some of what was remembered and talked about. These writings were mainly about the sayings or teachings of Jesus, and some about his miracles. Mark had these sources available to him when he sat down to write. Mark's Gospel is the earliest written account we have of what was remembered and spoken about.

### **Reading the Gospel of Mark**

While it is also true of the Gospel according to Luke and Matthew, it is even more beneficial to read the Gospel according to Mark with one's imagination, not just with one's mind. Mark's portrayal of Jesus is more humanly vivid than the other gospel writers' are. Mark tells us more of Jesus' emotions. The stories will reveal their meaning most fully to the readers who picture vividly for themselves the events told in the stories.

In this reflection on the Gospel according to Mark, an attempt will frequently be made to invite the reader to step into the scene which is described. That is beyond the usual way of studying a passage of scripture. But this method of reading introduces the reader to the character and personality of Jesus, as well as conveying his message.

With our minds we will try to understand the meaning of the text of scripture and what Mark meant to convey to his audience. The use of our imagination will help develop within us a spirituality and a personal relationship with Jesus. It is a way to be "with him." As we will see in Mark 3:14, to be "with him" made one a disciple. Only those who are "with him" can be sent to preach. What we imagine, however, ought not contradict what's in the text.



## Prologue - Mark 1:1-15

### Introduction - 1:1-8

Mark begins by relating Jesus to the Old Testament prophets (1:1-3), to John the Baptist (1:4-8), and to the “One who is to come” (1:9-15).

1 The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ (the Son of God). 2 As it is written in Isaiah the prophet: 3 "Behold, I am sending my messenger ahead of you; he will prepare your way. 3 A voice of one crying out in the desert: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.'" 4 John (the) Baptist appeared in the desert proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 People of the whole Judean countryside and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the Jordan River as they acknowledged their sins. 6 John was clothed in camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist. He fed on locusts and wild honey. 7 And this is what he proclaimed: "One mightier than I is coming after me. I am not worthy to stoop and loosen the thongs of his sandals. 8 I have baptized you with water; he will baptize you with the holy Spirit."

1:1 - The opening statement of the gospel is also Mark's last word on the subject, and the whole point of his writing. "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

"The Son of God;" these words open the Gospel. This is the beginning of the revelation, which will eventually be attested only twice more in the Gospel: in 8:29 Peter will express his faith that Jesus is the Messiah. The only other profession of faith is by the centurion, who pierced Jesus' side (16:39). He said "Truly this man was the Son of God." Remembering that Mark wanted to show that it was difficult for people to come to *faith* in Jesus, and remembering that it was for the Romans that Mark was writing, it may have been somewhat flattering for the Romans to read that, besides Peter, a Roman was the only one who proclaimed faith in who Jesus is.

1:2-3 - Related to the prophets

In showing that the appearance of John the Baptist in the desert was the fulfillment of Old Testament prophesy, Mark says he is quoting Isaiah, but in fact he has strung together quotes from Malachi, Isaiah and the Book of Exodus.

1:6 - John's clothing

The description of John's clothing is reminiscent of the clothing of Elijah in 2 Kings 1:8. In Mark 9:11 Jesus will make the comparison complete, when he says, "But I tell you that Elijah has already come and they did to him whatever they pleased."

1:7 - "One mightier than I" The Greek word means literally "stronger one." The word will appear again in 3:27 when Jesus speaks of the strong man guarding his house.

Throughout Mark's Gospel, he will use the same word several times, but the English translates it differently each time. That's because in the Greek New Testament there are only eight hundred words; but the verbs in Greek have so many tenses that it seems like there are more. The English translators used the context to nuance the one Greek word. We'll try to point out how the various English words used in the gospel are all nuanced translations of the word meaning "the stronger one."

1:8 - John contrasts his baptism with the baptism with the Holy Spirit which Jesus will bring.

### **Preparation for his ministry - 1:9-15**

9 It happened in those days that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized in the Jordan by John. 10 On coming up out of the water he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit, like a dove, descending upon him. 11 And a voice came from the heavens, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." 12 At once the Spirit drove him out into the desert, 13 and he remained in the desert for forty days, tempted by Satan. He was among wild beasts, and the angels ministered to him. 14 After John had been arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God: 15 "This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel."

Jesus undergoes baptism (1:9-11) , and is tested by Satan in the wilderness (1:12-13), and Mark has Jesus make the statement of the theme of his preaching of God's Kingdom (1:14-15).

1:9-11 - "Was baptized in the Jordan by John": John's baptism was a sign of repentance from sin. Jesus identified himself with sinners; **he's one of us.** (‡)

1:12-13 - "Tempted by Satan": In the Letter to the Hebrews the author writes "he was tempted in every way that we are" (Hebrews 4:15). We learn that Jesus in preparation for his ministry is not someone far removed from the human family; **he's one of us.** (‡)

#### **Discussion**

Much discussion has taken place on just how to understand Hebrews 4:15. Just Google the verse and be amazed at all the commentaries on the passage. It clearly can't mean that Jesus experienced every temptation that every person in the world has experienced. It might mean only that he was as susceptible to being tempted as the rest of human beings are. Many of the commentaries seem to want to avoid any interpretation that would indicate that Jesus had any internal temptations; no concupiscence. And it seems that most of those interpretations center on sexual issues.

It certainly cannot be maintained that Jesus was fully human but experienced nothing of human sexuality. After reading all the interpretations of the passage, one could conclude that it's another one of those "who knows?" situations.

In any case, the message which is given, even if it doesn't answer all the questions, is that Jesus is one of us; he wasn't just masquerading as a human being.

1:14-15 - Transition verses. After John was "handed over" evokes the passion and death of Jesus. Mark will use the word to describe John, Jesus (1:14; 8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34) and the Christian (13:10-12).

"This is the time of fulfillment." Greek has two words for time. *Chronos* and *Kairos*. *Chronos* is the time on a clock or a calendar. *Kairos* is an event, like "the time of your life." Mark uses the word *kairos*, the event. Jesus is the event.

“The Kingdom of God is at hand.” The Greek word for “kingdom,” *basileis*, does not designate a territory with borders. It means where God reigns, rules and has influence. If the word “kingdom” were not so prevalent in the history of theology, a better word would be the “reign” of God. That reign is being inaugurated by Jesus. It is in Jesus that the reign, the rule, and influence of God has begun in a new way. Mark’s whole gospel is a narration of the reign of God in Jesus’ words and deeds.

“Repent” means change of heart.

“Believe” means more than just an intellectual assent. It implies trust and a commitment to the one in whom one believes.

### **Conclusion**

This Jesus about whom Mark is writing is the Son of God, but also a human being like all of us. As the story of the gospel unfolds, we must resist the inclination to think that, since Jesus is the Son of God, things were easier for him than they are for us. This Person is a truly human being who is also God.

## Call of the first disciples - Mark 1:16-20

16 As he passed by the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting their nets into the sea; they were fishermen. 17 Jesus said to them, "Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men." 18 Then they abandoned their nets and followed him.

19 He walked along a little farther and saw James, the son of Zebedee, and his brother John. They too were in a boat mending their nets. 20 Then he called them. So they left their father Zebedee in the boat along with the hired men and followed him.

### 1:16-18 - **Peter and Andrew**

Walking along the Sea of Galilee, Jesus saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting their nets into the sea. They were fishermen. He said, "Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men." They abandoned their nets and followed him.

**Peter:** Born in Bethsaida, probably located at the northern end of the Sea of Galilee. Moved to Capernaum and lived with his mother-in-law (or she lived in Peter's home). So, he was married and perhaps had some children. Originally a follower of John the Baptist, Peter was alerted to Jesus by his brother Andrew who told him that they had found the messiah. Among the Twelve Peter soon became conspicuous. Though of irresolute character, he clings with the greatest fidelity, firmness of faith, and inward love to the Savior; rash in both word and action, he is full of zeal and enthusiasm, though he can be influenced by events and intimidated by difficulties.

**Andrew:** Son of Jonah, or John (Matthew 16:17; John 1:42), was born in Bethsaida of Galilee (John 1:44). He was brother of Simon (Peter) (Matthew 10:2; John 1:40). Both were fishermen (Matthew 4:18; Mark 1:16), and at the beginning of Our Lord's public life occupied the same house at Capernaum (Mark 1:21, 29). From the fourth Gospel we learn that Andrew was a disciple of the Baptist, whose testimony first led him and John the Evangelist to follow Jesus (John 1:35-40). Andrew at once recognized Jesus as the Messiah, and hastened to introduce him to his brother, Peter, (John 1:41). Thenceforth the two brothers were disciples of Christ. On a subsequent occasion, prior to the final call to the apostolate, they were called to a closer companionship, and then they left all things to follow Jesus (Luke 5:11; Matthew 4:19-20; Mark 1:17-18).

### 1:19-20 - **James and John**

Then Jesus came upon James and his brother John in the boat with their father Zebedee; he called them and they, too, followed him. Later in the gospel we are told that Jesus gave them the nickname "Boanerges," meaning "Sons of Thunder." (Mark 3:17) They could have gotten that nickname because they were the sons of their father Zebedee who could have been thundering at the two kids leaving the hard work of fishing and running off after this stranger who walked by. Or they could have gotten the nickname because of their own temperament and behavior. They were, after all, the ones who asked the Lord if they should call down fire and brimstone on the town whose citizens would not welcome them. (Luke 9:54) Or perhaps both; the boys might have taken after their father!

They appear to have taken after their mother as well. In the stories about them in the gospels, it is either the mother, or the boys themselves, who approach Jesus and ask for the seats at his right and at his left when he comes into his kingdom.

Both boys, and they were very young – probably known as “the kids” among the rest of the apostles, were both aggressive and ambitious. John seems to have mellowed as he aged. In his gospel he never highlights his role by using his or his brother’s names.

Perhaps the two sets of brothers were competitors. In Luke’s Gospel we are told that James and John were Peter’s partners, but apparently that was not the case when they were called.

## An Eventful Day in Capernaum - Mark 1:21-45

Mark records Jesus' authority in teaching and healing. The standard pattern for the exorcism stories in Mark is this: the encounter between Jesus and the possessed person, the exorcism, the departure of the demon, and the impression made on the bystanders.

### 1:21-22 - Teaching

21 Then they came to Capernaum, and on the Sabbath he entered the synagogue and taught. 22 The people were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority and not as the scribes.

He entered the synagogue and began to teach. A person didn't have to be an "ordained" rabbi in order to teach in the synagogue. The way he taught was different from the way the scribes taught. Jesus taught with authority. This continues Mark's theme that Jesus is the "stronger one." (1:7) This *astonished* the people in the synagogue. Note that this is not faith.

### 1:23-28 - Healing

23 In their synagogue was a man with an unclean spirit; 24 he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are - the Holy One of God!" 25 Jesus rebuked him and said, "Quiet! Come out of him!" 26 The unclean spirit convulsed him and with a loud cry came out of him. 27 All were amazed and asked one another, "What is this? A new teaching with authority. He commands even the unclean spirits and they obey him." 28 His fame spread everywhere throughout the whole region of Galilee.

The unclean spirit in the possessed man argues with Jesus, and Jesus simply commands the spirit to depart. And the spirit does. It's another example of Jesus' authority. And the people are *amazed* (not faith) and asked where this man got such authority.

### 1:29-31 - Healing Peter's mother-in-law

29 On leaving the synagogue he entered the house of Simon and Andrew with James and John. 30 Simon's mother-in-law lay sick with a fever. They immediately told him about her. 31 He approached, grasped her hand, and helped her up. Then the fever left her and she waited on them.

The word used for she "waited on them," or "took care of their needs," is *diekonei*. The word was used earlier in reference to the angels who ministered to Jesus in the wilderness (1:13). It will be used again in 10:45 when Jesus says that "the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve." Obviously the English word "deacon" comes from that word. Her ability to serve demonstrates the completeness of the healing.

### 1:32-34 - An evening of healing

32 When it was evening, after sunset, they brought to him all who were ill or possessed by demons. 33 The whole town was gathered at the door. 34 He cured many who were sick with various diseases, and he drove out many demons, not permitting them to speak because they knew him.

Because of the teaching and healing with such authority, the people in town brought to the house all their sick and possessed “at sunset.” The Sabbath is over at sunset, and the people can carry burdens then. And Jesus healed them.

#### 1:35-39 - Take a break

35 Rising very early before dawn, he left and went off to a deserted place, where he prayed. 36 Simon and those who were with him pursued him 37 and on finding him said, "Everyone is looking for you." 38 He told them, "Let us go on to the nearby villages that I may preach there also. For this purpose have I come." 39 So he went into their synagogues, preaching and driving out demons throughout the whole of Galilee.

Mark says that Jesus went to a deserted place. There is no desert near Capernaum, so Jesus found some place where he could be alone in order to pray. Peter and the others who were with Jesus apparently woke up and couldn't find Jesus, so they went looking for him. It had been quite a day for the disciples. These very ordinary fishermen were now associated with a celebrity; and they didn't want to give that up. But Jesus remains faithful to the mission he has been given. Popularity will not distract him from that mission. (†) So they move on to the other cities in Galilee in order to preach there also.

#### 1:40-45 - Cleansing of the leper

40 A leper came to him (and kneeling down) begged him and said, "If you wish, you can make me clean." 41 Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand, touched him, and said to him, "I do will it. Be made clean." 42 The leprosy left him immediately, and he was made clean. 43 Then, warning him sternly, he dismissed him at once. 44 Then he said to him, "See that you tell no one anything, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses prescribed; that will be proof for them." 45 The man went away and began to publicize the whole matter. He spread the report abroad so that it was impossible for Jesus to enter a town openly. He remained outside in deserted places, and people kept coming to him from everywhere.

In the course of their journey to the other towns, a leper approaches Jesus and asks to be made clean, expressing confidence that Jesus could do so if he wished. Jesus said he did wish to do so, and he touched the man. The Jewish members of Mark's community might have been a little uncomfortable with that, since that was probably against the law, since it would make Jesus ritually unclean according to the law of Moses. He sends the man off to show himself to the priest so the priests can declare him cleansed, and admit him back into the community from which he had been excluded because he was “unclean.”

Then we have the messianic secret: Jesus tells the man not to talk about how he was healed. It answers the Romans question: if Jesus was all you say he is, why didn't his own people accept him?

## Jesus' ministry gains him enemies - Mark 2:1-3:6

As we begin this section of the Gospel of Mark, we would do well to pose for ourselves the question: why was Jesus killed? Theologies about the death of Jesus range from his Father's asking that he make reparation for the sins of humankind, and demanding the ultimate sacrifice in expiation for humanity's sin, to he got killed because he was obedient to his Father's will, and that made people so angry that they killed him. As we follow Jesus through Mark's Gospel, keep the question in mind.

### 2:1-12 - The paralyzed man

1 When Jesus returned to Capernaum after some days, it became known that he was at home. 2 Many gathered together so that there was no longer room for them, not even around the door, and he preached the word to them. 3 They came bringing to him a paralytic carried by four men. 4 Unable to get near Jesus because of the crowd, they opened up the roof above him. After they had broken through, they let down the mat on which the paralytic was lying. 5 When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Child, your sins are forgiven." 6 Now some of the scribes were sitting there asking themselves, 7 "Why does this man speak that way? He is blaspheming. Who but God alone can forgive sins?" 8 Jesus immediately knew in his mind what they were thinking to themselves, so he said, "Why are you thinking such things in your hearts? 9 Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise, pick up your mat and walk'? 10 But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority to forgive sins on earth" - 11 he said to the paralytic, "I say to you, rise, pick up your mat, and go home." 12 He rose, picked up his mat at once, and went away in the sight of everyone. They were all astounded and glorified God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this."

This story continues the theme of Jesus' authority, it brings him into conflict with those who thought they had some religious knowledge and authority of their own.

Here's an interesting speculation. It seems that it was the four men who carried the stretcher who initiated the trip to ask for healing from Jesus. The four of them must have had faith that Jesus would heal their friend. Perhaps the paralyzed friend was not so sure. But his friends picked him up and brought him to the place where Jesus was. Could the four friends have been Peter, Andrew, James and John? They were the only ones who had come to believe in Jesus. Mark says that when Jesus saw *their* faith, not *his*, the paralyzed man's faith, he spoke to the paralyzed man, and said, "Child, your sins are forgiven." Paralysis was thought to be brought on by sin.

The *scribes* become the first of Jesus' opponents because they object to Jesus' saying, "Your sins are forgiven." Because of their acquaintance with the law of Moses, they realized that Jesus was claiming power reserved to God. And then Jesus goes on to prove he has the power to forgive sin by showing that he also has the power to heal.

Once again, those who witnessed the miracle are *astounded*, not faith.

### 2:13-17 - The call of Levi (Matthew)

13 Once again he went out along the sea. All the crowd came to him and he taught them. 14 As he passed by, he saw Levi, son of Alphaeus, sitting at the customs post. He said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him. 15 While he was at table in his house, 9 many tax collectors and sinners sat with Jesus and his disciples; for there were many who followed him. 16 Some scribes who were Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors and said to his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" 17 Jesus heard this and said to

them (that), "Those who are well do not need a physician, but the sick do. I did not come to call the righteous but sinners."

If it weren't bad enough that Jesus began assembling his group by calling competitors in the fishing business, the next one he called was Levi (Matthew) who collected taxes from all of them! Galilee was not under direct Roman rule; Herod Antipas was the ruler of Galilee, but he himself was under Roman rule. Because Matthew was a tax collector in Galilee, he worked for Herod, not the Roman authorities.

The Roman practice was not to be bothered collecting taxes themselves. They levied a tax on an area and got some rich person to pay what was levied, and they gave that person the right to reimburse himself by collecting taxes from the locals. There is no reason to believe that Herod did differently. So Matthew must have been rich. And he certainly was despised by the people from whom he collected taxes. It's doubtful that the tax collector exacted from the locals only enough money to reimburse his payment to Herod. Tax collectors were despised because they charged whatever they wanted, and they had the backing of the civil authorities to get what they charged.

Mark writes that Matthew "stood up and followed him." The word Mark uses for "stood up" is the same word he uses when Jesus says that after three days he will "rise."

Zacchaeus (Luke 19:8) was also a tax collector who lived in Jericho. He worked directly for the Roman occupiers, rather than for an Israeli potentate. After he was inspired by Jesus because Jesus said he was going to honor him by staying at his house that evening, Zacchaeus said that he'd give half his money to the poor, and that if he had defrauded anyone, he'd pay them back fourfold. Well, the simple fact is that he had extorted money from everyone in town!

### Lesson

Perhaps there's a lesson in this selection of the first five disciples. It wouldn't have made a good business model: calling competitors and a tax collector! Perhaps the lesson is that each of those called followed. They were not a clique of friends; they had in common only that they followed the one who called them. The Christian church today is not so different; we are not a cadre of friends; we are disciples of Jesus. On the basis of that commonality, we need to work out our differences. (‡)

The story of the call of Matthew has the further important message of showing that in carrying out his mission, Jesus attracts enemies. This time it is the *Pharisees* who get mad at Jesus because he hangs around with sinners and eats with them. In Jesus' time to share a meal with someone was an expression of great intimacy. One did not eat meals with anyone but one's friends and family.

The Pharisees got it right. Jesus was indeed saying that he shared a great intimacy with those people the Pharisees in their righteousness considered sinners. (‡)

### 2:18-22 - The question of fasting

18 The disciples of John and of the Pharisees were accustomed to fast. People came to him and objected, "Why do the disciples of John and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" 19 Jesus answered them, "Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them they cannot fast. 20 But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day. 21 No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak. If he does, its fullness

pulls away, the new from the old, and the tear gets worse. 22 Likewise, no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the skins are ruined. Rather, new wine is poured into fresh wineskins."

This time it is *the disciples of John the Baptist* and the *Pharisees* who object to what Jesus and his disciples are doing. Even though Mark has named the twelve apostles, he has not indicated that all twelve have already been called. So far it's only Peter and Andrew, James and John, and Matthew whose call Mark has told us about. What are Jesus and his disciples doing? They're apparently not observing all the fasting rules of the Mosaic Law.

Jesus' reference to himself as the "bridegroom" had to have been understood by his audience as a messianic claim. During this time, there is no fasting. But later the disciples might go back to the practice. But the message given here is that Jesus is inaugurating something entirely new. The old practices of piety cannot hold this new revelation of God.

Jesus gives two examples of what the newness of his presence represents. You don't sew a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, or the next time you wash it, the new piece will shrink and tear away from the old garment which has already shrunk. And you don't put new fermenting wine into old wineskins, because the on-going fermentation will destroy the skins, and both the skins and the wine will be lost.

The point here is not that Jesus is rejecting the old law. If people do things right, both the patch and the garment will be left intact, and the wine and the wineskin will both survive.

A personal reflection: In 1967 I taught a sophomore religion class in Milwaukee. When we got to this passage in Mark's gospel, I explained to the class about the patch and the new wine. I asked if they could give me a parable in modern terms which would express the same message. A sophomore boy named Kim raised his hand and said, "You don't put a Ford Thunderbird engine in a Model T, because it will shake the shit out of the chassis." He got it!

Modern people sort of like the cleverness of Jesus response to the scruples of John's disciples and of the Pharisees. But those to whom the sayings were addressed found them offensive, and they hated Jesus because of his teaching . . . with authority, partly because under the old dispensation, they thought *they* were the authority on these matters. (‡)

## 2:23-28 - Working on the Sabbath

23 As he was passing through a field of grain on the Sabbath, his disciples began to make a path while picking the heads of grain. 24 At this the Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?" 25 He said to them, "Have you never read what David did when he was in need and he and his companions were hungry? 26 How he went into the house of God when Abiathar was high priest and ate the bread of offering that only the priests could lawfully eat, and shared it with his companions?" 27 Then he said to them, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. 28 That is why the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath."

The Sabbath rest laws were very strict for certain segments of the Jews at Jesus' time; and among certain sects of Twenty-first Century Jews they remain just as strict. Absolutely no work is

allowed. Contemporary Christians still go into the homes of contemporary Jews in order to light their stoves, etc.

There are two things to which the Pharisees objected: Jesus and his disciples were walking too far on the Sabbath, and the disciples were “harvesting” wheat, work forbidden on the Sabbath.

Jesus’ response to the Pharisees is quoting from the Old Testament. [In doing so, Mark makes several mistakes. David entered the temple alone, not with followers; he has the wrong name for the priest, who was not the high priest, etc. (confer 1 Samuel, 21:1-6).] Great leaders, David and the High Priest Abiathar, broke the Sabbath rule in order to provide for the necessities of human beings. Perhaps the Pharisees could follow that argument and assent to it, except for the fact that Jesus appeared to make himself equal to David or the High Priest. But the next thing Jesus said must have driven them crazy. By saying, “The Sabbath is made for man, not man for the Sabbath,” he was subordinating the Sabbath observance to human needs.

If that weren’t insulting enough, he went on to say, “The Son of Man is lord, even of the Sabbath.” The Pharisees knew Jesus was speaking about himself, and for them that was blasphemy.

### 3:1-6 - Healing on the Sabbath

1 Again he entered the synagogue. There was a man there who had a withered hand. 2 They watched him closely to see if he would cure him on the Sabbath so that they might accuse him. 3 He said to the man with the withered hand, "Come up here before us." 4 Then he said to them, "Is it lawful to do good on the Sabbath rather than to do evil, to save life rather than to destroy it?" But they remained silent. 5 Looking around at them with anger and grieved at their hardness of heart, he said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out and his hand was restored. 6 The Pharisees went out and immediately took counsel with the Herodians against him to put him to death.

The issue here is the timing of Jesus action. The Rabbis allowed healing on the Sabbath if the situation were life-threatening. But the withered hand is not life-threatening; the man may have been born with a withered hand. This story might have been appreciated by the community in Rome, made up of Jews and Gentiles, and not particular about observing the Sabbath. By this time the Christians celebrated weekly the resurrection of the Lord on the first day of the week. So they may have delighted to learn that Jesus was not a great Sabbath observer himself.

Jesus doesn’t make the debate one about the Sabbath observance, but the more important issue of doing good or doing harm. And the implicit message is that Jesus, the Son of Man, has authority over the Sabbath, which he claimed in 2:27-28.

Jesus’ reaction to his being grieved at the hard-heartedness of the Scribes and Pharisees is one of anger.

The first confrontation with the Scribes and Pharisees ends with Mark telling us that they were astounded (2:12). Now their hostility has escalated to “plotting with the Herodians on how to put him to death,” which is ironic, because it is plotting to do evil on the Sabbath. Remember, this is taking place in Galilee; it’s only when Jesus gets to Jerusalem that the threat of death becomes so much more real.

In order to understand the force of these six verses, you need to picture the scene vividly in your mind. Let the video in your mind begin.

## Imagine

The locals are making their way into the synagogue in Capernaum. They are conversing with each other, and Jesus is talking to some of the folks as he and his disciples enter the synagogue. It's a beautiful Sabbath morning. Because Jesus is recognized as something of a teacher, he is invited to sit up front on the chairs facing the congregation. The rabbi and several other men recognized as teachers occupy the six or eight chairs facing the congregation, among them some scribes of the Pharisee party. Scribes were considered to be teachers of the Law.

The Sabbath ritual begins, and then the reading from the scriptures takes place, and Jesus is asked to give a teaching. He stands, but remains silent. All eyes are on him. What will he say? They all know he's been upsetting the Pharisees with his teaching outside of the synagogue. What might he say within the synagogue Sabbath ritual. There is electricity in the air.

There is a man in the congregation who has a hand withered since birth. He always carefully hides it in the fold of his cloak, because everyone thinks the affliction may be the result of sin, either on the part of the man or on the part of his parents. The hand is always hidden from view.

Jesus could tell that they were watching him closely to see if he would cure on the Sabbath. Rather than heal the man quietly, Jesus decides to make a case of it. After a rather long silence, Jesus speaks. He doesn't begin a teaching on the scripture; he says to the man crouching behind the people in front of him, "Come up here before us." The words are spoken kindly, but with enough authority that the man comes forward and stands between the congregation and elders sitting in front.

Jesus looks around at the congregation, then he turns to the teachers sitting in front, and he asks, "Is it lawful to do good on the Sabbath rather than to do evil, to save life rather than to destroy it?"

Nobody says anything. There's absolute silence. And the silence is filled with tension.

Jesus looked around at everyone, and he was angry, and he was grieved at their hardness of heart. Angry and grieved as he was, he said to the man kindly, "Stretch out your hand."

The man has spent his whole life hiding the withered hand, and now he is more than hesitant to expose his deformed hand to public view. He begins slowly to bring that shriveled hand out into the open, where he is sure it will be ridiculed. But to his own amazement, and to the amazement of the entire congregation, especially those sitting in front, the hand is perfectly shaped. The congregation murmurs their surprise, and (can you believe it?) the Pharisees get up from their seats and strut out of the synagogue to see about getting Jesus killed.

Surprisingly, Mark does not tell us this time about the reaction of the crowd. But he tells us that when the Pharisees went out they took counsel with the Herodians about how they might put Jesus to death.

So now, Jesus has made enemies of the scribes, the Pharisees, the disciples of John the Baptist, and the Herodians. And he's just begun his ministry!

## Sharing a meal - An intimate experience

We're taking some time away from Mark's Gospel, and going again to the Book of Revelation. Our segway will prepare us for what's coming next in Mark's Gospel.

Many people think that praying is sort of like trying to contact a distant God. And they wonder if they really know how to make that contact. The Book of Revelation suggests another approach to understanding what praying is.

The Book of Revelation begins with John telling of visions he has had. The first vision is of the risen Lord walking among the seven lamp stands. The lamp stands are the seven churches in Asia Minor. Then John has a vision of the risen Lord holding the seven lamps in his arms. The message is that the risen Lord is present to the churches which are experiencing persecution. Then John is told to write letters to the churches. The last letter is to the Church of Laodicea.

To the angel of the church in Laodicea write this:

The Amen, the faithful and true witness, the source of God's creation, says this: "I know all about you; I know that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either cold or hot. But, because you are lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth. For you say, 'I am rich and affluent and have no need of anything,' and yet do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked. I advise you to buy from me gold refined by fire so that you may be rich, and white garments to put on so that your shameful nakedness may not be exposed, and buy ointment to smear on your eyes so that you may see. Those whom I love I reprove and chastise. Be earnest, therefore, and repent.

Behold, I am standing at the door and knocking. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will enter his house and share a meal with him, and he with me."

(Revelation 3:14-20)

In order to understand this fully, we need to know that "hot or cold" does not mean "good or bad." Both hot and cold are good; lukewarm is bad. We like our coffee hot and our beer cold. If either gets lukewarm, we want to spit it out of our mouth.

We also need to know some things about Laodicea. It had a gold refinery, a sort of pharmaceutical company known for its eye ointment, and it had figured out how to bleach wool cloth unusually white. And the risen Lord tells the people of Laodicea that they are poor, despite their gold refinery; blind, despite their eye ointment; and naked despite all their white cloth. Their problem was that they thought they were quite self-sufficient. So the risen Lord tells them to buy from him the gold which will make them really rich, and cloth to clothe themselves, and ointment to smear on their eyes.

Then the risen Lord says that he is standing at the door knocking. And the Laodiceans and we have to do only two things in order to experience the intimacy with the risen Lord symbolized by sharing a meal. First we have to hear him knocking; then we have to open the door.

These two things are a formula for praying.

We don't have to try to contact a distant God. He's standing at our door knocking. In order to hear him knocking, we probably have to be alone and quiet long enough to still the noise

around us and within us. And then we have to open the door. If someone unexpectedly knocks on our door, we usually want to look around to see how messy our house is before we say, “Come in.”

Well, the Lord knows just how messy our lives might be, but he wants to come in no matter how things are. We have to open the door on ourselves just as we are. Not the way we think we ought to be. Not the way we think the Lord thinks we ought to be. Not the way we think someone else thinks we ought to be. Just the way we are. Praying is making myself available to God just the way I know myself to be, so the Lord can touch me and move me.

Keep this in mind as we consider the next section of Mark’s Gospel.

## Popular - Mark 3:7-12

Mark shows Jesus initially going out to people, as he walked along and saw his first disciples and called them. Now, it is the other way around: people are coming to Jesus, his cures having gained him an audience to whom he could preach. Deeds preceded words; perhaps a model for all evangelization. (‡)

7 Jesus withdrew toward the sea with his disciples. A large number of people (followed) from Galilee and from Judea. 8 Hearing what he was doing, a large number of people came to him also from Jerusalem, from Idumea, from beyond the Jordan, and from the neighborhood of Tyre and Sidon. 9 He told his disciples to have a boat ready for him because of the crowd, so that they would not crush him. 10 He had cured many and, as a result, those who had diseases were pressing upon him to touch him. 11 And whenever unclean spirits saw him they would fall down before him and shout, "You are the Son of God." 12 He warned them sternly not to make him known.

3:7 - The people came from all over, even Jews who lived outside of Israel (Idumea, places beyond the Jordan, Tyre and Sidon).

3:11-12 - The unclean spirits try to make Jesus known as the Son of God, but Jesus demands their silence. Here again we have an answer to the Romans' question about why Jesus was not recognized by his own people. Jesus told people not to make him known.

## Called > Disciple > Apostle > Preach - Mark 3:13-19

13 He went up the mountain and summoned those whom he wanted and they came to him. 14 He appointed twelve (whom he also named apostles) that they might be with him and he might send them forth to preach 15 and to have authority to drive out demons: 16 (he appointed the twelve:) Simon, whom he named Peter; 17 James, son of Zebedee, and John the brother of James, whom he named Boanerges, that is, sons of thunder; 18 Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James the son of Alphaeus; Thaddeus, Simon the Cananean, 19 and Judas Iscariot who betrayed him.

### 3:13 - Up a mountain

This usually indicates some very special activity is going to take place. Throughout scriptures, these mountain experiences remind one of the Moses story. The gospel writers will use this phrase frequently in highlighting special moments in Jesus' life.

Jesus summoned those he wanted, and they came to him. In John's Gospel, Jesus will say, "You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you."

3:14-16 - Those whom Jesus summoned and gave the name "apostles" were to be *with him* and to be *sent to preach*.

"To be with him" made those he called into disciples. And then they were "to be sent" making them apostles. And they were sent to preach. All three are required. The Greek word used for "to preach" is "keryssein." The English word "kerygma" comes from that Greek word. The kerygma is the announcement of the good news of Jesus Christ. In order to *preach* that good news one had to be *sent* (apostle). And in order to be able to tell the good news of Jesus, one had first to have been *with him* (disciple). (†)

3:17-19 - Besides these first five men, Jesus selected another seven. Mark gives their names in chapter 3, verses 18 and 19: Philip, Bartholomew, Thomas, James the son of Alphaeus, Thaddeus, Simon the Cananean, and Judas.

The reason we spent time looking at the passage from the Book of Revelation and Jesus knocking and wanting to be admitted in, is because it is as important today as it was at the time of the apostles, that in order to be able to preach, one must first have to have been *with him*. You have to be a disciple before you can be an apostle. Because Jesus is alive, we can be with him; more precisely perhaps, we can be with him because he has chosen to be with us. (†)

### Call of the rest of the apostles - Mark 3:13-19

Most of what we know about all of them before their call is speculation; however, here's what we think we know about them.

**Philip:** Like the brothers, Peter and Andrew, Philip was a native of Bethsaida on Lake Genesareth (John 1:44). He also was among those surrounding the Baptist when the latter first pointed out Jesus as the Lamb of God. On the day after Peter's call, when about to set out for Galilee, Jesus met Philip and called him to the Apostolate with the words, "Follow me". Philip obeyed the call, and a little later brought Nathaniel as a new disciple (John 1:43-45). On the occasion of the selection and sending out of the twelve, Philip is included among the Apostles proper. His name stands in the fifth place in the three lists (Matthew 10:2-4; Mark 3:14-19; Luke 6:13-16) after the two pairs of brothers, Peter and Andrew, James and John. The Fourth Gospel records three episodes concerning Philip which occurred during the epoch of the public teaching of the Savior:

Before the miraculous feeding of the multitude, Christ turns towards Philip with the question: "Whence shall we buy bread, that these may eat?" to which the Apostle answers: "Two hundred days' wages would not be sufficient to feed the crowd, that every one may take a little" (6:5-7).

When some Gentiles in Jerusalem came to Philip and expressed their desire to see Jesus, Philip reported the fact to Andrew and then both brought the news to the Jesus (12: 21-23).

When Philip, after Christ had spoken to His Apostles of knowing and seeing the Father, said to Him: "Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us", he received the answer: "He that sees me, sees the Father also" (14:8-9).

These three episodes furnish a consistent character-sketch of Philip as a naïve, somewhat shy, sober-minded man. No additional characteristics are given in the Gospels or the Acts although he is mentioned in the latter work (1:13) as belonging to the Apostolic College.

**Bartholomew:** Perhaps he was also named Nathaniel. There's a lot of confusion and speculation about that. In the list of apostles, sometimes the name Bartholomew is present; sometimes the name Nathaniel is found. If that is the case, Jesus said of Nathaniel, "Behold an Israelite in whom there is no guile."

**Thomas:** Little is recorded of St. Thomas the Apostle, nevertheless thanks to the fourth Gospel his personality is clearer to us than that of some others of the Twelve. His name occurs in all the lists of the Synoptists (Matthew 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6, cf. Acts 1:13), but in St. John he plays a distinctive part. First, when Jesus announced His intention of returning to Judea to visit Lazarus, "Thomas" who is called Didymus [the twin], said to his fellow disciples: "Let us also go, that we may die with him" (John 11:16). Again it was St. Thomas who during the discourse before the Last Supper raised an objection: "Thomas said to him: Lord, we know not where you are going; and how can we know the way?" (John 14:5). But more especially St. Thomas is remembered for his incredulity when the other Apostles announced Christ's Resurrection to him: "Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe" (John 20:25); but eight days later he made his act of faith,

drawing down the rebuke of Jesus: "Because you have seen me, Thomas, you have believed; blessed are they that have not seen, and have believed" (John 20:29).

**James the Son of Alphaeus:** He was called sometimes "the brother of the Lord," probably meaning a cousin. At least that's what scholars have speculated. That identity once admitted, we can apply to him all the particulars supplied by the books of the New Testament. We may venture to assert that the training of James (and his brother Jude), had been that which prevailed in all pious Jewish homes and that it was therefore based on the knowledge of the Holy Scripture and the rigorous observance of the Law. Many facts point to the diffusion of the Greek language and culture throughout Judea and Galilee, as early as the first century B.C.; we may suppose that the Apostles, at least most of them, read and spoke Greek as well as Aramaic, from their childhood. James was called to the Apostolate with his brother Jude; in all the four lists of the Apostles, he stands at the head of the third group (Matthew 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:16; Acts 1:13). Of James individually we hear no more until after the Resurrection. St. Paul (1 Corinthians 15:5-7) mentions that the Lord appeared to him before the Ascension.

Then we lose sight of James till St. Paul, three years after his conversion (A.D. 37), went up to Jerusalem. Of the Twelve Apostles he saw only Peter and James the brother of the Lord (Galatians 1:19; Acts 9:27). When in the year 44 Peter escaped from prison, he desired that news of his release might be carried to James who held already a marked preeminence in the Church of Jerusalem (Acts 12:17). In the Council of Jerusalem (A.D. 51) he gives his sentence after St. Peter, declaring as Peter had done, that the Gentile Christians are not bound to circumcision, nor to the observance of the ceremonial Mosaic Law, but at the same time, he urged the advisability of conforming to certain ceremonies and of respecting certain of the scruples of their Jewish fellow-Christians (Acts 15:13 and following). On the same occasion, the "pillars" of the Church, James, Peter, and John "gave to me (Paul) and Barnabas the right hands of fellowship; that we should go unto the Gentiles, and they unto the circumcision" (Galatians 2:9). He publicly commended the great charter of Gentile freedom from the Law, although he still continued the observance in his own life, no longer as a strict duty, but as an ancient, most venerable and national custom, trusting to "be saved by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 15:11). When afterwards some came from James to Antioch and led Peter into dissimulation (Galatians 2:12), his name was used by them, though he had given them no such commandment to enforce their interpretation of the concordat which, on his proposal, had been adopted at the Council of Jerusalem. When St. Paul after his third missionary journey paid a visit to St. James (A.D. 58), the Bishop of Jerusalem and "the elders" "glorified the Lord" and advised the Apostle to take part in the ceremonies of a Nazarite vow, in order to show how false the charge was that he had spoken of the Law as no longer to be regarded. Paul consented to the advice of James and the elders (Acts 21:1 sqq.). The Epistle of St. James reveals a grave, meek, and calm mind, nourished with the Scriptures of the Old Testament, given to prayer, devoted to the poor, resigned in persecution, the type of a just and apostolic man.

**Thaddeus:** He is also called "Jude." He is the brother (cousin) of James the son of Alphaeus. Ancient writers tell us that he preached the Gospel in Judea, Samaria, Idumaea, Syria, Mesopotamia, and Lybia. According to Eusebius, he returned to Jerusalem in the year 62, and assisted at the election of his brother (cousin), St. Simeon, as Bishop of Jerusalem.

He is an author of an epistle (letter) to the Churches of the East, particularly the Jewish converts, directed against the heresies of the Simonians, Nicolaites, and Gnostics. This Apostle is said to have suffered martyrdom in Armenia, which was then subject to Persia. The final conversion of the Armenian nation to Christianity did not take place until the Third Century.

Jude was the one who asked Jesus at the Last Supper why He would not manifest Himself to the whole world after His resurrection. Little else is known of his life. Legend claims that he visited Beirut and Edessa; possibly martyred with St. Simon in Persia.

**Simon, the Cananaean:** The name of Simon occurs in all the passages of the Gospel and Acts, in which a list of the Apostles is given. To distinguish him from St. Peter he is called (Matthew 10:4; Mark 3:18) Kananaios, or Kananites, and Zelotes (Luke 6:15; Acts 1:13). Both surnames have the same signification and are a translation of the Hebrew qana (the Zealous). The name does not signify that he belonged to the party of Zealots, but that he had zeal for the Jewish law, which he practiced before his call. Little more is known about him.

**Judas:** Judas Iscariot is remembered for only one thing: the Apostle who betrayed Jesus. The name Judas (Ioudas) is the Greek form of Judah (Hebrew "praised"), a proper name frequently found both in the Old and the New Testament. Even among the Twelve there were two that bore the name, and for this reason it is usually associated with the surname Iscariot [Hebrew "a man of Kerioth" or Carioth, which is a city of Judah (cf. Joshua 15:25)]. There can be no doubt that this is the right interpretation of the name, though the true origin is obscured in the Greek spelling.

Very little is told us in the bible concerning the history of Judas Iscariot beyond the bare facts of his call as an Apostle, his treachery, and his death. His birthplace, as we have seen, is indicated in his name Iscariot, and it may be remarked that his origin separates him from the other Apostles, who were all Galileans. For Kerioth is a city of Judah. It has been suggested that this fact may have had some influence on his career by causing want of sympathy with the other apostles. We are told nothing concerning the circumstances of his call or his share in the ministry and miracles of the apostles. And it is significant that he is never mentioned without some reference to his great betrayal. Thus, in the list of the Apostles given in the Synoptic Gospels, we read: "and Judas Iscariot, who also betrayed him". (Matthew 10:4. Cf. Mark 3:19; Luke 6:16). So again in St. John's Gospel the name first occurs in connection with the foretelling of the betrayal: "Jesus answered them: Have not I chosen you twelve; and one of you is a devil? Now he meant Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon: for this same was about to betray him whereas he was one of the twelve" (John 6:71-2).

## Not so popular - Mark 3:20-35

20 He came home. Again (the) crowd gathered, making it impossible for them even to eat. 21 When his relatives heard of this they set out to seize him, for they said, "He is out of his mind." 22 The scribes who had come from Jerusalem said, "He is possessed by Beelzebul," and "By the prince of demons he drives out demons." 23 Summoning them, he began to speak to them in parables, "How can Satan drive out Satan? 24 If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. 25 And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. 26 And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand; that is the end of him. 27 But no one can enter a strong man's house to plunder his property unless he first ties up the strong man. Then he can plunder his house. 28 Amen, I say to you, all sins and all blasphemies that people utter will be forgiven them. 29 But whoever blasphemes against the holy Spirit will never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an everlasting sin." 30 For they had said, "He has an unclean spirit."

### 3:20-21 - Family

Jesus came back home, presumably meaning Nazareth, and his relatives having heard about his exploits, and his having gathered a band of followers of somewhat dubious reputation, decided Jesus was out of his mind.

### 3:22-30 - Scribes from Jerusalem

The scribes go a step further and declare that Jesus is possessed. And they say that Jesus can cast out devils because he is the prince (leader) of the devils who therefore obey his commands.

Jesus answers the charge with a story about a house divided against itself; it cannot stand. So, if Jesus is an instrument of Satan, or the chief among the devils, and he is casting out some of his own, then his house cannot stand. Everyone knew that the devil was strong. Jesus makes the point that if he, Jesus, is defeating the devil, he, Jesus, must be stronger than the devil. (Remember back in 1:7 John the Baptist said that one mightier than he was coming? It's the same Greek word here, but translated differently.)

The pronouncement Jesus makes about the unforgivable sin is strong. Why would some sin be unforgivable? Not because God would hold it against the sinner and refuse to forgive, but because if people call the Spirit evil, they cannot approach the Spirit. People can choose only something they consider good, or at least good for them. And if they have reached the point where they think God is bad, or bad for them, they cannot approach God. And so their sin remains.

### 3:31-35 - Who is the family of Jesus?

31 His mother and his brothers arrived. Standing outside they sent word to him and called him. 32 A crowd seated around him told him, "Your mother and your brothers (and your sisters) are outside asking for you." 33 But he said to them in reply, "Who are my mother and (my) brothers?" 34 And looking around at those seated in the circle he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers. 35 (For) whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

The mother and brothers of Jesus appear at the door, but because of the crowd, they cannot get in to where Jesus is. So when Jesus is told that they are outside, Jesus raises the question, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And he points around to those who have come to listen to him, and says, "Here are my mother and my brothers. Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

Why was this story remembered and written down? It was good news for the Romans. Each Roman household had its household god. When members of a Roman family started to believe in Jesus, they were excluded from the household. They were ostracized from the family because they no longer honored the household god. So when they heard that Jesus had said that his family was made up of those who did the will of God, they knew they had found a new family to which they belonged.

## Some teaching - Mark 4:1-34

We need to remember what Papias wrote just after 100 AD. “Mark, having become Peter’s interpreter, wrote down accurately whatever he remembered of what was said or done by the Lord, however not in order.” So Mark chooses this point in his gospel to include some of Jesus’ teachings.

### 4:1-2 - The setting for the teaching

1 On another occasion he began to teach by the sea. 2 A very large crowd gathered around him so that he got into a boat on the sea and sat down. And the whole crowd was beside the sea on land. 2 And he taught them at length in parables, and in the course of his instruction he said to them,

At the end of Chapter 3, Jesus is in Nazareth. Now he is at the Sea of Galilee. And Jesus is going to teach in parables. The classic description of a parable is given by a great scripture scholar, C. H. Dodd. “A metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient *doubt about its precise application* to tease it into active thought.” [The italics are mine, not C. H. Dodd’s.]

### 4:3-9 - The parable of the sower and the seed

3 "Hear this! A sower went out to sow. 4 And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. 5 Other seed fell on rocky ground where it had little soil. It sprang up at once because the soil was not deep. 6 And when the sun rose, it was scorched and it withered for lack of roots. 7 Some seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it and it produced no grain. 8 And some seed fell on rich soil and produced fruit. It came up and grew and yielded thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold." 9 He added, "Whoever has ears to hear ought to hear."

Both Matthew (13:1-13) and Luke (8:4-10) have the same story. It was obviously a story which was popular among the first believers.

After describing the various kinds of ground into which the seed fell, and the results each kind of soil produced, the story gets to the point it was intended to make. The seed which fell into good soil produced fruit thirty-, sixty-, or a hundred fold. Before the explanation is given, the parable is about the power of the seed to produce way beyond what one could expect from the normal process. In the First Century, thirty-, sixty- and one hundredfold were all beyond what one could expect from a single seed. So the point of the parable is the power of the seed to produce results in those who take in it.

The story could have meant that there will be different levels of receptiveness to the message of Jesus. For Mark, the story is being told in Rome to those who would undoubtedly have considered themselves the “good soil,” and who may have wondered why others weren’t as enthusiastic about the message as they were.

The scattering of seeds in places other than the good soil may be meant to show God’s lavishness in extending the invitation to the Kingdom. (‡)

#### 4:10-12 - The purpose for using the parable

10 And when he was alone, those present along with the Twelve questioned him about the parables. 11 He answered them, "The mystery of the kingdom of God has been granted to you. But to those outside everything comes in parables, 12 so that 'they may look and see but not perceive, and hear and listen but not understand, in order that they may not be converted and be forgiven.'"

Why did Jesus speak about the Kingdom in parables? Some suggest that the reason was to conceal the mystery from "outsiders." But there are also some scholars who believe that the word "lest" translated from the Aramaic (which Jesus spoke) into the Greek (in which language Mark wrote) was mistranslated. These scholars suggest that the word should have been translated "unless." Try reading the passage that way: "they may look and see but not perceive, and hear and listen but not understand, unless they be converted and be forgiven." The implication is that if they be converted and be forgiven, then they will be able to perceive and to understand. (↓)

#### 4:13-20 - The explanation of the parable of the sower and seed

13 Jesus said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand any of the parables? 14 The sower sows the word. 15 These are the ones on the path where the word is sown. As soon as they hear, Satan comes at once and takes away the word sown in them. 16 And these are the ones sown on rocky ground who, when they hear the word, receive it at once with joy. 17 But they have no root; they last only for a time. Then when tribulation or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. 18 Those sown among thorns are another sort. They are the people who hear the word, 19 but worldly anxiety, the lure of riches, and the craving for other things intrude and choke the word, and it bears no fruit. 20 But those sown on rich soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit thirty and sixty and a hundredfold."

As presented by Mark, as well by Matthew and Luke, this explanation is rather strange. Jesus doesn't explain any of his other parables. This has led commentators to conclude that the explanation is the result of the early community's reflection on the parable. And since Mark is writing what he learned from Peter, and if Peter presented the explanation of the early believers as something that Jesus himself had said, then Mark would have written it down that way. [It's just one of many "Who knows?" situations in the understanding of the scriptures.]

The various kinds of soil described in the parable, besides the good soil, probably represent the disappointments already experienced by the community of early believers. Some of the initial believers in Jesus fell away because Satan tempted them (by the wayside); others were initially enthusiastic, but fell away when persecution came (rocky ground); others are overly concerned with earthly things (among thorns).

But all is not disappointing; some fell on those who were good soil and produced fruit by the way they lived!

#### 4:21-25 - Parable-like sayings

21 He said to them, "Is a lamp brought in to be placed under a bushel basket or under a bed, and not to be placed on a lampstand? 22 For there is nothing hidden except to be made visible; nothing is secret except to come to light. 23 Anyone who has ears to hear ought to hear." 24 He also told them, "Take care what you hear. The measure with which you measure will be measured out to you, and still more will be given to you. 25 To the one who has, more will be given; from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away."

This little section is sort of a comment on the parable about the seeds and parables in general. They address the question, "Did Jesus really mean to hide his message behind parables, or were the parables, as said above, invitations to think?"

The first saying is about a lamp. What's the purpose of a lamp? To be hidden under a bed or to be put on a lamp stand so it can give light to the house? Jesus is saying that his parables are not really meant to hide the message, but to illuminate the community.

The statement about the measure with which one measures also refers to people's reaction of the parables. Those who have some insight will be given more insight by thinking about the parables. Those who have no insight, or little interest in having insight, will end up in complete spiritual ignorance.

#### 4:26-29 - The seed grows by itself

26 He said, "This is how it is with the kingdom of God; it is as if a man were to scatter seed on the land 27 and would sleep and rise night and day and the seed would sprout and grow, he knows not how. 28 Of its own accord the land yields fruit, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. 29 And when the grain is ripe, he wields the sickle at once, for the harvest has come."

The word which is sown is powerful and dynamic. If the word is taken in, it will grow because of its own power. God will nurture it and it will come to fruition.

#### 4:30-32 - Like a mustard seed

30 He said, "To what shall we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable can we use for it? 31 It is like a mustard seed that, when it is sown in the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on the earth. 32 But once it is sown, it springs up and becomes the largest of plants and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the sky can dwell in its shade."

The seed of the word will not only grow of its own power; it will produce more than anyone would expect. The Kingdom which is growing is not complete yet, but it is present enough that folks should not be discouraged just because it isn't complete yet. It will become complete by producing a great harvest.

#### 4:33-34 - Mark's summary of Chapter 4

33 With many such parables he spoke the word to them as they were able to understand it. 34 Without parables he did not speak to them, but to his own disciples he explained everything in private.

Jesus spoke to the crowds in parables; but he explained the parables to his disciples in private.

## Jesus demonstrates his authority - Mark 4:35-5:43

In this section, Mark shows that Jesus has authority over four destructive forces in human life: nature, possession, disease and death.

### 4:35-41 - The stilling of the storm (authority over nature)

35 On that day, as evening drew on, he said to them, "Let us cross to the other side." 36 Leaving the crowd, they took him with them in the boat just as he was. And other boats were with him. 37 A violent squall came up and waves were breaking over the boat, so that it was already filling up. 38 Jesus was in the stern, asleep on a cushion. They woke him and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" 39 He woke up, rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Quiet! Be still!" 9 The wind ceased and there was great calm. 40 Then he asked them, "Why are you terrified? Do you not yet have faith?" 41 They were filled with great awe and said to one another, "Who then is this whom even wind and sea obey?"

First, a little background. In the ancient Near East, the sea was thought of as a treacherous beast under the control of some evil spirit which rebelled against God. Therefore, by controlling the sea, Jesus does what God does and defeats the forces of evil.

Matthew and Luke report the same story, but they "cleaned it up a bit." Here Mark reports that Jesus is asleep in the boat while the storm is raging. One can imagine that eventually one of the disciples pulled the pillow out from under his head and said, "Master, do you not care that we are perishing?" Matthew's version reads: "Lord, save us; we are perishing." And Luke's version says, "Teacher, Teacher, we are perishing."

Jesus awakens and says to the sea, "Quiet! Be still!" and there was a great calm., so powerful is Jesus' authority over the sea.

Jesus challenges the disciples, "Why are you terrified? Do you not yet have faith?" And then in his narration, Mark answers that question by reporting, "They were filled with great awe." Not faith, but awe! And they said to one another, "Who then is this whom even wind and sea obey?" One would have expected the disciples to conclude that Jesus was God, because in their culture it was just accepted that only God could control the wind and the sea. But part of Mark's message for the Romans is that it is difficult to come to faith in Jesus.

### 5:1-20 - The Gerasene Demoniac (authority over the devil)

1 They came to the other side of the sea, to the territory of the Gerasenes. 2 When he got out of the boat, at once a man 2 from the tombs who had an unclean spirit met him. 3 The man had been dwelling among the tombs, and no one could restrain him any longer, even with a chain. 4 In fact, he had frequently been bound with shackles and chains, but the chains had been pulled apart by him and the shackles smashed, and no one was strong enough to subdue him. 5 Night and day among the tombs and on the hillsides he was always crying out and bruising himself with stones. 6 Catching sight of Jesus from a distance, he ran up and prostrated himself before him, 7 Crying out in a loud voice, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me!" 8 (He had been saying to him, "Unclean spirit, come out of the man!") 9 He asked him, "What is your name?" He replied, "Legion is my name. There are many of us." 10 And he pleaded earnestly with him not to drive them away from that territory.

11 Now a large herd of swine 5 was feeding there on the hillside. 12 And they pleaded with him, "Send us into the swine. Let us enter them." 13 And he let them, and the unclean spirits came out and entered the swine. The herd of about two thousand rushed down a steep bank into the sea, where they were drowned. 14 The swineherds ran away and reported the incident in the town and throughout the countryside. And people came out to see what had

happened. 15 As they approached Jesus, they caught sight of the man who had been possessed by Legion, sitting there clothed and in his right mind. And they were seized with fear. 16 Those who witnessed the incident explained to them what had happened to the possessed man and to the swine. 17 Then they began to beg him to leave their district. 18 As he was getting into the boat, the man who had been possessed pleaded to remain with him. 19 But he would not permit him but told him instead, "Go home to your family and announce to them all that the Lord in his pity has done for you." 20 Then the man went off and began to proclaim in the Decapolis what Jesus had done for him; and all were amazed.

The unusual length of this story and its detail suggests that Mark's source for it was eye-witness testimony from someone who was there for the event. The story is the longest and most detailed exorcist narrative in the New Testament. While some would emphasize the possible eye-witness source, others see so many contradictions within the story that they think it was developed in stages, with Mark giving it the final touches. [Another one of those "Who knows?" situations.]

Where is Gerasa? No one really knows. Other ancient texts, and other gospels have slightly different names for the region. Mark writes that the man was in the tombs and was possessed by an unclean spirit. The description of the man uses several Greek words which are found nowhere else in the New Testament; which suggests that Mark's description is not based on some previously existing writing.

Since no one was ever able to restrain the man, it again demonstrates that Jesus is the "stronger one."

The unclean spirit addresses Jesus by name. The culture at the time suggested that if you knew a person's name, you had power over that person. Well, it doesn't work here! Jesus turns the tables on the demon by demanding to know its name. "What is your name?" Jesus demands. "Legion," is the response, because there are many evil spirits in the man. They begged Jesus not to return them to their everlasting dwelling place of torment, but to allow them to enter the herd of pigs, which charged down into the sea and were destroyed. (This must not have been in a Jewish territory; Jews would not keep pigs for food.)

Mark records the people's reaction: "awe," not faith. The people of the area, presumably the owners of the pigs are afraid. They beg Jesus to depart from the area, probably because they had just lost a herd of pigs! The man who was released from the power of the devil asks to remain with Jesus, but Jesus tells him to go home and tell the story of his release from evil. The home to which the man goes is the territory of the ten cities, outside the territory of Israel. The cured man is sent to proclaim the message to Gentiles! The Romans must have been glad to hear that Jesus himself sent someone to preach to the Gentiles.

There are lots of reasons to think that Mark's source for this story is an eye-witness (perhaps Peter?). It doesn't follow the usual pattern of Mark's exorcism stories, particularly the end of the story when Jesus tells the man to go and tell his kinsfolk about being released from the power of evil. Usually Mark would have written that Jesus told the man to keep silent (messianic secret). But since this took place in Gentile territory, there were no expectations of a messiah of any kind, let alone a triumphant messiah.

5:21-24; 35-43 - Healing Jairus' daughter (authority over death)

21 When Jesus had crossed again (in the boat) to the other side, a large crowd gathered around him, and he stayed close to the sea. 22 One of the synagogue officials, named Jairus, came forward. Seeing him he fell at his feet

23 and pleaded earnestly with him, saying, "My daughter is at the point of death. Please, come lay your hands on her that she may get well and live." 24 He went off with him, and a large crowd followed him and pressed upon him.

35 While he was still speaking, people from the synagogue official's house arrived and said, "Your daughter has died; why trouble the teacher any longer?" 36 Disregarding the message that was reported, Jesus said to the synagogue official, "Do not be afraid; just have faith." 37 He did not allow anyone to accompany him inside except Peter, James, and John, the brother of James. 38 When they arrived at the house of the synagogue official, he caught sight of a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. 39 So he went in and said to them, "Why this commotion and weeping? The child is not dead but asleep." 40 And they ridiculed him. Then he put them all out. He took along the child's father and mother and those who were with him and entered the room where the child was. 41 He took the child by the hand and said to her, "Talitha koum," which means, "Little girl, I say to you, arise!" 42 The girl, a child of twelve, arose immediately and walked around. (At that) they were utterly astounded. 43 He gave strict orders that no one should know this and said that she should be given something to eat.

Jairus is some kind of synagogue official, possibly a member of the board of elders. He had to be somewhat aware that there was tension rising between Jesus and official religious leaders, but he approaches Jesus anyway. Mark narrates that Jairus' daughter is near death. Matthew and Luke narrate that she has already died. Jairus asks that Jesus come and lay his hands on her so she could be healed and so she could live. Laying on of hands was a pretty standard ritual for bringing about healing at the time. The two words "healed" and "live" were words used by the early Christian community for "salvation" and "resurrection." Mark may be making a deliberate reference to Jesus.

At this point the story of Jairus' daughter is interrupted by the story of the woman with the hemorrhage.

The story of the daughter of Jairus continues in verse 35. By the time Jesus is back on his way to Jairus' house the message comes that the daughter is already dead. The despair of Jairus and the crowd is shown in the question, "Why bother the master further?" Jesus brushes the suggestion aside and says, "Do not be afraid; just have faith."

When they get to the house the professional mourners and doing their thing, and Jesus tells them to stop because the girl is asleep and not dead. They ridicule him. The only ones with Jesus are Peter, James and John. Mark says that the mourners were put out of the house. Perhaps the disciples, angry that they were ridiculing Jesus, and being known for their bold nature (sons of thunder, remember?), forcefully put them out of the house.

Mark writes that Jesus took the girl by the hand, and he preserves the Aramaic words which Jesus would have used. "Little girl, I say to you arise." The word "arise" is the same word used to describe Jesus' resurrection. And the girl gets up and begins to walk around. And the parents were astounded, not faith. And Jesus tells them to keep this a secret.

The story of the woman with the hemorrhage is tucked in the middle of the story of Jairus' daughter. In both stories Jesus touches or is touched by the person. First, the woman with the "flow of blood" which would make him ritually unclean; then touching a corpse, which was the worst possible violation of the purity laws. The crowds with Jesus must have been shocked.

#### 5:25-34 - The woman with the hemorrhage (authority over disease)

25 There was a woman afflicted with hemorrhages for twelve years. 26 She had suffered greatly at the hands of many doctors and had spent all that she had. Yet she was not helped but only grew worse. 27 She had heard about Jesus and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak. 28 She said, "If I but touch his clothes, I shall be cured." 29 Immediately her flow of blood dried up. She felt in her body that she was healed of her affliction. 30 Jesus, aware at once that power had gone out from him, turned around in the crowd and asked, "Who has touched my

clothes?" 31 But his disciples said to him, "You see how the crowd is pressing upon you, and yet you ask, 'Who touched me?'" 32 And he looked around to see who had done it. 33 The woman, realizing what had happened to her, approached in fear and trembling. She fell down before Jesus and told him the whole truth. 34 He said to her, "Daughter, your faith has saved you. Go in peace and be cured of your affliction."

The trip to Jairus' house was interrupted by the woman in the crowd who had been hemorrhaging for twelve years. Because of her "flow of blood," she was ritually unclean, and could make unclean anyone she touched. So she sort of sneaks up on Jesus, confident that just touching him will be enough to be cured. And she was right. But Jesus, knowing that power had gone out of him, asks what everyone considers a stupid question, since verse 24 has already told us that a large crowd was pressing upon him, "Who touched me?" The woman came forward and admitted the whole truth. Jesus says simply, "Your faith has saved you. Go in peace and be cured of your affliction."

There are a couple of things in this narrative which must have shocked the crowd which was with Jesus. First, that he allowed himself to be touched by someone who was ritually unclean. Second, he was speaking with a woman in public; something not done in the society of the time.

If the Romans wanted to know why Jesus' own people didn't accept him, Mark seems to be saying that his disregard for the rules of ritual cleanliness drove the religious authorities more than just a little nuts.

## **Not so popular at home - Mark 6:1-6**

1 He departed from there and came to his native place, accompanied by his disciples. 2 When the Sabbath came he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astonished. They said, "Where did this man get all this? What kind of wisdom has been given him? What mighty deeds are wrought by his hands! 3 Is he not the carpenter, 3 the son of Mary, and the brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? And are not his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him. 4 Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor except in his native place and among his own kin and in his own house." 5 So he was not able to perform any mighty deed there, apart from curing a few sick people by laying his hands on them. 6 He was amazed at their lack of faith. He went around to the villages in the vicinity teaching.

Jesus went from the shore of the Sea of Galilee back to Nazareth, accompanied by his gang of disciples. The man who had left Nazareth a short time earlier now comes home and he's got these guys with him, obviously his followers. That in itself could have been a little off-putting for this small town. Basically the townsfolk probably asked, even before Jesus opened his mouth, "Who does he think he is, bringing a bunch like that into Nazareth; and why would they follow him anyway?"

When he did open his mouth preaching in the synagogue, the townsfolk were amazed (not faith). They recognized the wisdom which came from his mouth, but they asked where he got that wisdom. Mark says that they spoke of his wisdom and his mighty powers. They must have been hearing about Jesus before he got home, because he had not done any amazing things yet in Nazareth.

The neighbors listed the reasons Jesus shouldn't be able to do all these things: they knew his family, they knew him as a carpenter, they knew his relatives. None of the rest of his family ever made much of a splash. What's with him? At first they were amazed, Mark tells us, but then he tells us that they "took offense at him." (‡)

Jesus explained to his neighbors why they took offense. A prophet is not without honor except in his own house and neighborhood. Mark says that he was not able to work many miracles there, because of their lack of faith. But he did cure a few sick people. Jesus was amazed at their lack of faith; so he moved on to the other towns in the neighborhood.

### **Imagine**

Jesus left home just a short time ago. Now he shows up with a gang of followers. The old friends from the neighborhood react with a bit jealously to his having a new group of friends. Things are a bit strange and strained for a couple of days. But then comes the Sabbath. And now Jesus, the town carpenter, starts preaching to them. Jesus shares with his family and friends and neighbors the things which had come to mean the most to him, and they not only aren't interested, but they think he's a little self-important to be preaching to them. Heck, they've known him all their lives.

Luke tells us more about the occasion, and so it's easier to understand why the citizens of Nazareth were upset with Jesus. Luke tells us that Jesus stood up to do the reading for the Sabbath ceremonies, and he was handed the scroll of Isaiah. Jesus deliberately looked for the passage he wanted: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let

the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord.” (Isaiah 61:1-2) Luke tells us that Jesus sat down after reading that passage, and he said, “Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing.”

Luke tells us further that after Jesus had preached on that text, the townsfolk were so angry that they threw Jesus out of town.

Apparently Jesus didn't get it, because Mark tells us that Jesus was sort of taken aback; he was amazed. Maybe he thought, “What's the use of coming home any more?”

## More miracles and more controversy - Mark 6:6 - 6:34

Throughout this section, the Romans' question which is being answered is: if Jesus is who you say he is, why didn't his own people accept him? A large part of that answer is that the religious authorities were against him. No matter what Jesus did, they found fault with his actions, even when those actions were miracles.

### 6:6-13 - The mission of the twelve

6 He was amazed at their lack of faith. He went around to the villages in the vicinity teaching. 7 He summoned the Twelve and began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over unclean spirits. 8 He instructed them to take nothing for the journey but a walking stick - no food, no sack, no money in their belts. 9 They were, however, to wear sandals but not a second tunic. 10 He said to them, "Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave from there. 11 Whatever place does not welcome you or listen to you, leave there and shake the dust off your feet in testimony against them." 12 So they went off and preached repentance. 13 They drove out many demons, and they anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

Jesus called those he wanted, and now they have been *with him* for some time. That made them disciples. Now Jesus *sends them*; that makes them apostles (See Mark 3:14). He gave them authority to cast out devils. Theirs is a share in Jesus' mission to preach the coming of the Kingdom of God by word and deed.

They receive some instructions on how they are to proceed. They are to take nothing for the journey but a walking stick (generally used to ward off wild animals); no food, no sack (generally used for larger amounts of money), no money in their belts (where smaller amounts of money were carried). All forms of financial security are forbidden. Every physical and material concern is to be left aside. Their entire focus must be on announcing the Kingdom of God in word and deed. (†)

Whatever house they settle in, they are to stay there; they are not celebrities moving around from one house to another. They accept whatever hospitality is offered; they do not try to improve their lot by moving to better accommodations.

So they went off to preach repentance. The word is used to mean believing in the word which is preached.

And if they are not welcomed by a town, they are to show no disrespect to its citizens, but merely move on with the symbolic gesture of shaking the dust off their sandals. This symbol goes back to the desire of the Jews to live on the land they were promised. And if some locality didn't receive them, they shook the dust from their feet, because they didn't want to be standing on heathen soil.

### 6:14-29 - The fate of John the Baptist

14 King Herod heard about it, for his fame had become widespread, and people were saying, "John the Baptist has been raised from the dead; that is why mighty powers are at work in him." 15 Others were saying, "He is Elijah"; still others, "He is a prophet like any of the prophets." 16 But when Herod learned of it, he said, "It is John whom I beheaded. He has been raised up."

17 Herod was the one who had John arrested and bound in prison on account of Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip, whom he had married. 18 John had said to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife."

19 Herodias harbored a grudge against him and wanted to kill him but was unable to do so. 20 Herod feared John, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man, and kept him in custody. When he heard him speak he was very much perplexed, yet he liked to listen to him. 21 She had an opportunity one day when Herod, on his birthday, gave a banquet for his courtiers, his military officers, and the leading men of Galilee. 22 Herodias's own daughter came in and performed a dance that delighted Herod and his guests. The king said to the girl, "Ask of me whatever you wish and I will grant it to you." 23 He even swore (many things) to her, "I will grant you whatever you ask of me, even to half of my kingdom." 24 She went out and said to her mother, "What shall I ask for?" She replied, "The head of John the Baptist."

25 The girl hurried back to the king's presence and made her request, "I want you to give me at once on a platter the head of John the Baptist." 26 The king was deeply distressed, but because of his oaths and the guests he did not wish to break his word to her. 27 So he promptly dispatched an executioner with orders to bring back his head. He went off and beheaded him in the prison. 28 He brought in the head on a platter and gave it to the girl. The girl in turn gave it to her mother. 29 When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body and laid it in a tomb.

Mark inserts this story at this place in his narration, possibly to indicate what the apostles, and Jesus himself, can expect from preaching the good news. Herod's confusing Jesus with John the Baptist risen from the dead is told by both Mark and Matthew in essentially the same way. This suggests that the story circulated quite widely within the early Christian community. Herod's confusing Jesus and John provides both a flashback concerning John the Baptist and a look into the future concerning Jesus. The story narrated here by Mark has many points of similarity between the fate of John the Baptist in the past and Jesus in the future. That perhaps was his intent in introducing the story into his narrative.

#### 6:30-34 - The return of the apostles from their ministry

30 The apostles gathered together with Jesus and reported all they had done and taught. 31 He said to them, "Come away by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while." People were coming and going in great numbers, and they had no opportunity even to eat. 32 So they went off in the boat by themselves to a deserted place. 33 People saw them leaving and many came to know about it. They hastened there on foot from all the towns and arrived at the place before them. 34 When he disembarked and saw the vast crowd, his heart was moved with pity for them, for they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.

It can be safely assumed that the apostles were quite enthusiastic about their first experience of sharing in Jesus ministry. This is the only time that the "disciples" are referred to as "apostles," which is appropriate, since they had just been "sent."

Verse 31 sounds as though it could have been lifted right out of Psalm 23. The word for "rest" is the same as the one used for "restful waters." In what follows in the next section of the feeding of the 5,000, there are further allusions to that psalm. There is "green grass," which is the same as "verdant pastures." And Jesus prepares a "meal" for the sheep which follow him.

#### **Imagine**

Remember how enthused the disciples were after they had witnessed the first day of Jesus ministry in Capernaum, after which Jesus got up early the next morning and went to a deserted place to pray. The disciples wanted him to come back to town to sop up the popularity he had generated the previous day.

So, what might have been their level of enthusiasm when they returned from their own first experience of preaching and casting out devils? Probably the last thing they wanted was to go

on a retreat. But once again Jesus admonished going off by themselves as the appropriate follow-up to a very active period of ministry. (‡) Might they have been somewhat reluctant to leave behind the adoring crowds and get into a boat to cross to the other side, and leave all those admiring people on the shore.

Well, they didn't have to worry. The crowds went around the lake and got to the spot where Jesus and the apostles landed, even before the boat got there. Mark uses this little passage to set the scene for the multiplication of loaves. Before the disciples left for their retreat, Mark had written that because of the crowds they didn't even have time to eat. And now there are going to be all these people who have nothing to eat.

The Capuchin constitutions in the 1950's admonished traveling preachers who gave parish missions to move on when they were finished with their preaching, so people could appreciate the message, not idolize the messengers.

## More acts of power and more controversy - Mark 6:35-7:23

### 6:35-44 - Feeding the five thousand

35 By now it was already late and his disciples approached him and said, "This is a deserted place and it is already very late. 36 Dismiss them so that they can go to the surrounding farms and villages and buy themselves something to eat." 37 He said to them in reply, "Give them some food yourselves." But they said to him, "Are we to buy two hundred days' wages worth of food and give it to them to eat?" 38 He asked them, "How many loaves do you have? Go and see." And when they had found out they said, "Five loaves and two fish." 39 So he gave orders to have them sit down in groups on the green grass. 40 The people took their places in rows by hundreds and by fifties. 41 Then, taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he said the blessing, broke the loaves, and gave them to (his) disciples to set before the people; he also divided the two fish among them all. 42 They all ate and were satisfied. 43 And they picked up twelve wicker baskets full of fragments and what was left of the fish. 44 Those who ate (of the loaves) were five thousand men.

That the story of the multiplication of the loaves (and fishes) was important to the early community can be seen by the fact that the story is narrated six times in the gospels. Mark and Matthew tell us that Jesus did it twice, Luke and John each give the account only once. In all instances, the story looks back to God's feeding the people in the desert during the Exodus and Elisha's feeding 100 men (2 Kings 4:42-44), and it looks forward to the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper, and beyond that, to the banquet in the Kingdom of God. And in each instance, the story has a slightly different twist, either because that's the way the story circulated, or because the evangelist wanted to make a point.

So, did Jesus multiply loaves twice or only once? [Who knows?] But most certainly there were two stories being circulated among the different Christian communities. Mark and Matthew included both versions of the stories. John and Luke only one.

Behind the story as Mark tells it is a theology which is very Eucharistic. The story begins with Mark telling us what motivated Jesus. He felt sorry for the crowd because they were like sheep without a shepherd, so he began to teach them many things. Before he fed them with bread, he fed them with the word. It is *the disciples who are concerned* that the people don't have anything to eat; they want Jesus to disperse the crowd so they can go and get some food for themselves. And Jesus says, no, the disciples should feed them. And they explain to Jesus why that is not possible; it would cost more than they had. The way Mark recounts the story it sounds like the disciples got a little snotty about it!

So Jesus asks how much food they have, and tells the disciples to go and find out. They report back that they've got five loaves and two fish. Jesus tells the disciples to get the people to sit down, and they do so in an orderly fashion, in groups of a hundred and groups of fifty. The Greek word which Mark uses is the same word which was used in gardening: neat rows.

Mark describes Jesus taking the loaves and raising his eyes to heaven, saying the blessing, and giving the loaves to the disciples to distribute to the crowd. These are the same words which Mark uses in describing the Last Supper. And all had as much as they wanted to eat. And there was plenty left over, enough to fill twelve baskets. Some say that Mark, along with indicating *twelve* baskets full left over after feeding *five* thousand is directing his readers' attention to the five books attributed to Moses and the twelve tribes of Israel. [Who knows?]

In placing this story of the "banquet" hosted by Jesus next to the story of the banquet hosted by Herod (Mark 6:14-29), one may wonder if Mark went to bed one night feeling sort of

clever and satisfied with himself for having put the stories of the two parties one after the other in his narrative.

#### 6:45-52 - Jesus walking on the water

45 Then he made his disciples get into the boat and precede him to the other side toward Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. 46 And when he had taken leave of them, he went off to the mountain to pray. 47 When it was evening, the boat was far out on the sea and he was alone on shore. 48 Then he saw that they were tossed about while rowing, for the wind was against them. About the fourth watch of the night, he came toward them walking on the sea. He meant to pass by them. 49 But when they saw him walking on the sea, they thought it was a ghost and cried out. 50 They had all seen him and were terrified. But at once he spoke with them, "Take courage, it is I, do not be afraid!" 51 He got into the boat with them and the wind died down. They were (completely) astounded. 52 They had not understood the incident of the loaves. On the contrary, their hearts were hardened.

Once again, after Jesus had dismissed the crowd after feeding them, and after he had sent the disciples off in a boat, he retired to the mountain to pray. This habit of Jesus' praying after a miracle is an acknowledgment of Jesus' sense that he depends on his Father for the miraculous powers he has.

The disciples set off in a boat, but it's rough going. About the fourth watch of the night, that is, between 3:00 AM and 6:00 AM, Jesus walks by them on the water. Mark says that he meant to pass them by. But they see him and are terrified because they thought they were seeing a ghost. But Jesus spoke to them, "Take courage. It is I. Do not be afraid." The phrase "It is I" comes from the scene when Moses asked God who God was and God said, "I am who am." In Greek the "ego eimi" can be translated either way. So this is a revelation of Jesus' divinity.

And the disciples' reaction? They were completely astounded. Not faith. Mark tells us that they had not understood the incident of the loaves. On the contrary, he says, their hearts were hardened.

What was it about the incident of the loaves that the disciples should have understood? They should have equated the providing of bread in a deserted place with God's providing manna in the desert, thus identifying Jesus as equal to God.

#### 6:53-56 - Healings

53 After making the crossing, they came to land at Gennesaret and tied up there. 54 As they were leaving the boat, people immediately recognized him. 55 They scurried about the surrounding country and began to bring in the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. 56 Whatever villages or towns or countryside he entered, they laid the sick in the marketplaces and begged him that they might touch only the tassel on his cloak; and as many as touched it were healed.

According to 6:45 the boat set out for Bethsaida, but they ended up in Gennesaret. If one were inclined to regard this as strict history in our sense, they could claim that the wind mentioned in 6:48 blew them off course. But probably thirty years later, Mark was just combining different fragments of the stories which were circulating within the community. (Remember back in Mark 1, Papias of Hierapolis wrote that Mark didn't get everything in the right order.)

"They wanted just to touch the fringe of his garment" and they thought they would be healed. That's reminiscent of the woman with the flow of blood described in 4:25-34. The point is

that Mark is trying to portray Jesus as the healer. “And as many as touched him were healed.” The Greek word used here is *esozanto*, which means “saved” as well as “healed.”

### 7:1-23 - Controversy

1 Now when the Pharisees with some scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, 2 they observed that some of his disciples ate their meals with unclean, that is, unwashed, hands. 3 (For the Pharisees and, in fact, all Jews, do not eat without carefully washing their hands, keeping the tradition of the elders. 4 And on coming from the marketplace they do not eat without purifying themselves. And there are many other things that they have traditionally observed, the purification of cups and jugs and kettles (and beds).) 5 So the Pharisees and scribes questioned him, "Why do your disciples not follow the tradition of the elders but instead eat a meal with unclean hands?" 6 He responded, "Well did Isaiah prophesy about you hypocrites, as it is written: 'This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; 7 In vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines human precepts.' 8 You disregard God's commandment but cling to human tradition." 9 He went on to say, "How well you have set aside the commandment of God in order to uphold your tradition! 10 For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and 'Whoever curses father or mother shall die.' 11 Yet you say, 'If a person says to father or mother, "Any support you might have had from me is qorban"' (meaning, dedicated to God), 12 you allow him to do nothing more for his father or mother. 13 You nullify the word of God in favor of your tradition that you have handed on. And you do many such things." 14 He summoned the crowd again and said to them, "Hear me, all of you, and understand. 15 Nothing that enters one from outside can defile that person; but the things that come out from within are what defile." [16 ]

17 When he got home away from the crowd his disciples questioned him about the parable. 18 He said to them, "Are even you likewise without understanding? Do you not realize that everything that goes into a person from outside cannot defile, 19 since it enters not the heart but the stomach and passes out into the latrine?" (Thus he declared all foods clean.) 20 "But what comes out of a person, that is what defiles. 21 From within people, from their hearts, come evil thoughts, unchastity, theft, murder, 22 adultery, greed, malice, deceit, licentiousness, envy, blasphemy, arrogance, folly. 23 All these evils come from within and they defile."

It's interesting that Mark says this controversy arose with “the Pharisees and some scribes who had come from Jerusalem.” One wonders why they came up to Galilee. [Who knows?] The Judeans didn't have much use for the Galileans.

In order to get the full feel of this story, perhaps our imagination can help. We could imagine Jesus speaking calmly; or we can imagine that he's had it with the scribes and Pharisees! He's angry, and it shows.

It would appear that the scribes and Pharisees are looking for a fight. They object to Jesus' disciples eating meals without first washing their hands. Mark digresses to inform his Roman audience about a lot of the traditions of the Pharisees. Then he gets back to the story. The scribes and Pharisees ask again, “Why do your disciples not follow the tradition of the elders but instead eat a meal with unclean hands?”

Jesus broadens the argument, moving from the question of washing hands to the whole attitude of the Pharisees toward religion. “Well did Isaiah prophesy about you hypocrites!” He quotes Isaiah 29: This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines human precepts. And then Jesus shows how they have set aside the law of God in order to observe the teaching of some rabbis. He uses the example of honoring parents.

If a person, always a son, because daughters could not inherit, proclaimed that some part of his estate was *korban*, that is, dedicated to God, then no one could take it from him in a law suit or to pay other debts. The tradition of the elders applied this law of *korban* to a person's

responsibility to take care of elderly parents. And Jesus concludes, “And you do many such things.” This whole explanation was undoubtedly for the benefit of the Romans who would not be familiar with Jewish law and customs.

So, if the Pharisees who came from Jerusalem made the journey in order to pick a fight with Jesus, they got a fight! Those who confronted Jesus were religious officials, and they had come all the way from Jerusalem. They must have been sort of special religious officials. And they tried to embarrass Jesus in front of the crowd which followed him, possibly to try to discredit Jesus in front of his own followers.

Jesus turned to the crowds of his followers. [Here use your imagination.] “Hear me, all of you and understand. Nothing that enters one from outside can defile that person; but the things that come out from within are what defiles.” How did that go down with the Pharisees who had confronted him? First Jesus told them that their dedication to the traditions of the elders was contrary to the law of God; now he told them that the particular tradition they had used to begin the fight is in itself a crock. Guess who got embarrassed in front of the crowd!

When Jesus and the disciples got home, away from the crowd his disciples questioned him about what he said. And Jesus explained to them, all of whom were Jews used to practicing the law and the traditions, what he meant when he talked to the Pharisees. Mark makes a parentheses in his text writing, “Thus he declared all foods clean.” Both the Jews and the Romans in Mark’s congregation must have been glad to hear that.

It’s a bit strange that this very blunt saying of Jesus about food did not influence the debates in the early Christian community about the food laws. Why not? [Who knows?]

But here’s a possibility. Matthew’s version of the story does not have Mark’s parenthesis: “Thus he declared all foods clean,” but he does have most of the rest of the story. Perhaps the parenthesis is Mark’s own interpretation of the story. Mark, after all, had accompanied Paul for awhile before he accompanied Peter. He may even have been witness to the confrontation between Paul and Peter, which Paul wrote about in his letter to the Galatians (2:11-14). Peter had been eating with the Gentiles, but when some Jews came from Jerusalem, Peter left the Gentiles and went to eat with the Jews, who presumably ate according to the Jewish traditions. In writing his Gospel for the Romans, Mark may have finally put his stamp on the controversy by including in his gospel that parenthesis.

## Even more acts of power and more controversy - Mark 7:24-8:21

### 7:24-30 - Healing the possessed daughter of a Gentile woman

24 From that place he went off to the district of Tyre. He entered a house and wanted no one to know about it, but he could not escape notice. 25 Soon a woman whose daughter had an unclean spirit heard about him. She came and fell at his feet. 26 The woman was a Greek, a Syrophenician by birth, and she begged him to drive the demon out of her daughter. 27

He said to her, "Let the children be fed first. For it is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs." 28 She replied and said to him, "Lord, even the dogs under the table eat the children's scraps." 29 Then he said to her, "For saying this, you may go. The demon has gone out of your daughter." 30 When the woman went home, she found the child lying in bed and the demon gone.

After the grueling confrontation with the scribes and Pharisees from Jerusalem, Jesus withdrew to the district of Tyre. That's just north of Galilee, and it is Gentile territory. Jesus was looking for a chance to be alone and he didn't want anyone to know he was there (Messianic secret). But people found out at what house he was staying, and they came flocking to him. How did they know about Jesus? Back in 3:8 we are told that some from that area had come down to Galilee and had witnessed Jesus' healing.

Mark frequently mentions that Jesus entered a house where he performed some miracle. Perhaps this was an important reference for the Romans for whom Mark is writing, because they all met in "house-churches."

Among the people who came flocking was a woman who was a Syrophenician, a gentile. She bowed to the ground in veneration of Jesus and made her request. Her daughter was possessed by a demon. Jesus' response seems harsh: "Let the children be fed first. For it is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs." Jesus' Jewish contemporaries often referred to the Gentiles as "dogs." The word Jesus uses softens that a bit, because the word he used means "puppies." The woman has an immediate comeback. "Lord, even the puppies under the table eat the children's scraps." Jesus takes her reply as a sign of her faith in God and in Jesus' power. So he grants her request.

The woman's reply to Jesus criticizes the exclusivity of Jesus' statement and shows how there can be a place for non-jews in God's plan. Mark's Gentile-Christian readers would have taken this story as an explanation of their presence in the people of God.

The Greek words used here in the conversation between Jesus and the woman are the same words used in the multiplication of the loaves for 5,000, and in the coming story of the feeding of the 4,000. The literal translation of the Greek words are "bread," "eat," and "be satisfied." So, Jesus says, "It is not right to take the *bread* of the children *until they are satisfied*, and throw it to the dogs." The woman says that even the dogs *eat* the crumbs that fall on the floor.

### 7:31-37 - Healing the man who couldn't hear or speak

31 Again he left the district of Tyre and went by way of Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, into the district of the Decapolis. 32 And people brought to him a deaf man who had a speech impediment and begged him to lay his hand on him. 33 He took him off by himself away from the crowd. He put his finger into the man's ears and, spitting, touched his tongue; 34 then he looked up to heaven and groaned, and said to him, "Ephphatha!" (that is, "Be

opened!") 35 And (immediately) the man's ears were opened, his speech impediment was removed, and he spoke plainly. 36 He ordered them not to tell anyone. But the more he ordered them not to, the more they proclaimed it. 37 They were exceedingly astonished and they said, "He has done all things well. He makes the deaf hear and (the) mute speak."

From Tyre Jesus heads southeast to the area of the Decapolis (it's a Greek word meaning deca = ten and capolis = cities); part of it is just southeast of Galilee. It seems Jesus is making his way toward Jerusalem, but not by a direct route, and much of it through Gentile territory. Perhaps Mark in reporting this is pandering to the Gentile Romans. Jesus is working miracles also for Gentiles; despite Jesus' words to the Syrophenician woman, his mission goes beyond Israel.

Jesus took the man aside, away from the crowd, and Mark says he looked up to heaven (prayed) and he groaned (sympathy for the man). And the healing is gradual, not instantaneous. That's part of Mark's overall theme: coming to belief in Jesus is a gradual process. Mark records the Aramaic words of Jesus, *ephphatha*, meaning "be opened." Mark did the same thing in the raising of the girl to life when he said, "*Talitha koum*" which means "Little girl arise." Many say Mark preserved the words of Jesus in the language he spoke, because of his belief in the power of the word of Jesus.

And the man was healed. But again Jesus said not to tell anybody. It's the messianic secret again. If people thought Jesus was the messiah, they would have very false expectations of him. He is the messiah, but not in the way people expected. The reaction of the crowd was to say that he has done everything well, "he makes the deaf hear and the mute speak." These are words taken from Isaiah 35:5-6, where they allude to Israel's glorious future.

## 8:1-10 - Feeding the four thousand

1 In those days when there again was a great crowd without anything to eat, he summoned the disciples and said, 2 "My heart is moved with pity for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat. 3 If I send them away hungry to their homes, they will collapse on the way, and some of them have come a great distance." 4 His disciples answered him, "Where can anyone get enough bread to satisfy them here in this deserted place?" 5 Still he asked them, "How many loaves do you have?" "Seven," they replied. 6 He ordered the crowd to sit down on the ground. Then, taking the seven loaves he gave thanks, broke them, and gave them to his disciples to distribute, and they distributed them to the crowd. 7 They also had a few fish. He said the blessing over them and ordered them distributed also. 8 They ate and were satisfied. They picked up the fragments left over - seven baskets. 9 There were about four thousand people. He dismissed them 10 and got into the boat with his disciples and came to the region of Dalmanutha.

Even though there are some differences in detail, this second account of the feeding of the multitude is generally assumed to be a different narration of the same event as the narration of the five thousand found in Mark 6:35-44. But the differences in description of the event have some theological meaning not contained in the narration of the feeding of the five thousand.

The differences are: the crowd has been with Jesus for three days (instead of hurrying to where Jesus and the disciples had gone by boat); the disciples know what supply of food is available (instead of going and inquiring of the people in the crowd); there are seven loaves (instead of five); Jesus says two blessings (instead of only one); four thousand are fed (instead of five thousand); and there are seven baskets of fragments left over (instead of twelve). Despite the

differences, the message is the same: looking back on the manna in the desert, and looking forward to the Eucharist, and the messianic banquet in heaven.

In both instances, the blessings Jesus would have said would have been the typical and traditional Hebrew blessings for just about everything. "Blessed are you Lord, God Almighty, in your goodness we have . . ."

Many say that there is a message contained in the numbers which are used. [Who knows?]  
In the feeding of the five thousand in Jewish territory, the numbers may indicate the Jews

5,000 people fed = 5 books of Moses

5 loaves available = 5 books of Moses

12 baskets of left-overs = 12 tribes of Israel

In the feeding of the four thousand in Gentile territory, the numbers may indicate Gentiles

4,000 people fed = The four points of the compass (the whole world)

7 loaves available = 7 churches in Asia Minor; 7 deacons elected in Acts to distribute

7 baskets of left-overs = 7 churches in Asia Minor; 7 deacons elected in Acts to distribute

The accounts of two feedings, first in Jewish territory and then in Gentile territory, may be Mark's way of telling the young Christian community that any walls between Jews and Gentiles within the community need to be broken down. (‡)

#### 8:11-21 - Controversy about signs

11 The Pharisees came forward and began to argue with him, seeking from him a sign from heaven to test him. 12 He sighed from the depth of his spirit and said, "Why does this generation seek a sign? Amen, I say to you, no sign will be given to this generation." 13 Then he left them, got into the boat again, and went off to the other shore.

14 They had forgotten to bring bread, and they had only one loaf with them in the boat. 15 He enjoined them, "Watch out, guard against the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod." 16 They concluded among themselves that it was because they had no bread. 17 When he became aware of this he said to them, "Why do you conclude that it is because you have no bread? Do you not yet understand or comprehend? Are your hearts hardened? 18 Do you have eyes and not see, ears and not hear? And do you not remember, 19 when I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many wicker baskets full of fragments you picked up?" They answered him, "Twelve." 20 "When I broke the seven loaves for the four thousand, how many full baskets of fragments did you pick up?" They answered (him), "Seven." 21 He said to them, "Do you still not understand?"

The Pharisees who had seen the miracles Jesus had worked, came up to him and demanded a sign from him that would indicate that he really came from God. Mark doesn't mince words when he says, "He sighed from the depth of his spirit." And he told them that no sign would be given. The Pharisees wanted some spectacular show of power as "a sign from heaven." Jesus' preaching the word and curing illnesses and casting out demons weren't spectacular enough for the Pharisees. If they can't see the meaning of the miracles, then it's not because there is no sign, it's because they refuse to see!

It seems as though Jesus was much disgusted as he got into the boat with his disciples. His disgust spreads from the Pharisees to Herod as well. He warns his disciples not to be corrupted by their "leaven." As much as we appreciate yeast, it is in fact a corrupting influence on the mixture

of flour and water which puffs it up and makes it soft. The disciples can apparently tell that Jesus is upset, and they attribute that to the fact that they didn't bring enough bread with them. They too fail to see. So Jesus questions them about what *they've* seen. How much bread has been left over after he shared with the five thousand and then with the four thousand. If the disciples can't believe in Jesus' care for their material welfare, how will they deal with what Jesus must endure for their spiritual welfare?

#### 8:22-26 - Healing the blind man

22 When they arrived at Bethsaida, they brought to him a blind man and begged him to touch him. 23 He took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village. Putting spittle on his eyes he laid his hands on him and asked, "Do you see anything?" 24 Looking up he replied, "I see people looking like trees and walking." 25 Then he laid hands on his eyes a second time and he saw clearly; his sight was restored and he could see everything distinctly. 26 Then he sent him home and said, "Do not even go into the village."

With all the blindness of the Pharisees and even of the disciples, this story points ahead to Peter's profession of faith, and to the end of the whole controversy about signs and who can see them when we get to 10:32, when blind Bartimaeus receives his sight.

The story of the blind man at Bethsaida is also related to what has gone before and which will follow. The major point of this cure is that it is gradual. Jesus puts spittle on the man's eyes and places his hands on him and asks if he can see. The man can see somewhat. [Unlike the earlier healing of "the man born blind," this man must have lost his sight, because he can distinguish people from trees. If he had been blind from birth, he wouldn't recognize and distinguish a person from a tree.] Jesus places his hands on the man a second time, and his sight is *restored* completely. This gradual recovery of sight is meant to assure the Romans that coming to faith in Jesus does not come easily nor suddenly; it takes time.

And Jesus sends the man home, telling him not even to go into the village. The messianic secret again.

#### 8:27-30 - Peter's profession of faith

27 Now Jesus and his disciples set out for the villages of Caesarea Philippi. Along the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" 28 They said in reply, "John the Baptist, others Elijah, still others one of the prophets." 29 And he asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter said to him in reply, "You are the Messiah." 30 Then he warned them not to tell anyone about him.

Mark uses the phrase "on the way." That phrase describes both the geographical journey to Jerusalem, and also "the way" of coming to faith in Jesus. The previous episode indicates that coming to faith is gradual. In the rest of Mark's Gospel, it will represent the journey that the disciples must make from their idea of a glorious messiah to the correct understanding of Jesus' messiahship. They will have to come to grips with the fact that Jesus is the messiah who will suffer and die. The disciples won't "get it" until Jesus' resurrection.

This is the final episode in the first half of Mark's Gospel. Peter, who has been witness to the teaching of Jesus and to his miracles gives the first expression of *faith* found in Mark's

Gospel. Jesus had asked the disciples who others thought him to be, and they gave him a list of what they had heard (the same list that Herod thought after he had beheaded John the Baptist in Mark 6:14-15). When asked directly who they thought Jesus was, Peter answered for them, "You are the messiah." Messiah, whether in the Hebrew or in the Greek means "the anointed one."

This was great news for the Christian community in Rome. Their Peter, the one who had first told them about Jesus, who had just been martyred in Rome within the past year or two, was the first one to profess faith in Jesus. There will be no other profession of faith in Mark's Gospel until the centurion who pierces his side says, "Truly this was the Son of God."

Jesus tells the disciples not to tell anyone that he is the messiah, because people's idea of what the messiah would be and do was at such variance with what Jesus was about to undergo. To proclaim that Jesus was the messiah would infuriate the Romans and the Jewish leaders who cooperated with the Romans. Jesus will begin now to tell the disciples plainly that the messiah must suffer and die. This was not something his friends, his disciples, or for that matter, the Roman Christians, wanted to hear.

## First instruction on the passion and teachings - Mark 8:31-38

This section and the next two will be dominated by Jesus attempting to set right in his disciples' minds the true meaning of his being the Messiah.

### 8:31-33 - First prediction of the passion

31 He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer greatly and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and rise after three days. 32 He spoke this openly. Then Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 33 At this he turned around and, looking at his disciples, rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan. You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do."

Because of the recent persecutions of Christians and the martyrdom of Peter, the Roman Christians are not surprised to hear the narration of Jesus predicting that he will suffer and die. Mark will use the words, "It is necessary" as he reveals the nature of Jesus' messiahship. This has the inference that "it is ordained by God."

Jesus says his opponents will be the elders, the chief priests and the scribes. The Pharisees disappear from Mark's list of opponents. However, many of the scribes (the learned ones because they could read and write, and because they were sort of experts in the Law of Moses) were members of the Pharisee Party.

In Mark's gospel Jesus' prediction of his passion always includes "and will rise on the third day." Even so, Peter wants no part of it. He rebukes Jesus for saying that the messiah would suffer and die. Then Jesus rebukes Peter for thinking only in human terms, and not according to God's designs. This stands as a challenge to the Roman Christians, and to all generations of Christians. Can they/we accept a messiah who suffers and dies, and can we follow that kind of a messiah? (†)

### 8:34-9:1 - Consequences for Jesus' followers

34 He summoned the crowd with his disciples and said to them, "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. 35 For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and that of the gospel will save it. 36 What profit is there for one to gain the whole world and forfeit his life? 37 What could one give in exchange for his life? 38 Whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this faithless and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels."

9:1 He also said to them, "Amen, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come in power."

The previous section (8:31-33) describes the conversation between Jesus and Peter in the presence of those who were already disciples of Jesus. Now Jesus speaks to "the crowds along with his disciples," meaning anyone who would wish to become his disciple. Anyone who would wish to follow Jesus must "deny himself/herself, take up his/her cross, and follow me." To "deny oneself" means "to act in a selfless way and to give up one's place at the center of things."

To "take up one's cross" surely reminded the Romans of Jesus death; it is an allusion to the form of execution used by the Roman authorities for rebels and slaves, who were forced to

carry the horizontal cross-beam to the place of their execution. Here Mark means that the disciple must be prepared to enter the “way” in following the path that Jesus trod. (‡)

To “follow me” again means persevering in following Jesus, not just beginning to follow.

To “save . . . lose one’s soul/life” is a translation of the Greek word *psyche*. It means more than “soul” or “life” in our modern context; it means the most inner core of a person, that which constitutes the self. This *psyche* is so valuable that there is nothing which can pay for it. And if one loses it, there is nothing which can buy it back.

All this is set in the context of the last judgement, when the Son of Man will come in glory (after his suffering and death) and will be ashamed of those who have lost their *psyche*. But those who have remained steadfast will be rewarded. This must have been some consolation for the Christians in Rome, who were being persecuted.

The pattern in 8:31-38 will be followed twice more in Mark’s Gospel. Jesus predicts his passion, people misunderstand, and Jesus tells what true discipleship entails.

Jesus says, “There are some people standing here who will not experience death until they see the kingdom of God come with power.” The kingdom of God is both present and future. It is inaugurated in the person of Jesus who has come “with power” in his preaching and miracles. But the kingdom of God is still to be realized in its fullness. It is often spoken of as the kingdom of God is “already/not yet.” It has begun, but is not yet fulfilled. So the “people standing here” must mean Peter, James and John.

## 9:2-13 - The Transfiguration

2 After six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John and led them up a high mountain apart by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, 3 and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no fuller on earth could bleach them. 4 Then Elijah appeared to them along with Moses, and they were conversing with Jesus. 5 Then Peter said to Jesus in reply, “Rabbi, it is good that we are here! Let us make three tents: one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” 6 He hardly knew what to say, they were so terrified. 7 Then a cloud came, casting a shadow over them; then from the cloud came a voice, “This is my beloved Son. Listen to him.” 8 Suddenly, looking around, they no longer saw anyone but Jesus alone with them.

9 As they were coming down from the mountain, he charged them not to relate what they had seen to anyone, except when the Son of Man had risen from the dead. 10 So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what rising from the dead meant. 11 Then they asked him, “Why do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?” 12 He told them, “Elijah will indeed come first and restore all things, yet how is it written regarding the Son of Man that he must suffer greatly and be treated with contempt? 13 But I tell you that Elijah has come and they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written of him.”

The disciple’s experience of the transfiguration of Jesus is a taste of the “already/not yet” nature of the kingdom of God. They get a glimpse of the glorified Jesus in the fulfilled kingdom of God.

Jesus’ clothes become so bright that no bleach on earth could be the cause of their brightness.

Elijah and Moses, the prophet and the law-giver, appear conversing with Jesus. Jesus was written about elsewhere as fulfilling the law and the prophets.

Peter speaks up and says that it is good that the three disciples were there. He means that it is good for Jesus that they were there; they can verify the significance of Jesus as equal to the law-

giver and the prophet, thereby showing the importance of Jesus. But from the cloud comes the voice which says, "This is my beloved son. Listen to *him*." [The emphasis here is mine. I emphasize the word "him," because Jesus is not just equal to Moses and Elijah; Jesus is now the one to whom people should listen.] However, listening to Jesus does not abrogate continued listening to Moses and the prophets. That they are in conversation with Jesus suggests that while Jesus might surpass the Law and the prophets, he does not supplant them, but fulfills them.

Jesus again tells them not to speak about the event until the Son of Man has risen from the dead. (Messianic secret again)

The discussion about Elijah's coming first points to John the Baptist.

### 9:14-29 - The healing of the possessed boy

14 When they came to the disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and scribes arguing with them. 15 Immediately on seeing him, the whole crowd was utterly amazed. They ran up to him and greeted him. 16 He asked them, "What are you arguing about with them?" 17 Someone from the crowd answered him, "Teacher, I have brought to you my son possessed by a mute spirit. 18 Wherever it seizes him, it throws him down; he foams at the mouth, grinds his teeth, and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive it out, but they were unable to do so." 19 He said to them in reply, "O faithless generation, how long will I be with you? How long will I endure you? Bring him to me." 20 They brought the boy to him. And when he saw him, the spirit immediately threw the boy into convulsions. As he fell to the ground, he began to roll around and foam at the mouth. 21 Then he questioned his father, "How long has this been happening to him?" He replied, "Since childhood. 22 It has often thrown him into fire and into water to kill him. But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us." 23 Jesus said to him, "If you can! Everything is possible to one who has faith." 24 Then the boy's father cried out, "I do believe, help my unbelief!" 25 Jesus, on seeing a crowd rapidly gathering, rebuked the unclean spirit and said to it, "Mute and deaf spirit, I command you: come out of him and never enter him again!" 26 Shouting and throwing the boy into convulsions, it came out. He became like a corpse, which caused many to say, "He is dead!" 27 But Jesus took him by the hand, raised him, and he stood up. 28 When he entered the house, his disciples asked him in private, "Why could we not drive it out?" 29 He said to them, "This kind can only come out through prayer."

This is the second longest and most detailed story in Mark's Gospel, second only to the driving out of the Gerasene demoniac in Mark 5:1-20. Despite all the details, it is a story about faith. The disciples cannot cast out the devil, perhaps because they are still part of "this unbelieving generation." The father's request that Jesus cast out the devil "if you can," and Jesus' reply that if one has faith everything is possible, and the father's response that he does believe, but asks that Jesus help his unbelief, all point to the central message of the story: faith and coming to faith.

Jesus' instruction that this kind can be cast out only by prayer suggests that praying is part of having faith. (†)

## Passion predicted again and teachings - Mark 9:30-10:31

### 9:30-32 - End of Galilean public ministry

30 They left from there and began a journey through Galilee, but he did not wish anyone to know about it. 31 He was teaching his disciples and telling them, "The Son of Man is to be handed over to men and they will kill him, and three days after his death he will rise." 32 But they did not understand the saying, and they were afraid to question him.

The simple phrase "And they left there and passed through Galilee" marks the end of Jesus' *public* ministry in Galilee. The rest of the Galilean teaching is directed toward the disciples, as is suggested by the fact that Jesus didn't want anyone else in Galilee to know that he was there. Jesus continued teaching the disciples that the Son of Man will be handed over, be killed, and rise after three days. But the disciples failed to understand, and they were afraid to ask him. They still don't get it!

### 9:33-37 - Who is the greatest?

33 They came to Capernaum and, once inside the house, he began to ask them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" 34 But they remained silent. They had been discussing among themselves on the way who was the greatest. 35 Then he sat down, called the Twelve, and said to them, "If anyone wishes to be first, he shall be the last of all and the servant of all." 36 Taking a child he placed it in their midst, and putting his arms around it he said to them, 37 "Whoever receives one child such as this in my name, receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but the one who sent me."

"What were you discussing along the way?" This whole section of the gospel is the journey to Jerusalem and toward Jesus' passion and death. The phrase "along the way" means, not only the geographical journey, but the way of discipleship. And the disciples, right off the bat, get it all wrong. They want to know who among them is the greatest! Clearly they are not yet fully on the *way of discipleship*, but rather part of the *way of the society* in which they lived, where status and honor were very real and natural considerations. (‡)

The way of discipleship is just the opposite of the way of society. It was then, and it is now. "If anyone wishes to be first, he shall be the last of all and servant of all." (‡)

By taking the child as an example, Jesus changes the focus of his teaching from those who are *to serve* to those who are *to be served*. A child in the First Century was not considered for its innocence and unspoiledness, but was a non-person, one who had no social status or legal rights. One could not expect to gain anything either socially or materially from kindness to a child. By embracing the child Jesus displays his acceptance of the child (who is a social nonentity) as worthy of respect and care. The non-entities of the world are to be served by the disciples of Jesus. (‡)

"Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me." In Jesus' perspective even the most apparently insignificant people are important because they too (and especially) carry the name of Jesus and belong to him. Matthew will give a dramatic development to this teaching in his description of the last judgment (Matt. 25:31-46).

“Whoever receives me receives the one who sent me.” It was just taken for granted in the First Century that anyone sent as an ambassador had to be received, not as simply a person in his or her own right, but as the one who sent him or her.

It would seem as though Pope Francis has made this the cornerstone of his ministry as Bishop of Rome. Whether he is at home in Rome or traveling to other places, he always chooses to visit a prison or a hospital, a home for the aged or an orphanage. He seems always to choose “non-entities” as recipients of his ministry. Even in his writings about the environment, he always mentions the effect of global warming and climate change on the poorest people in the world.

### 9:38-41 - Who is with us?

38 John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone driving out demons in your name, and we tried to prevent him because he does not follow us." 39 Jesus replied, "Do not prevent him. There is no one who performs a mighty deed in my name who can at the same time speak ill of me. 40 For whoever is not against us is for us.

41 Anyone who gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ, amen, I say to you, will surely not lose his reward.

There seems to be some sort of jealousy in John’s speaking of the “strange exorcist,” someone casting out demons in Jesus’ name, but who is not in the company of Jesus’ followers. John says that “we forbade him.” Remembering the hot-headed temperament of James and John, this “forbidding” might have taken on the nature of some harassment of the person. But Jesus rebuked John, saying that if someone is doing good in Jesus’ name, that person must be for us, not against us. And “anyone who is not against us is for us.” Perhaps the message here is a caution against exclusivity in one’s following of Jesus. This saying could provide the scriptural basis for ecumenism. (↓)

Interestingly, both Matthew and Luke turn that saying around, having Jesus say, “Anyone who is not for us is against us.”

### 9:42-50 - More instruction

42 "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe (in me) to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were put around his neck and he were thrown into the sea. 43 If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life maimed than with two hands to go into Gehenna, into the unquenchable fire. [44] 45 And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life crippled than with two feet to be thrown into Gehenna. 47 And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. Better for you to enter into the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into Gehenna, 48 where 'their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.' 49 "Everyone will be salted with fire. 50 Salt is good, but if salt becomes insipid, with what will you restore its flavor? Keep salt in yourselves and you will have peace with one another."

Whoever does good to a follower of Christ will receive a reward. (9:41) Whoever puts a stumbling block on the way of those coming to believe in Christ will be judged severely.

If there are things within yourself which are a stumbling block (hand, foot, eye), get rid of it. It is also possible that this saying was taken by the early small Christian community as a recommendation for dealing with those within the community who presented a stumbling block to the community: throw them out.

Salt is a metaphor for the activities of the disciples. The admonition is that it shouldn't go flat. Within the believing community salt and fire will keep the believers on the right path to cultivating hospitality and peace. (‡)

## 10:1-12 - Teaching about marriage and divorce

1 He set out from there and went into the district of Judea (and) across the Jordan. Again crowds gathered around him and, as was his custom, he again taught them. 2 The Pharisees approached and asked, "Is it lawful for a husband to divorce his wife?" They were testing him. 3 He said to them in reply, "What did Moses command you?" 4 They replied, "Moses permitted him to write a bill of divorce and dismiss her." 5 But Jesus told them, "Because of the hardness of your hearts he wrote you this commandment. 6 But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female. 7 For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother (and be joined to his wife), 8 and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two but one flesh. 9 Therefore what God has joined together, no human being must separate." 10 In the house the disciples again questioned him about this. 11 He said to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; 12 and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery."

During the end of his time in Galilee, Jesus confined his teaching to the disciples. Now he enters Judea, and he begins to teach the crowds again.

The questions surrounding marriage and divorce were much debated among the Pharisees at Jesus' time. The Pharisees knew well that according to Deuteronomy 24:1-4 it was lawful for a man to divorce his wife. Apparently the Pharisees already knew Jesus' thoughts on the matter, and so they asked him in public for his opinion, so the people could see that he was not orthodox in his teaching. They were testing him.

Jesus turns the tables on the Pharisees by asking them what Moses commanded. In fact, Moses' commands concerned only the technicalities of dismissing a wife; he only allowed, not commanded divorce. Jesus points that out to the Pharisees, and claims that the permission to divorce was given only because of people's "hardness of heart." Jesus draws on two texts which appear earlier in the bible, Genesis 1:27 and 2:24, which represent God's original plan for marriage, and indicate that in marriage the two become one flesh and therefore there can be no divorce.

On the basis of Deuteronomy 24:1-4, a man could divorce his wife for "something objectionable." The debates which occupied the Pharisees surrounded what was the "something objectionable." The stricter Pharisees held that it meant some kind of sexual impropriety; those who held a looser interpretation claimed it could be something as trivial as serving her husband something to eat which he considered spoiled. And some went so far as to say that the man might find his wife objectionable because he had fallen in love with someone more beautiful.

In a society in which divorce was widely accepted and the controversial issue was the grounds for divorce, Jesus' teaching about no divorce went against custom and the cultural grain. (‡)

## 10:13-16 - Blessing the children

13 And people were bringing children to him that he might touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. 14 When Jesus saw this he became indignant and said to them, "Let the children come to me; do not prevent them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. 15 Amen, I say to you, whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it." 16 Then he embraced them and blessed them, placing his hands on them.

This simple little story is much more than a pleasant memory of something Jesus did. The stories about Jesus were recalled by the community, because they answered a question which occupied the early community.

First among the question which the story answers is again the question of those who are to be served by the believing community: the children, the non-persons, the ones with no status or authority or ability to repay. Jesus grew angry when the disciples tried to prevent the children from coming to him. Only those who receive God's kingdom as a gift from God and make no claim upon it on the basis of their own status or power will enter God's kingdom.

The second question which is answered is about the baptism of infants. The early Christian community had a formula which was used before baptism. The question was asked, "Is there anything to *prevent* this person from being baptized?" The same formula is apparent in Acts 8:36, when the Ethiopian eunuch says, "Look, there is water. What is to *prevent* my being baptized?"

It is possible that at the first Pentecost, among the three thousand who were baptized was a pregnant woman. When the baby was born the community was confronted with the question about baptizing the child. Imagine that Peter said that the child could not be baptized because the child could not believe in Jesus. And an old woman in the community spoke up and said, "There you go again, Peter. Remember when they were bringing the little children to Jesus, and you tried to *prevent* them?"

## 10:17-31 - Riches and poverty

17 As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up, knelt down before him, and asked him, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" 18 Jesus answered him, "Why do you call me good? 3 No one is good but God alone. 19 You know the commandments: 'You shall not kill; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness; you shall not defraud; honor your father and your mother.'" 20 He replied and said to him, "Teacher, all of these I have observed from my youth." 21 Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said to him, "You are lacking in one thing. Go, sell what you have, and give to (the) poor and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." 22 At that statement his face fell, and he went away sad, for he had many possessions.

23 Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" 24 The disciples were amazed at his words. So Jesus again said to them in reply, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! 25 It is easier for a camel to pass through (the) eye of (a) needle than for one who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." 26 They were exceedingly astonished and said among themselves, "Then who can be saved?" 27 Jesus looked at them and said, "For human beings it is impossible, but not for God. All things are possible for God."

28 Peter began to say to him, "We have given up everything and followed you." 29 Jesus said, "Amen, I say to you, there is no one who has given up house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands for my sake and for the sake of the gospel 30 who will not receive a hundred times more now in this present age: houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and eternal life in the age to come. 31 But many that are first will be last, and (the) last will be first."

To grasp the meaning of these three teaching of Jesus on riches and poverty, some knowledge is needed about the concepts which were in the minds of Jesus' hearers. Riches in Jesus' time were regarded as a blessing for having lived a good life. The virtuous were rich. And those riches were expected to make their owner a benefactor of other people not so blessed. Riches were regarded as a blessing, and as a means of conferring blessing on the less fortunate. (‡)

Mark's Jesus now gives three teachings on riches and poverty. This is the longest sustained treatment of any ethical issue in Mark's Gospel, and it reflects Jesus' ethic of radical discipleship.

First teaching: The rich young man. Mark says that Jesus looked at his young questioner with love. He was a person of integrity. Jesus extends to him the invitation to even greater integrity: "Go, sell whatever you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven, and come, follow me." Jesus is asking him to divest himself of all his goods once and for all and so deprive himself of the role of benefactor. Jesus says that you will have treasure in heaven, an even greater blessing than being rich in this life and playing the benefactor. (‡)

The obstacle posed by riches seems to be that the thought and energy given to accumulating and preserving one's riches can distract from making God's kingdom the focus of attention. It is a practical poverty, rather than an aesthetical one. The rich young man could not follow the itinerant Jesus with a lot of possessions.

Second teaching: It is hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of God. The camel through the eye of a needle is a hyperbole. There is no gate in Jerusalem named the eye of the needle, as some have maintained. It is impossible for people to save themselves, but it is possible for God to save them. In fact, it is only God who can save them. No one can gain salvation; it is a gift of God. This is Mark's theology of God's preferential option for the poor. The disciples were amazed at this teaching because it is a reversal of the idea that riches are a sign of divine favor. (‡)

Third teaching: The rewards for choosing poverty. The hundredfold blessings are both for here and now, and for the future in the fulfillment of the kingdom of God. The "houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and land" one will receive now are to be found within the Christian community, where all were regarded as brothers and sisters, where itinerant preachers could always find a home in the hospitality of other Christians. (‡) Mark, speaking to what the persecuted Roman Christians already knew, adds the phrase "with persecutions."

## Passion predicted a third time and more teaching - Mark 10:32-52

### 10:32-34 - Prediction

32 They were on the way, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus went ahead of them. They were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. Taking the Twelve aside again, he began to tell them what was going to happen to him. 33 "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death and hand him over to the Gentiles 34 who will mock him, spit upon him, scourge him, and put him to death, but after three days he will rise."

Jesus predicts what will happen to him in Jerusalem. Nonetheless, Jesus is preceding the disciples, which amazed the disciples and frightened them. Jesus took the Twelve aside and described what would happen to him in Jerusalem, this time in even greater detail than before.

### 10:35-40 - Request of James and John

35 Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." 36 He replied, "What do you wish (me) to do for you?" 37 They answered him, "Grant that in your glory we may sit one at your right and the other at your left." 38 5 Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup that I drink or be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" 39 They said to him, "We can." Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink, you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; 40 but to sit at my right or at my left is not mine to give but is for those for whom it has been prepared."

The boys' request is for special places when the kingdom is fully realized indicates that they just don't get it. When they approach Jesus with their request, Jesus asks them, "What do you wish that I should do for you?" They want glory! And Jesus says that it is not his to give. Instead he offers the boys the chance to share in his own suffering. And they blithely say that, yes, they can do that.

### 10:41-45 - True glory is service

41 When the ten heard this, they became indignant at James and John. 42 Jesus summoned them and said to them, "You know that those who are recognized as rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones make their authority over them felt. 43 But it shall not be so among you. Rather, whoever wishes to be great among you will be your servant; 44 whoever wishes to be first among you will be the slave of all. 45 For the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many."

James and John were the ones foolish enough to ask for glory, but the others were just as un-seeing, because they became furious that the boys were asking something for themselves, which the others would not get. (‡)

Jesus uses the disciples' misunderstanding of what real glory is to instruct the disciples on what authority is all about. Not like those who rule over the Gentiles and make their authority felt by lording it over others, but as service, even the service of slaves of the others. Slaves usually served only one master, but in the company of Jesus those in authority will serve all! (‡)

## 10:46-52 - The blind man sees

46 They came to Jericho. And as he was leaving Jericho with his disciples and a sizable crowd, Bartimaeus, a blind man, the son of Timaeus, sat by the roadside begging. 47 On hearing that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out and say, "Jesus, son of David, have pity on me." 48 And many rebuked him, telling him to be silent. But he kept calling out all the more, "Son of David, have pity on me." 49 Jesus stopped and said, "Call him." So they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take courage; get up, he is calling you." 50 He threw aside his cloak, sprang up, and came to Jesus. 51 Jesus said to him in reply, "What do you want me to do for you?" The blind man replied to him, "Master, I want to see." 52 Jesus told him, "Go your way; your faith has saved you." Immediately he received his sight and followed him on the way.

As they were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus was sitting by the road and when he heard that it was Jesus who was passing by he cried out to him, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" The Greek word for "have mercy" would be familiar to older Catholics who remember the Latin Mass in which was recited "*Kyrie eleison.*" That is what Bartimaeus cried out. Even though others tried to shut him up, he kept crying out. Jesus called him over. The blind man threw aside his cloak. As he was begging on the side of the road, his cloak would have been where passers-by would possibly throw a coin; perhaps the coins went flying. Jesus then asked him, "What do you wish that I should do?" That's the same question Jesus asked the brothers James and John, who asked for glory. Bartimaeus asks that he might see. The disciples turn out to be the ones who are blind; and the blind man sees! And he followed Jesus on the way. Presumably that means on the way to Jerusalem, and on the way of discipleship. (‡)

## Holy Week begins - Mark 11:1-12:44

The Holy Week events as described by Mark, begin with the entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem, and they conclude with a description of his appearances after his resurrection. The Holy Week events and teachings are among the earliest testimonies we have of the Jesus event. They formed the oral tradition of the narratives from the very beginning (see Peter's speech in Acts 2).

### 11:1-11 - Jesus enters Jerusalem.

1 When they drew near to Jerusalem, to Bethphage and Bethany at the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples 2 and said to them, "Go into the village opposite you, and immediately on entering it, you will find a colt tethered on which no one has ever sat. Untie it and bring it here. 3 If anyone should say to you, 'Why are you doing this?' reply, 'The Master has need of it and will send it back here at once.'" 4 So they went off and found a colt tethered at a gate outside on the street, and they untied it. 5 Some of the bystanders said to them, "What are you doing, untying the colt?" 6 They answered them just as Jesus had told them to, and they permitted them to do it. 7 So they brought the colt to Jesus and put their cloaks over it. And he sat on it. 8 Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut from the fields. 9 Those preceding him as well as those following kept crying out: "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! 10 Blessed is the kingdom of our father David that is to come! Hosanna in the highest!" 11 He entered Jerusalem and went into the temple area. He looked around at everything and, since it was already late, went out to Bethany with the Twelve.

The whole event is told in terms of the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9. "Shout for joy, O daughter Jerusalem! Behold: your king is coming to you, a just savior is he, humble, and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey." It is a proclamation of Jesus as messiah. Such a proclamation by the crowds would have alarmed the Roman officials and their Jewish collaborators, who would meet the proclamation with swift and massive punishment.

As would be true of any person from Galilee entering Jerusalem, Jesus and his disciples go immediately into the temple. Jesus just looks around and leaves for Bethany with his disciples.

After describing Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, Mark narrates one miracle and five controversies in Jerusalem - 11:12-12:44

### 11:12-14 - The cursing and withering of the fig tree

12 The next day as they were leaving Bethany he was hungry. 13 Seeing from a distance a fig tree in leaf, he went over to see if he could find anything on it. When he reached it he found nothing but leaves; it was not the time for figs. 14 And he said to it in reply, "May no one ever eat of your fruit again!" And his disciples heard it.

This is the only miracle Jesus works in Jerusalem. Jesus curses the fig tree. Since Jesus grew up in Palestine, he knew perfectly well that there would be no fruit on the tree so early in the spring. But his curse is symbolic of religious activity which is "all leaves" and "no fruit." The story of the fig tree is interrupted by the story of the "cleansing" of the temple, which points to a similarity with the fig tree. Temple worship could easily be regarded as "all leaves" and "no fruit."  
(↓)

## 11:15-19 - Money changers

15 They came to Jerusalem, and on entering the temple area he began to drive out those selling and buying there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who were selling doves. 16 He did not permit anyone to carry anything through the temple area. 17 Then he taught them saying, "Is it not written: 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples'? But you have made it a den of thieves." 18 The chief priests and the scribes came to hear of it and were seeking a way to put him to death, yet they feared him because the whole crowd was astonished at his teaching. 19 When evening came, they went out of the city.

Jesus drives money changers out of the temple. Like the cursing of the fig tree for not having fruit, even though it was not the season for fruit, the driving out of the money changers is strange behavior on Jesus' part. Money changers were needed in order for people to have the right currency to pay for the materials for sacrifice and for the temple tax. The events and Mark's narration of them must be taken as symbolic as well as real. On the real level, they seem a bit outlandish; symbolically, they give any number of messages. Scholars disagree about the point of the stories. Perhaps the message in both cases is that although something seems to be thriving, it is time for it to come to an end. (‡)

Jesus' saying that "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations" may have resonated with his Roman audience, because it included them, and not just Jewish believers in the God of Israel.

## 11:20-25(26) - The withered tree

20 Early in the morning, as they were walking along, they saw the fig tree withered to its roots. 21 Peter remembered and said to him, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed has withered." 22 Jesus said to them in reply, "Have faith in God. 23 Amen, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be lifted up and thrown into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it shall be done for him. 24 Therefore I tell you, all that you ask for in prayer, believe that you will receive it and it shall be yours. 25 When you stand to pray, forgive anyone against whom you have a grievance, so that your heavenly Father may in turn forgive you your transgressions." [verse 26 is missing]

Jesus' curse has had its effect. Peter remembers the previous morning's curse and is surprised. Jesus gives a short discourse on praying and faith. Apparently this is a statement to show that Jesus acted with the power of God, and that his followers could count on the same power if they have faith and pray.

Commentators and scholars have widely divergent opinions about the meaning of the two incidents of the cursed and withered fig tree and the temple action. The fig tree incident possibly symbolizes that the people, especially the leaders, did not bear the kind of fruit which the ministry of Jesus should have produced. The temple action established the inadequacy of the Jerusalem temple as the only place to worship the God of Israel.

The admonition to forgive offences against oneself prior to asking God for forgiveness was obviously a major spiritual theme in the early Christian community. Matthew includes it in his narration of Jesus' teaching the disciples how to pray. (‡)

## 11:27-33 - Jewish officials question Jesus' authority.

27 They returned once more to Jerusalem. As he was walking in the temple area, the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders approached him 28 and said to him, "By what authority are you doing these things? Or who gave you this authority to do them?" 29 Jesus said to them, "I shall ask you one question. Answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things. 30 Was John's baptism of heavenly or of human origin? Answer me." 31 They discussed this among themselves and said, "If we say, 'Of heavenly origin,' he will say, '(Then) why did you not believe him?' 32 But shall we say, 'Of human origin?'" - they feared the crowd, for they all thought John really was a prophet. 33 So they said to Jesus in reply, "We do not know." Then Jesus said to them, "Neither shall I tell you by what authority I do these things."

This is the *first of a block of five controversies* in Jesus' Jerusalem ministry.

As officials of the religion, the chief priests and scribes and elders thought they had a legitimate interest in asking by what authority Jesus acted. On the surface, it was a legitimate concern for them. But in a very clever way Jesus demonstrates that it was not their legitimate concern which prompted their questioning, but rather an attempt to discredit Jesus.

Well, if they were interested in what authority was religiously legitimate, Jesus says, then they must have been interested in by what authority John the Baptism did what he did. The officials were afraid to answer Jesus' question, because no matter what they answered, they would embarrass themselves. So Jesus says, in effect, "So you are not really all that concerned about what constitutes legitimate authority."

## 12:1-12 - Parable of the vineyard

1 He began to speak to them in parables. "A man planted a vineyard, put a hedge around it, dug a wine press, and built a tower. Then he leased it to tenant farmers and left on a journey. 2 At the proper time he sent a servant to the tenants to obtain from them some of the produce of the vineyard. 3 But they seized him, beat him, and sent him away empty-handed. 4 Again he sent them another servant. And that one they beat over the head and treated shamefully. 5 He sent yet another whom they killed. So, too, many others; some they beat, others they killed. 6 He had one other to send, a beloved son. He sent him to them last of all, thinking, 'They will respect my son.' 7 But those tenants said to one another, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours.' 8 So they seized him and killed him, and threw him out of the vineyard. 9 What (then) will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come, put the tenants to death, and give the vineyard to others. 10 Have you not read this scripture passage: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; 11 by the Lord has this been done, and it is wonderful in our eyes?'" 12 They were seeking to arrest him, but they feared the crowd, for they realized that he had addressed the parable to them. So they left him and went away.

After besting the priests, scribes and elders in the question of Jesus' authority, he teaches them in the parable of the vineyard, which they knew was directed against them. (Remember, he's speaking *to* them, not only *about* them.

"A man planted a vineyard." That would immediately direct the audience's attention to Isaiah 5:7 in which the vineyard is a symbol for Israel. "He let it out to tenant farmers" is exactly that which was the case in Israel at the time, in fact, in the entire Greek and Roman world. In return the owner expected a large share of the profit. His hearers knew immediately that a) the vineyard is Israel, b) the owner is God, and c) the tenant farmers are Israel's leaders.

"When the proper time came" has an interesting meaning. In Leviticus 19:23-25 it is stipulated that it was forbidden to eat fruit from a tree for the first three years from its planting, the

fruit of the fourth year was set apart for a sacrifice to God, and only in the fifth year might the fruit be freely eaten.

The owner (God) sent servants (the prophets) but the farmers (Israel's leaders) disrespected the emissaries of the owner, thereby showing disrespect to the owner.

It is important to note that it is the tenant farmers, not all of Israel, against whom the criticism of Jesus is leveled. It is not a parable about the Christian church replacing Israel as God's people.

### 12:13-17 - Taxes to Caesar

13 They sent some Pharisees and Herodians to him to ensnare him in his speech. 14 They came and said to him, "Teacher, we know that you are a truthful man and that you are not concerned with anyone's opinion. You do not regard a person's status but teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it lawful to pay the census tax to Caesar or not? Should we pay or should we not pay?" 15 Knowing their hypocrisy he said to them, "Why are you testing me? Bring me a denarius to look at." 16 They brought one to him and he said to them, "Whose image and inscription is this?" They replied to him, "Caesar's." 17 So Jesus said to them, "Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God." They were utterly amazed at him.

The *second controversy* concerns the question of payment of taxes to Caesar. It's interesting that the Herodians and the Pharisees would get together to ask Jesus the question about paying taxes to Caesar. The Herodians would probably have said "yes," the Pharisees, at least some of them, would probably have said "no." The flattering introduction which they give Jesus is clearly a set-up, because their intention was to trap him. But Jesus eludes the trap by asking to see the coin with the Emperor's image and words on it. So, it belongs to Caesar, so give it back to Caesar. And the things of God, give to God.

This cannot reasonably be construed as an argument for "the separation of church and state." Neither Jesus nor Mark could have had such a thing in mind.

### 12:18-27 - Resurrection

18 Some Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to him and put this question to him, 19 saying, "Teacher, Moses wrote for us, 'If someone's brother dies, leaving a wife but no child, his brother must take the wife and raise up descendants for his brother.'" 20 Now there were seven brothers. The first married a woman and died, leaving no descendants. 21 So the second married her and died, leaving no descendants, and the third likewise. 22 And the seven left no descendants. Last of all the woman also died. 23 At the resurrection (when they arise) whose wife will she be? For all seven had been married to her." 24 Jesus said to them, "Are you not misled because you do not know the scriptures or the power of God? 25 When they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but they are like the angels in heaven. 26 As for the dead being raised, have you not read in the Book of Moses, in the passage about the bush, how God told him, 'I am the God of Abraham, (the) God of Isaac, and (the) God of Jacob'?" 27 He is not God of the dead but of the living. You are greatly misled."

The *third controversy* concerns the resurrection of the dead. The Sadducees, who deny the resurrection, are Jesus' opponents in this controversy. A contemporary historian, Josephus, described them as men of high standing but with limited popular influence. Josephus also wrote that "they reckon it a virtue to dispute with the teachers of the path of wisdom that they (the

teachers) pursue.” Their question to Jesus is hostile in intent and seeks to reduce to absurdity the case for life after death.

The Sadducees accepted only the Torah, the first five books of the bible, as authentic and the basis of religion. So when Jesus confronts them that they know neither the *scripture* nor the power of God, he is hitting them where it really hurts! Then he quotes from their precious scriptures to show that God is the God of the living, because God identifies himself as the God of the long-deceased patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. So they must be living.

#### 12:28-34 - The greatest law

28 One of the scribes, when he came forward and heard them disputing and saw how well he had answered them, asked him, "Which is the first of all the commandments?" 29 Jesus replied, "The first is this: 'Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is Lord alone! 30 You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.' 31 The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." 32 The scribe said to him, "Well said, teacher. You are right in saying, 'He is One and there is no other than he.' 33 And 'to love him with all your heart, with all your understanding, with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself' is worth more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices." 34 And when Jesus saw that (he) answered with understanding, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." And no one dared to ask him any more questions.

This *fourth controversy* is more a conversation than a controversy story. It concerns which is the greatest law or commandment.

Rabbis found 613 commandments in the Torah, 248 of them were positive in form, and 365 of them were negative. They also debated about which were the “heavy” laws and which were “light.” Debate about the first or greatest of these commandments was common practice among the rabbis. So the scribe who approached Jesus assumed that because Jesus was a teacher, he had an opinion on the matter.

Almost all Jews at Jesus’ time would have held that the greatest commandment was to love God; it was part of their daily prayer. Jesus gives his opinion on the second greatest commandment; it is to love one’s neighbor as oneself.

The scribe agrees with Jesus’ answer, and Jesus says that he is not far from the kingdom of God. How far is he? Well, now that you know it, just do it!

Mark adds that after this conversation, no one dared ask him any more questions. So in the following sections, Jesus himself introduces the controversy by asking some questions of his own.

#### 12:35-37 - David’s son

35 As Jesus was teaching in the temple area he said, "How do the scribes claim that the Messiah is the son of David? 36 David himself, inspired by the holy Spirit, said: 'The Lord said to my lord, "Sit at my right hand until I place your enemies under your feet.'" 37 David himself calls him 'lord'; so how is he his son?" (The) great crowd heard this with delight.

To understand this *fifth controversy* about the Messiah and the Son of David, two assumptions of First Century Jews, including Jesus, must be kept in mind: first that David wrote all the psalms, and second that he did so under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

An understanding of Hebrew and Greek is needed to fully understand the quotation from Psalm 110:1, but it is best understood as “The Lord (the God of Israel) said to my lord (the king) . . .” The understanding of the people at Jesus’ time was that David called the Messiah “Lord.” The controversy goes on from there. If David called the Messiah “my Lord,” someone greater than David, how can he be David’s son?

Whether the early Roman Christians liked it or not, their proclaiming Jesus as Lord had political implications, because the Emperor was also called Lord. If Jesus is Lord, does that mean that the Emperor is not? This caused trouble for the Christians.

#### 12:38-40 - False religion (scribes)

38 In the course of his teaching he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to go around in long robes and accept greetings in the marketplaces, 39 seats of honor in synagogues, and places of honor at banquets. 40 They devour the houses of widows and, as a pretext, recite lengthy prayers. They will receive a very severe condemnation."

Jesus says beware of the scribes who were ostentatious in their dress and in the seats they chose in synagogues and at banquets. They liked to be thought of as important people. Jesus says that they say long prayers, but are dishonest, cheating widows out of part of their sustenance, and hypocrites.

#### 12:41-44 - True religion (The widow’s mite)

41 He sat down opposite the treasury and observed how the crowd put money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. 42 A poor widow also came and put in two small coins worth a few cents. 43 Calling his disciples to himself, he said to them, "Amen, I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all the other contributors to the treasury. 44 For they have all contributed from their surplus wealth, but she, from her poverty, has contributed all she had, her whole livelihood."

The receptacles into which the temple tax was put were made of metal, so when someone put coins into the receptacles, it made a noise. The more coins, the more noise. The poor widow’s coin didn’t make much noise, but Jesus commended her contribution over the contributions of the “noisy ones.” (↓)

It is debated whether the widow is a model to be imitated for her sincerity and generosity or as someone to be pitied as a victim of religious exploitation.

## Jesus' End-time talk - Mark 13:1-37

13:1-4 - Jesus prophesies the destruction of the Jerusalem temple.

1 As he was making his way out of the temple area one of his disciples said to him, "Look, teacher, what stones and what buildings!" 2 Jesus said to him, "Do you see these great buildings? There will not be one stone left upon another that will not be thrown down." 3 As he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple area, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, 4 "Tell us, when will this happen, and what sign will there be when all these things are about to come to an end?"

These four verses pose a question about the date of the Gospel of Mark. The description of the destruction of the temple is very close to what actually happened. The date of the composition of Mark's Gospel is usually set at just before 70 AD. The temple was destroyed by the Romans in the year 70AD. There was already great tension in Rome prior to the destruction of the temple. So the question arises: Did Mark foresee what was about to happen, suggesting that the Gospel was written before 70 AD, or was it written immediately after 70 AD, when the destruction of the temple had already taken place? [Who knows?]

13:5-8 - The end-time is not yet

5 Jesus began to say to them, "See that no one deceives you. 6 Many will come in my name saying, 'I am he,' and they will deceive many. 7 When you hear of wars and reports of wars do not be alarmed; such things must happen, but it will not yet be the end. 8 Nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes from place to place and there will be famines. These are the beginnings of the labor pains.

The warnings about wars and rumors of war, and the earthquakes are all part of previous Old Testament prophesies. Jesus is preparing his disciples for frightful things which will happen. But his point is: "Don't be upset. These things must happen." Perhaps there were already within the Christian community – or in the society surrounding the community – people who claimed to be the messiah. Jesus doesn't want his disciples to be misled; the end-time is not here yet.

13:9-13 - Persecution

9 "Watch out for yourselves. They will hand you over to the courts. You will be beaten in synagogues. You will be arraigned before governors and kings because of me, as a witness before them. 10 But the gospel must first be preached to all nations. 11 When they lead you away and hand you over, do not worry beforehand about what you are to say. But say whatever will be given to you at that hour. For it will not be you who are speaking but the holy Spirit. 12 Brother will hand over brother to death, and the father his child; children will rise up against parents and have them put to death. 13 You will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who perseveres to the end will be saved.

The upheavals will be not only in wars and natural disasters; they will also affect the disciples who will suffer persecution, from both Jewish authorities (councils and synagogues) and Gentile authorities (governors and kings), and even from their own families. When Jesus says, "When they lead you away, handing you over . . ." it is likely that Mark's audience was already experiencing that. They should continue to rely on the Holy Spirit to know what to say.

When Jesus speaks of family members handing other family members over, this too was probably part of Mark's audience's experience. When one became a believer in Jesus as the Son of God, he or she renounced belief in the Roman household gods of the family, and was ostracized from the family, and perhaps reported to the Roman authorities as a heretic and a traitor. But whoever perseveres will be saved. This probably means more than "rescued" from present persecution, but saved for eternal life.

### 13:14-23 - The abomination of desolation

14 "When you see the desolating abomination standing 4 where he should not (let the reader understand), then those in Judea must flee to the mountains, 15 (and) a person on a housetop must not go down or enter to get anything out of his house, 16 and a person in a field must not return to get his cloak. 17 Woe to pregnant women and nursing mothers in those days. 18 Pray that this does not happen in winter. 19 For those times will have tribulation such as has not been since the beginning of God's creation until now, nor ever will be. 20 If the Lord had not shortened those days, no one would be saved; but for the sake of the elect whom he chose, he did shorten the days. 21 If anyone says to you then, 'Look, here is the Messiah! Look, there he is!' do not believe it. 22 False messiahs and false prophets will arise and will perform signs and wonders in order to mislead, if that were possible, the elect. 23 Be watchful! I have told it all to you beforehand.

What is the "abomination of desolation?" This is another of those "who knows?" questions. The reference is to the historical event told in the Book of Daniel, chapter 11, verse 31. The Seleucid King Antiochus IV in 167 BC set up on the altar of holocausts in the Jerusalem Temple a statue to a pagan god. The Emperor Coligula tried to put a statue of himself in the temple in 40 AD. Maybe that is what Jesus is referring to. Or it may be some other blasphemy which hadn't taken place yet, but which Mark took it to mean the persecution the Roman Christians were experiencing. [Who knows?] Whatever it is, the admonition is to "head for the hills," "get out of town."

The further admonition is not to believe anyone who says in those troubled times that he is the Christ. Jesus concludes this part of his end-time discourse by saying, "Take heed," and do not get all excited that the end is here. Be patient.

### 13:24-37 - The coming of the Son of Man

24 "But in those days after that tribulation the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, 25 and the stars will be falling from the sky, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. 26 And then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in the clouds' with great power and glory, 27 and then he will send out the angels and gather (his) elect from the four winds, from the end of the earth to the end of the sky. 28 "Learn a lesson from the fig tree. When its branch becomes tender and sprouts leaves, you know that summer is near. 29 In the same way, when you see these things happening, know that he is near, at the gates. 30 Amen, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. 31 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. 32 "But of that day or hour, no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. 33 Be watchful! Be alert! You do not know when the time will come. 34 It is like a man traveling abroad. He leaves home and places his servants in charge, each with his work, and orders the gatekeeper to be on the watch. 35 Watch, therefore; you do not know when the lord of the house is coming, whether in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or in the morning. 36 May he not come suddenly and find you sleeping. 37 What I say to you, I say to all: 'Watch!'"

Several times in this reflection on Mark's Gospel, the phrase has been used "[Who knows?]" This section of Mark's Gospel is the granddaddy of them all! Commentators point out that much of this section is quotations from Old Testament prophets, drawn together into this discourse of Jesus. Did Jesus draw them together, or did Mark? [Who knows?] But the point of it all is that the fulfillment of the coming of God's reign in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus is going to turn the whole world upside down.

Jesus did turn the world upside down by inaugurating the kingdom of God; so it's "already." But believers in Jesus are to bring the kingdom to completion by the way they live; so the kingdom of God is also "not yet." It still has to be brought to completion by the way believers live. The general message is that one should not be fooled into thinking that Jesus will be returning soon, but that one ought to be prepared at all times. (↓)

## Jesus' last days - Mark 14:1-31

The events narrated here take place during what we would call Tuesday to Thursday of Holy Week. Because in the Jewish tradition a day was measured from sunset of one day to sunset of the following day, the chronology is difficult to follow. By that reckoning the last supper, the agony in the garden and the crucifixion all take place on one day, even though we would consider it as Thursday evening and Friday. The three synoptic gospels have the same chronology but the Gospel of John has it differently. [Who knows?]

14:1-11 - Jesus is anointed and betrayed.

1 The Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread were to take place in two days' time. So the chief priests and the scribes were seeking a way to arrest him by treachery and put him to death. 2 They said, "Not during the festival, for fear that there may be a riot among the people." 3 When he was in Bethany reclining at table in the house of Simon the leper, a woman came with an alabaster jar of perfumed oil, costly genuine spikenard. She broke the alabaster jar and poured it on his head. 4 There were some who were indignant. "Why has there been this waste of perfumed oil? 5 It could have been sold for more than three hundred days' wages and the money given to the poor." They were infuriated with her. 6 Jesus said, "Let her alone. Why do you make trouble for her? She has done a good thing for me. 7 The poor you will always have with you, and whenever you wish you can do good to them, but you will not always have me. 8 She has done what she could. She has anticipated anointing my body for burial. 9 Amen, I say to you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed to the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her." 10 Then Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve, went off to the chief priests to hand him over to them. 11 When they heard him they were pleased and promised to pay him money. Then he looked for an opportunity to hand him over.

The chief priests and the scribes were secretly planning on how to "capture" Jesus and put him to death. The usual English translation is "arrest" him. But there is no legal authority here. They just want to capture him.

Because it was Passover time, Jerusalem's population swelled to four times its usual size. That caused the Roman and Jewish authorities anxiety because of the possibility of riots. Pilate, the governor, moved into Jerusalem from his usual residence, just in case there was trouble. With him undoubtedly came a large contingent of Roman soldiers.

Mark says that Jesus was in the house of "Simon the leper." That's strange, because a leper would not be associating with others. Perhaps Simon had been cured of leprosy previously. Or Simon the leper owned the house but did not live there. [Who knows?]

A woman (not named by Mark) enters and with extravagant gestures anoints Jesus head. Matthew and Luke say it was his feet. [Who knows?] The ointment was very expensive, as was the jar which she broke. Mark narrates that "some" were indignant about the waste of the precious oil; he doesn't name Judas. But Jesus says, "Why do you trouble her?" and then he says, "For you will have the poor everywhere in your midst." That's not the usual translation, but it is a more accurate translation of the Greek. (One scripture scholar says this is the most misinterpreted verse in the New Testament.) Jesus is not saying that poverty is inevitable; he means that the poor among you will always be a stimulus for you to do good, but I will not always be among you (in his earthly life), so it's fine that she has found me a stimulus to do good. And at Passover it was customary to give alms for the poor.

Whether Mark intended it or not, the incident is reminiscent of Psalm 23, where the Lord sets a *table* for me while my enemies *watch* and my *head is anointed with oil*.

We are told that Judas went out and plotted with the chief priests to hand Jesus over to them.

#### 14:12-26 - The Last Supper

12 On the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, when they sacrificed the Passover lamb, 3 his disciples said to him, "Where do you want us to go and prepare for you to eat the Passover?" 13 He sent two of his disciples and said to them, "Go into the city and a man will meet you, carrying a jar of water. 4 Follow him. 14 Wherever he enters, say to the master of the house, 'The Teacher says, "Where is my guest room where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?"'" 15 Then he will show you a large upper room furnished and ready. Make the preparations for us there." 16 The disciples then went off, entered the city, and found it just as he had told them; and they prepared the Passover. 17 When it was evening, he came with the Twelve. 18 5 And as they reclined at table and were eating, Jesus said, "Amen, I say to you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me." 19 They began to be distressed and to say to him, one by one, "Surely it is not I?" 20 He said to them, "One of the Twelve, the one who dips with me into the dish. 21 For the Son of Man indeed goes, as it is written of him, 6 but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed. It would be better for that man if he had never been born." 22 While they were eating, he took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them, and said, "Take it; this is my body." 23 Then he took a cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them, and they all drank from it. 24 He said to them, "This is my blood of the covenant, which will be shed 8 for many. 25 Amen, I say to you, I shall not drink again the fruit of the vine until the day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God." 26 Then, after singing a hymn, 9 they went out to the Mount of Olives.

Jesus eats a final meal with his disciples, during which he tells the disciples what Mark's readers have known all along, namely that one of them will betray him. That must have been quite a surprise for them to hear.

Jesus also institutes the Eucharist, which together with the sacrifice of his life, institutes a new covenant between God and the people of God.

Jesus also says that the Son of Man goes forward as it is written of him, but "Woe to the one by whom the Son of Man is handed over." Jesus says that it would be better that the betrayer had never been born.

Here is the theological tension between Jesus going his way as it is written of him (presuming that it is God's will), and the freedom of the one by whom he is betrayed. Many say that God wanted Jesus to die. That is repugnant to many others.

A Franciscan scholar has put together an understanding which brings the two outlooks together. John Duns Scotus, a Franciscan theologian, has written that the Incarnation is too great a grace to have been occasioned by sin; God had always intended to send the Son to become part of the human race. But the human race sinned, and so the Son had to come also as a savior to undo the sin of Adam.

Adam's sin was disobedience. Jesus undid or reversed that sin by his obedience. He always did the will of his Father. And that got him killed. The sacrifice God required of Jesus, and which Jesus gladly made was his obedience. Some people didn't like what Jesus did, and so they arranged to have him killed. Did God want Jesus to die? No, God wanted Jesus to obey. And that made other people plan that Jesus should die.

#### 14:26-31 - Peter's denial is prophesied

26 Then, after singing a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. 27 Then Jesus said to them, "All of you will have your faith shaken, for it is written: 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be dispersed.'" 28 But after I

have been raised up, I shall go before you to Galilee." 29 Peter said to him, "Even though all should have their faith shaken, mine will not be." 30 Then Jesus said to him, "Amen, I say to you, this very night before the cock crows twice you will deny me three times." 31 But he vehemently replied, "Even though I should have to die with you, I will not deny you." And they all spoke similarly.

The prophesy of Peter's denial and the actual denial are two of the few events which appear in all four gospels. It appears first in Mark's Gospel. Possibly the reason it was so important to Mark's Roman audience was because of the apostasy of several Roman Christians, who, when persecuted, gave the names of other Christians. Peter's denials and his reconciliation after the resurrection gave a foundation for the Christian community's welcoming back those who had betrayed other Christians. (‡)

## The Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ - Mark 14:32-15:47

It is now after sunset, so according to the Jewish calendar the events of the evening and night are reckoned as Friday events.

### 14:32-42 - In the Garden

32 Then they came to a place named Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray." 33 He took with him Peter, James, and John, and began to be troubled and distressed. 34 Then he said to them, "My soul is sorrowful even to death. Remain here and keep watch." 35 He advanced a little and fell to the ground and prayed that if it were possible the hour might pass by him; 36 he said, "Abba, Father, all things are possible to you. Take this cup away from me, but not what I will but what you will." 37 When he returned he found them asleep. He said to Peter, "Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep watch for one hour? 38 Watch and pray that you may not undergo the test. The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak." 39 Withdrawing again, he prayed, saying the same thing. 40 Then he returned once more and found them asleep, for they could not keep their eyes open and did not know what to answer him. 41 He returned a third time and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? It is enough. The hour has come. Behold, the Son of Man is to be handed over to sinners. 42 Get up, let us go. See, my betrayer is at hand."

As they enter the garden, Jesus tells the disciples to "sit here while I pray." He takes Peter, James and John, apparently his favorites, and walks further into the garden. Then he begins to feel distressed, and he tells them, "My soul is sorrowful unto death. Remain here and keep on watching." He walked a little further into the garden and fell down and prayed. This reveals the gradual alienation of Jesus from the disciples.

Mark says that he began his prayer by asking is it were possible that this hour might pass away. Jesus then said, "Abba, Father, all things are possible for you, Take away this cup from me. But not what I wish but what you wish." Mark keeps the Aramaic word "Abba" and gives the Greek word "Pater." In the First Century, this would have been considered too familial a way to address God.

Jesus struggles with two things. First, he struggles to accept what he believes is his Father's will for him. (†) And he struggles with the failure of his disciples to keep awake and pray with him. Mark says that when Jesus confronted them on their sleeping, Peter didn't know what to say. That was the same response reported of Peter at the Transfiguration. One would imagine that Jesus felt abandoned by everyone he loved. But in the end, he accepts the fate that his faithfulness to his Father has brought upon him. And he accepts the frailty of his disciples, because he invites them to go with him. (†)

The usual translation of the Greek has Jesus say, when he returns to them the third time, that the disciples should just take their rest. But since the next thing he says is, "Get up. Let us go," it is probable that Jesus said, "Are you still taking your rest?"

The usual English translation of the next sentence is, "It is enough." But the Greek word has a commercial or financial meaning; more literally it is translated, "The money is paid in full." This is possibly a reference to Judas who has accepted the money for his betrayal.

### 14:43-52 - Judas arrives and Jesus is captured.

43 Then, while he was still speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, arrived, accompanied by a crowd with swords and clubs who had come from the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders. 44 His betrayer had arranged a

signal with them, saying, "The man I shall kiss is the one; arrest him and lead him away securely." 45 He came and immediately went over to him and said, "Rabbi." And he kissed him. 46 At this they laid hands on him and arrested him. 47 One of the bystanders drew his sword, struck the high priest's servant, and cut off his ear. 48 Jesus said to them in reply, "Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs, to seize me? 49 Day after day I was with you teaching in the temple area, yet you did not arrest me; but that the scriptures may be fulfilled." 50 And they all left him and fled. 51 Now a young man followed him wearing nothing but a linen cloth about his body. They seized him, 52 but he left the cloth behind and ran off naked.

“Arrested” is not really the appropriate word, because those who came had no authority to arrest; but they were sent by the chief priests, the scribes and the elders to *capture* Jesus. Judas had given them a signal; the one he kissed was the one they were to lead away.

Judas kissed Jesus and they laid hands on him. The other disciples fled. What must they have thought when they saw that one of their own company betrayed Jesus?

Mark narrates that one of the twelve drew a sword and cut off the ear of the high priest's servant. That's all that Mark writes. Matthew and Luke add more details, even the name of the servant, Malchus, and that Jesus healed the ear. These details must have developed within the Christian community at a later date. Matthew expands the story to include a saying of Jesus that whoever lives by the sword will perish by the sword.

Mark's description of the scene is rather bare-bones compared to the other three evangelists, with the exception of one detail: Now a young man followed him wearing nothing but a linen cloth about his body. They seized him, but he left the cloth behind and ran off naked. Many theories have been put forward about this detail, but since Mark is the only one who narrates this, many suppose that the young man was Mark himself.

And they led Jesus away to appear before Sanhedrin. And his disciples fled. Peter followed Jesus right into the courtyard of the high priest (Mark 14:54, 66-72).

#### 14:53-65 - Jesus before the Sanhedrin

53 They led Jesus away to the high priest, and all the chief priests and the elders and the scribes came together. 54 Peter followed him at a distance into the high priest's courtyard and was seated with the guards, warming himself at the fire. 55 The chief priests and the entire Sanhedrin kept trying to obtain testimony against Jesus in order to put him to death, but they found none. 56 Many gave false witness against him, but their testimony did not agree. 57 Some took the stand and testified falsely against him, alleging, 58 "We heard him say, 'I will destroy this temple made with hands and within three days I will build another not made with hands.'" 59 Even so their testimony did not agree. 60 The high priest rose before the assembly and questioned Jesus, saying, "Have you no answer? What are these men testifying against you?" 61 But he was silent and answered nothing. Again the high priest asked him and said to him, "Are you the Messiah, the son of the Blessed One?" 62 Then Jesus answered, "I am; and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power and coming with the clouds of heaven."

63 At that the high priest tore his garments and said, "What further need have we of witnesses? 64 You have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?" They all condemned him as deserving to die. 65 Some began to spit on him. They blindfolded him and struck him and said to him, "Prophesy!" And the guards greeted him with blows.

It is now late at night or very early in the morning (in either case, it was reckoned as Friday). Mark said that the chief priest, other high priests, the elders and the scribes *came together* when Jesus was brought in. They must have been waiting to see if Judas' treachery would be successful. So in the middle of the night on the day of preparation for the Passover they got themselves out of bed to deal with Jesus.

Mark is very blunt in saying that they were seeking testimony against Jesus so they could condemn him. The trial was rigged against Jesus from the beginning. According to Mosaic Law, a condemnation of a person could not take place unless there were two or three witnesses who agreed. Well, there were enough witnesses for the Sanhedrin to condemn Jesus, but Mark says, "They were bearing false witness, and their testimony did not agree."

The chief priest, frustrated at the ineffectual testimony of the false witnesses whose testimony did not agree, and at Jesus' refusal to say anything, finally asks Jesus bluntly if he is the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One. Throughout Mark's Gospel, Jesus has shunned accepting those names (messianic secret), because when people used them, they thought of a majestic messiah. Here, Jesus has entered into his suffering, and so he willingly accepts the names; it is now obvious that the messiah will suffer and die. So when the chief priest asks the question, Jesus answers, "I am." (Remember in Greek that "ego emi" is the name of God.) That would be blasphemy. So, Jesus pleads guilty to the charge of being "the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One," and no further witnesses are needed. The chief priest tears his garments, and the attendants ridicule Jesus by spitting on him. They blindfold him and slap him and taunt him to prophesy which one of them hit him; he did prophesy the destruction of the temple and the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven, after all.

In the Book of Leviticus the sin of blasphemy is to be punished by death through stoning. However, as reported in John's Gospel, under Roman occupation, the Sanhedrin could not sentence a person to death; only the Romans could do that, and they executed by crucifixion.

#### 14:66-72 - Peter's denial

66 While Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the high priest's maids came along. 67 Seeing Peter warming himself, she looked intently at him and said, "You too were with the Nazarene, Jesus." 68 But he denied it saying, "I neither know nor understand what you are talking about." So he went out into the outer court. [Then the cock crowed.] 69 The maid saw him and began again to say to the bystanders, "This man is one of them." 70 Once again he denied it. A little later the bystanders said to Peter once more, "Surely you are one of them; for you too are a Galilean." 71 He began to curse and to swear, "I do not know this man about whom you are talking." 72 And immediately a cock crowed a second time. Then Peter remembered the word that Jesus had said to him, "Before the cock crows twice you will deny me three times." He broke down and wept.

In the courtyard of the high priest Peter is accosted by a servant girl. She first glanced at him, and then looked at him more carefully and declared that "You also were with the Nazarene Jesus." Peter denied it, pretending that he did not know what she was talking about.

Then Peter started to leave the high priest's house, and the servant girl pointed to him and said to the bystanders, "This man is one of them." This time, instead of pretending he didn't understand, he flatly denied it.

Then a group of bystanders says, "Truly you are one of them, for you are a Galilean." This time Peter's denial is profound. He swears he does not know Jesus.

Then a cock crowed, and Peter remembered Jesus prediction that Peter would deny him three times before the cock crowed twice. It must have been around three o'clock in the morning by this time. Peter went out and wept.

The three denials follow a line of thinking about apostasy during persecution in Jewish moral theology: a private denial is less serious than a public one; an evasive denial is less serious than an explicit one; and a public direct denial is the worst.

## 15:1-20 - Jesus before Pilate

1 As soon as morning came, the chief priests with the elders and the scribes, that is, the whole Sanhedrin, held a council. They bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate. 2 Pilate questioned him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" He said to him in reply, "You say so." 3 The chief priests accused him of many things. 4 Again Pilate questioned him, "Have you no answer? See how many things they accuse you of." 5 Jesus gave him no further answer, so that Pilate was amazed.

6 Now on the occasion of the feast he used to release to them one prisoner whom they requested. 7 A man called Barabbas was then in prison along with the rebels who had committed murder in a rebellion. 8 The crowd came forward and began to ask him to do for them as he was accustomed. 9 Pilate answered, "Do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?" 10 For he knew that it was out of envy that the chief priests had handed him over. 11 But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas for them instead. 12 Pilate again said to them in reply, "Then what (do you want) me to do with (the man you call) the king of the Jews?" 13 They shouted again, "Crucify him." 14 Pilate said to them, "Why? What evil has he done?" They only shouted the louder, "Crucify him." 15 So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas to them and, after he had Jesus scourged, handed him over to be crucified.

16 The soldiers led him away inside the palace, that is, the praetorium, and assembled the whole cohort. 17 They clothed him in purple and, weaving a crown of thorns, placed it on him. 18 They began to salute him with, "Hail, King of the Jews!" 19 and kept striking his head with a reed and spitting upon him. They knelt before him in homage. 20 And when they had mocked him, they stripped him of the purple cloak, dressed him in his own clothes, and led him out to crucify him.

Jesus is brought before Pilate first thing in the morning. From other sources, it is known that Pilate was cruel and obstinate. That's not quite how he appears in Mark's narrative. Pilate was also known to charge into tense situations, and make matters worse. That's sort of what he does here.

When Pilate cannot get Jesus to defend himself, he still declares that he can find no cause to put Jesus to death. The chief priests charge him with many things, but Pilate cannot see that there are any "capital crimes" for which he would order execution. So he tries one of the compromises for which he was known. He offers the people a choice between Jesus and Barabbas. There is irony in the name. Barabbas means "son of the father." And of course, Jesus is the Son of the Father.

The chief priests convince the crowd to ask for Barabbas. And Pilate hands Jesus over to be scourged. The scourging prior to execution was designed to weaken the victim prior to crucifixion so he would die more quickly. The guards also mock Jesus and hail him as "King of the Jews."

The Book of the Wisdom of Solomon was written about one hundred and fifty years before Mark wrote his Gospel. It is doubtful that Mark knew of the book. But his description of Jesus before Pilate is such that no Christian can read the Book of Wisdom, chapter two without thinking of Jesus' passion and death.

Let us lie in wait for the righteous one, because he is annoying to us' he opposes our actions, reproaches us for transgressions of the law and charges us with violations of our training. He professes to have knowledge of God and styles himself a child of the Lord. To us he is the censure of our thoughts; merely to see him is a hardship for us because his life is not like that of others, and different are his ways.

He judges us debased; he holds aloof from our paths as from things impure. He calls blest the destiny of the righteous and boasts that God is his Father.

Let us see whether his words be true; let us find out what will happen to him in the end. For if the righteous one is the son of God, God will help hi and deliver him from the hand of his foes.

With violence and torture let us put him to the test, that we may have proof of his gentleness and try his patience. Let us condemn him to a shameful death; for according to his own words, God will take care of him. Wisdom 2:12-20

### 15:21-32 - Crucifixion

21 They pressed into service a passer-by, Simon, a Cyrenian, who was coming in from the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to carry his cross.

22 They brought him to the place of Golgotha (which is translated Place of the Skull). 23 They gave him wine drugged with myrrh, but he did not take it. 24 Then they crucified him and divided his garments by casting lots for them to see what each should take. 25 It was nine o'clock in the morning 10 when they crucified him. 26 The inscription of the charge against him read, "The King of the Jews." 27 With him they crucified two revolutionaries, one on his right and one on his left. (28 ) 29 Those passing by reviled him, shaking their heads and saying, "Aha! You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, 30 save yourself by coming down from the cross." 31 Likewise the chief priests, with the scribes, mocked him among themselves and said, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. 32 Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross that we may see and believe." Those who were crucified with him also kept abusing him.

Jesus' crucifixion took place immediately after his encounter with Pilate and his soldiers. John's Gospel has a different time table of events than the three synoptic gospels do. Although Mark does not go into the gruesome details of death by crucifixion, the details he gives are historically accurate. Carrying the cross beam was the common practice. Simon was pressed into service, probably because Jesus was too weak from the scourging to carry it himself. Roman soldiers had the legal right to require work from the subjugated people. This is reflected in Jesus' saying that if someone forces you to go one mile, go two miles with him.

Supposedly the offer of wine was to deaden the pain, but Jesus had already said he would not drink wine until in the kingdom of heaven. He refused.

And then Mark makes the simple statement. "And they crucified him."

Three groups of people ridiculed Jesus: the passers-by, probably pilgrims going to Jerusalem for the feast of Passover; the chief priests and scribes; and those crucified with him. (In Mark there is no mention of the "good thief.") The irony of the ridiculing is that the things they made fun of were in fact true; Jesus *is* the messiah, the King of Israel.

## 15:33-41 - The death of Jesus

33 At noon darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. 34 And at three o'clock Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which is translated, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" 35 Some of the bystanders who heard it said, "Look, he is calling Elijah." 36 One of them ran, soaked a sponge with wine, put it on a reed, and gave it to him to drink, saying, "Wait, let us see if Elijah comes to take him down." 37 Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. 38 The veil of the sanctuary was torn in two from top to bottom. 39 When the centurion who stood facing him saw how he breathed his last he said, "Truly this man was the Son of God!" 40 There were also women looking on from a distance. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of the younger James and of Joses, and Salome. 41 These women had followed him when he was in Galilee and ministered to him. There were also many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem.

Jesus' death occurred when he was completely abandoned by his enemies, his disciples, the passers-by, the Jewish officials, and even the thieves who were crucified with him. And Jesus screamed in a loud voice, "My God, my God, why have *you* abandoned me?" He cried in Aramaic, quoting Psalm 22.

This cry of Jesus to his God was meant by Mark to be a sort of consolation to the suffering members of his own community, especially to those who had succumbed to the Roman torture and had disavowed their faith in Jesus, indicating to them that even Jesus approached the point of doubting his God's care for him.

Jesus dies. And the centurion who was in charge of the execution pronounces what in all of Mark's Gospel is only the second profession of *faith*: "Truly this man was the Son of God." Before the transfiguration, Peter professed *faith*. Throughout the gospel, people have been amazed, awe-struck, astounded, fearful, and astonished at the works of Jesus. But only Peter and the Centurion expressed faith. That's Mark's device to indicate to his audience that it is difficult to come to faith in Jesus. And Mark's Roman audience might have been gratified that those who professed faith were Peter, the hero of the Roman Christian community, and a Roman centurion.

Women who had followed Jesus from Galilee were looking on at a distance. These were Mary Magdalen, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and Salome. Mary Magdalen is easily recognizable. Mary, the mother of James and Joses, is not so easily identified. Some say that it was really Mary, the mother of Jesus. In Mark 6:3, the people said of Jesus, "Is this not the carpenter, the son of Mary, and the brother of James and Joses?" [Who knows?]

## 15:42-47 - The burial

42 When it was already evening, since it was the day of preparation, the day before the Sabbath, 43 Joseph of Arimathea, a distinguished member of the council, who was himself awaiting the kingdom of God, came and courageously went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. 44 Pilate was amazed that he was already dead. He summoned the centurion and asked him if Jesus had already died. 45 And when he learned of it from the centurion, he gave the body to Joseph. 46 Having bought a linen cloth, he took him down, wrapped him in the linen cloth and laid him in a tomb that had been hewn out of the rock. Then he rolled a stone against the entrance to the tomb. 47 Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses watched where he was laid.

Burial took place, probably around 4:00 PM. Joseph of Arimathea appears out of nowhere. He is a Jew, but not a Galilean. He appears to have been a prominent citizen in Judea. He is a "respected councilor," meaning he is a member of the Sanhedrin. Mark had written earlier that the whole Sanhedrin had gathered to condemn Jesus, and that their decision was unanimous. So,

either Joseph changed his mind about Jesus, or he didn't make it to the meeting of the Sanhedrin. (John the Evangelist says he did not concur in the death sentence.)

He was in a hurry to get Jesus buried, because he was a good Jew who was observant of the law, which required burial on the same day as the death.

It is important information that the women, although they did not take part in the burial of Jesus, noted where he had been buried. Later, when some refused to believe that Jesus had been raised, and who suggested that the women had gone to the wrong tomb and found it empty, this note assures people that the women knew where Jesus was buried.

As far as anyone knew, this was the end of Jesus.

## The empty tomb and more - Mark 16:1-20

### 16:1-8 - The empty tomb

1 When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary, the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go and anoint him. 2 Very early when the sun had risen, on the first day of the week, they came to the tomb. 3 They were saying to one another, "Who will roll back the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" 4 When they looked up, they saw that the stone had been rolled back; it was very large. 5 On entering the tomb they saw a young man sitting on the right side, clothed in a white robe, and they were utterly amazed. 6 He said to them, "Do not be amazed! You seek Jesus of Nazareth, the crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Behold the place where they laid him. 7 But go and tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him, as he told you.'" 8 Then they went out and fled from the tomb, seized with trembling and bewilderment. They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

When the Sabbath was over (around 7:00 PM on Saturday), the shops could be opened, and the women could have gone to buy the spices to use for anointing Jesus' dead body. Then very early on the next morning (Sunday) they went to the tomb. Why they hadn't thought before hand about who would roll back the stone is a mystery. But they found the tomb open. And a young man sitting there, who said that they were looking for Jesus. But he said, "He has been raised. He is not here."

The women are the first witnesses to Jesus' resurrection, and the first ones sent (apostles) to tell the good news to Jesus' disciples and to Peter. They are to tell the men that Jesus is going before them into Galilee, and there they shall see him.

Mark says the women fled the tomb trembling and bewildered and afraid. And they did not carry out the young man's orders. "They said nothing to anyone."

And that is the end of the Gospel according to Mark by the original author. Later several endings were written by someone else, and those endings are accepted as authentically inspired by God, even though written by other authors.

### 16:9-20 - A longer ending

9 When he had risen, early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had driven seven demons. 10 She went and told his companions who were mourning and weeping. 11 When they heard that he was alive and had been seen by her, they did not believe.

12 After this he appeared in another form to two of them walking along on their way to the country. 13 They returned and told the others; but they did not believe them either.

14 (But) later, as the eleven were at table, he appeared to them and rebuked them for their unbelief and hardness of heart because they had not believed those who saw him after he had been raised. 15 He said to them, "Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature. 16 Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved; whoever does not believe will be condemned. 17 These signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will drive out demons, they will speak new languages. 18 They will pick up serpents (with their hands), and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not harm them. They will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover."

19 So then the Lord Jesus, after he spoke to them, was taken up into heaven and took his seat at the right hand of God 20 But they went forth and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the word through accompanying signs.

A later ending to the Gospel of Mark, clearly written by somebody other than the author of the rest of the Gospel, was probably provided in order to bring a more satisfying conclusion to the narrative. It is a compilation of passages from the other two synoptic gospels.

Scripture scholars who are able to work with the Greek text of the Gospel can tell by things like vocabulary and literary style that the 16:9-20 is not written by the same author as the rest of the Gospel. But even an amateur reading in English can tell the difference. In verse 16, Jesus says, "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved; whoever does not believe will be condemned." After fifteen chapters of showing that only two people came to believe, and constant explanations that coming to faith is a gradual and difficult process, the same author could not have written verse 16.

## Added thought

### Because of Jesus' Resurrection - Revelations 4-5

In his death, Jesus has been glorified. He has shed his human limitations of time and place. He can now be present to every place at all times. In chapter 1 of the Book of Revelations John has two visions. The first is of seven lamp stands and the risen Lord walking among the lamp stands. Then he has a vision of the risen Lord holding the seven lamps in his arms. Both visions tell of the risen Lord being present to the seven churches which were enduring persecution.

Then John has another visions in which the angel tells him to write a letter to each of the seven churches. Chapters 2 and 3 contain those letters.

Chapter 4 begins "After this I had a vision of an open door to heaven, and I heard the trumpet-like voice that had spoken to me before, saying, 'Come up here and I will show you what must happen hereafter.'" Then John gives the "stage directions" for the scene which he is about the witness.

In Chapter 5 John writes: I saw a scroll in the right hand of the one who sat on the throne. It had writing on both sides and was sealed with seven seals. Then I saw a mighty angel who proclaimed in a loud voice, "Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?" But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to examine it. I shed many tears because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to examine it. One of the elders said to me, "Do not weep. The lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David, has triumphed, enabling him to open the scroll with its seven seals.

Then I saw standing (alive) in the midst of the throne and the four living creatures and the elders a Lamb that seemed to have been slain. . . He came and received the scroll from the right hand of the one who sat on the throne. . . They sang a new hymn: " Worthy are you to receive the scroll and to break open its seals, for you were slain and with your blood you purchased for God those from every tribe and tongue, people and nation."

The scroll in the right hand of the one seated on the throne contains "what must happen afterwards." Only the Lamb who was standing (alive) but who had been dead can be present to every event of human history, so there is no need to cry.

Paul echoed the same sentiments in his letter to the Philippians, chapter 4, verses 4 to 7: Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again: rejoice! Your kindness should be known to all. The Lord is near."

Actually the Greek word [epieikes] which is translated here as "kindness" could more properly be understood as "unperturbability." What Paul is saying is that there is no need to be disturbed, because "The Lord is near."

Since the risen Lord is present to and has dominion over every event of human history, there is no need to cry. Even when those events escape our dominion, they do not escape the dominion of the risen Lord.

A Reflection on  
the Gospel  
according to  
Matthew



## **Introduction**

### **Who is Matthew?**

The author of “The Gospel according to Matthew” is most certainly not the Apostle Matthew, at least not of the gospel in present form. The Apostle Matthew may have been the author of a group of sayings of Jesus, written in Aramaic, upon which this gospel is based in part; it is called the Q-source.

The evangelist was an early Christian teacher and leader. He may previously have been a Jewish scribe, so that Jesus’ saying in 13:52 may be the author’s signature. “Every scribe who has been made a disciple of the kingdom of the heavens is like a householder who brings forth from his treasure new things and old.”

The gospel was probably written within a Jewish-Christian community by people who had been ousted from the Jewish community; so they are no longer part of the synagogue, but still Jewish by race. Because they’ve been excluded, they are sort of Gentile in the sense that they no longer belong to the Jewish community and synagogue, but their roots are in Judaism. In several places Matthew contrasts the Christian community with “their synagogue.”

With only his writing to go on, the personality and concerns of the author can only be surmised. He may have been a conscientious leader of the Christian community who felt obliged to confront three fronts which he saw as inimical to the integrity of the life of his community: the members of “their synagogue,” some members of his own community, and the already existing gospel of Mark.

### **What was Matthew trying to tell his community?**

From all appearances, Matthew was trying to provide a handbook for the leaders of his community to assist them in preaching and teaching, in worship and evangelization, and in any arguments they might have with the Jewish community which had ousted them. He also seems interested in presenting who Jesus is (Christology) to others outside the community. So this is what’s on the author’s mind: strengthening the belief of the Christian community, and refuting the Jewish community which excluded them, and attracting outsiders to the Christian community, mainly by an extensive “Christology.”

Even though the Christians may have been excluded from explicit involvement in the synagogue, Matthew seems to want to find and demonstrate a continuity between Jewish tradition and the new Christian community; he does this by presenting Jesus as fulfillment of Old testament writings.

Matthew is arguing, not only with the members of “their synagogue,” the Jews who have rejected Matthew and his community, but also with Mark’s Gospel, which Matthew found embarrassing in some areas.

As with all four gospels, we need to remember that Matthew is presenting to us Jesus, not history in our understanding of history. So he freely arranged the events he knew from Mark’s Gospel with the teachings from the Q-source, and whatever information he had from other sources.

### **When and where was the Gospel of Matthew written?**

The best guess is sometime between the years 80 to 90; certainly before 110. And scholars disagree about where it was written, but the best guess based on available evidence is Antioch in Syria.

### **Matthew’s sources**

Matthew seems obviously to have had at hand Mark’s Gospel. In many ways he follows Mark very closely, and inserts new material into Mark’s narrative, particularly two chapters of infancy narrative and large teaching sections. Almost all (80%) of the verses of Mark’s Gospel are found in Matthew’s. However, the wording of the stories differs in many respects from Mark’s wording. Especially noteworthy are the little things Matthew leaves out of Mark’s renditions of the stories, because he wanted to get rid of the items which were extrinsic to his desire to show who Jesus is.

There is also evidence that like Mark, Matthew had at his disposal a collection of the sayings of Jesus, often called the Q-source. Biblical scholars also find evidence of another source at Matthew’s disposal. They call it “M,” for Matthew. Whether this was one source or several no one knows. But it was material which seems to have been available to Matthew and not to Mark or Luke.

Particularly in the infancy narratives, the source of any actual historical data, in our understanding of history, could be only Mary and Joseph. Matthew could not have had any acquaintance with them. So, why don’t we start with the assumption that he just made it all up?

Matthew, and Luke along him, are *evangelists*, not historians. If we assume that John the Apostle is also John the evangelist, John is the one who apparently had the most contact with Mary. We are told that after the crucifixion, he took her into his home. And John has no infancy narrative. All four evangelists are trying to tell their audiences, and us, the good news of Jesus Christ. In writing their infancy narratives, Matthew and Luke are trying to present Jesus in all the mystery which surrounds his coming among the human family. They don’t present, nor could they have presented, a theology of incarnation and redemption the way mediaeval theologians like Thomas Aquinas or Duns Scotus have, in more or less abstract concepts. As evangelists they conveyed their theological and faith message in narrative form, not in the form of dissertations.

However, it is unlikely that they were just engaged in creative writing, trying to produce a novel. There must have been stories circulating within the believing community from which the evangelists drew in order to create the narrative they did. But the narratives need to be taken as documents of faith and theology, not history.

As always, it is a good idea to remember that the evangelists wrote what they did because their narratives were answering questions which were important to their believing communities.

While it is true of all the narratives in the gospels, it is abundantly clear that with the infancy narratives, we need to be aware of two questions the writers are answering: What happened? What did it mean? Frequently the “what happened?” has to be answered with a “Who knows?” We can, however, often discern what the writer wanted to convey in the narratives.

### **Structure of Matthew’s Gospel**

A widely, though not universally, accepted understanding of the structure of Matthew’s Gospel divides it into infancy narrative at the beginning, followed by five books, each comprised of a narrative section and a discourse section, and at the end, the passion, death and resurrection narrative. It is further suggested that Matthew has arranged even the structure of his Gospel to reflect the similarity between Moses the Law-giver (in the first five books of the bible) and Jesus the giver of the new law, with his narrative arranged in five books. Thus, the structure of Matthew’s Gospel looks like this.

Infancy narrative:	1:1-2:23
Book One:	3:1-7:29
Narrative:	3:1-4:25
Discourse:	5:1-7:29
Book Two:	8:1-11:1
Narrative:	8:1-9:38
Discourse:	10:1-11:1
Book Three	11:2-13:53
Narrative:	11:2-13:1
Discourse:	13:2-13:53
Book Four:	13:54-18:35
Narrative:	13:54-17:21
Discourse:	17:22-18:35
Book Five:	19:1-25:46
Narrative:	19:1-21:27
Discourse:	21:28-25:46
Passion, Death and Resurrection:	26:1-28:20



## INFANCY NARRATIVE

### The genealogy of Jesus - Matthew 1:1-17 [Luke 3:23-38]

1 The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. 2 Abraham became the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob, Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers. 3 Judah became the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar. Perez became the father of Hezron, Hezron the father of Ram, 4 Ram the father of Amminadab. Amminadab became the father of Nahshon, Nahshon the father of Salmon, 5 Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab. Boaz became the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth. Obed became the father of Jesse, 6 Jesse the father of David the king.

David became the father of Solomon, whose mother had been the wife of Uriah. 7 Solomon became the father of Rehoboam, Rehoboam the father of Abijah, Abijah the father of Asaph. 8 Asaph became the father of Jehoshaphat, Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, Joram the father of Uzziah. 9 Uzziah became the father of Jotham, Jotham the father of Ahaz, Ahaz the father of Hezekiah. 10 Hezekiah became the father of Manasseh, Manasseh the father of Amos, Amos the father of Josiah. 11 Josiah became the father of Jechoniah and his brothers at the time of the Babylonian exile.

12 After the Babylonian exile, Jechoniah became the father of Shealtiel, Shealtiel the father of Zerubbabel, 13 Zerubbabel the father of Abiud. Abiud became the father of Eliakim, Eliakim the father of Azor, 14 Azor the father of Zadok. Zadok became the father of Achim, Achim the father of Eliud, 15 Eliud the father of Eleazar. Eleazar became the father of Matthan, Matthan the father of Jacob, 16 Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary. Of her was born Jesus who is called the Messiah.

17 Thus the total number of generations from Abraham to David is fourteen generations; from David to the Babylonian exile, fourteen generations; from the Babylonian exile to the Messiah, fourteen generations.

Matthew's genealogy is divided into three sections: from Abraham to David (patriarchs), from David to the Babylonian captivity (kings), and from the Babylonian captivity to Jesus (unknowns). As is usually true of stories in the gospels, one needs to ask what question is being answered by the narrative.

Matthew says the genealogy is that of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. David is mentioned first, because Matthew is going to present Jesus as the royal messiah. But he is also the descendent of Abraham, and therefore a member of the race chosen by God to be God's own. (Possibly this is to refute the Jews who had cut the Christian off from the community of God's chosen ones.)

There are sources in the Hebrew scriptures where most of the people named in the genealogy can be found, but not all of them. Of particular interest is the inclusion of the names of five women: Tamar (Genesis 38), Rahab (Joshua 2), Ruth (Ruth 1), Bathsheba (II Samuel 11), and Mary, the mother of Jesus. Perhaps the mention of the Old Testament women was done because Matthew had to be careful with verse 1:16 to include a woman.

Verse 16 is carefully constructed. The genealogy is traced from the Babylonian captivity to Joseph, "the husband of Mary. Of her was born Jesus who is called the Messiah."

Matthew's record of the ancestors of Jesus is quite different from that presented by Luke. Many people are left out who were actually in the line of ancestors. But Matthew is giving us a theology of Jesus' lineage. That theology is found in the opening sentence which is sort of a title: "The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham."

Because Jesus is a son of David, he is the royal messiah expected in *Israel*. This is further theologized by the fact that Matthew uses three lists of fourteen generations in his genealogy. In

Hebrew, there are no numerals; the letters of the alphabet are used in reckoning numbers. The letters of David's name, when added up, equal fourteen (D = 4, V = 6, D = 4).

Because he is a son of Abraham, his influence extends beyond Israel to everyone. The Book of Genesis says of Abraham "In your descendants *all the nations of the earth* shall find blessing."

### **More about Matthew's genealogy than you ever wanted to know**

Typically in a Jewish genealogy, the lineage is passed down through the first born son. Matthew traces Jesus' ancestry differently. Jesus is the "son of Abraham." Abraham had two sons. The first was Ishmael, but Matthew makes note of the fact that it is through the second son, Isaac, that the genealogy of Jesus comes. Isaac had two sons. The first was Esau, but Matthew makes note of the fact that it is through the second son, Jacob that Jesus' ancestry is traced. Matthew's point: it is by God's design and providence that the messiah comes into the world, not by human rules and expectations. (†)

And then there are the women mentioned in Matthew's genealogy. Usually a person's lineage was traced through the male ancestors. There are four women mentioned, besides Mary the mother of Jesus: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah. There is something "irregular" about the marital status of each one whom Matthew mentions. Tamar had a rather scandalous relationship with Judah. Rahab had been a prostitute. Ruth was a Moabite who married Boaz in a rather irregular way. And Bathsheba had been the wife of Uriah until David had Uriah killed in battle and then married Bathsheba.

Besides the "irregularities" involving these women, there is also the initiative they took and the role they played in furthering God's plan for sending a messiah. Because of the "irregularities" of their marital situations, and because of the important roles they played in the plan of salvation, they are forerunners and models for Mary, the mother of the messiah.

The genealogy traces Jesus ancestry back through Joseph, even though Joseph was not the *biological* father of Jesus. Nonetheless, in naming the child as Joseph was told to do (Matt. 1:21), Joseph's *legal* paternity is established.

So what's the point of Matthew's genealogy? Matthew's community had been excluded by the members of "their synagogue," the Jewish community which did not accept Jesus. Matthew is showing that the origin or genesis of Jesus is in the Old Testament. The coming of Jesus, while bringing something new, does not start from scratch; Jesus brings with him the whole of the Old Testament theology and understanding of God's activity in the world.

Another point: Matthew's history isn't very good. He skips several kings in the line-up; but the *history* of Jesus' ancestry is not his point. His point is the *mystery* of his ancestry: that it's not by human expectations that God acts to save us. It's not through holy people only that God acts to save us. Jesus comes to us *from everybody*: Jews and Gentiles, expected and unexpected, saints and sinners, men and women, important and unimportant, famous and unknown, somebodies and nobodies, the deserving and the undeserving; and he comes *for everybody*: Jews and Gentiles, expected and unexpected, saints and sinners, men and women, important and unimportant, famous and unknown, somebodies and nobodies, the deserving and the undeserving. That's the good news of Jesus. (†)

At the end of the day, Matthew tells us in his genealogy who Jesus is: the Messiah, the one uniquely conceived from the Holy Spirit, Emmanuel or God with us, and how that came about.



## Introduction to Matthew's Infancy Narrative [Luke 1:2-2:20]

Here's a caution which must be kept in mind all throughout the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke: the meaning of the word "gospel" is *good news*. The word is used customarily for the writings of four evangelists. But the basic meaning is good news. So, Mark begins his version of the good news by stating, "The beginning of the gospel (good news) of Jesus Christ, the son of God." That's the first gospel (good news) which was written down in a form which has endured. *Jesus, the Son of God, IS the good news.*"

From the Acts of the Apostles, and from some of Paul's letters, we learn that initially people came to realize and to believe the good news as a result of Jesus' resurrection. Initially it was thought that Jesus *became* the Son of God and the good news in his resurrection. Peter's first sermon on Pentecost says, "Therefore let the whole house of Israel know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified." (Acts 2:36)

Around the year 55 AD (about twenty years after the resurrection), Paul wrote to the Philippians. He may still have thought that Jesus was made the Son of God at his resurrection, for he quotes an already existing hymn, "because of this God raised him high and gave him the name above every other name, so that the name of Jesus, every knee must bend in heaven and on the earth and under the earth, and every tongue proclaim to the glory of God the Father that Jesus Christ is Lord." "Lord" is the name for God. That is the name given to Jesus in his resurrection. So at that time Paul may have thought that Jesus became the Son of God in his resurrection.

As the believing community reflected on what they knew of Jesus before his death and resurrection, they began to realize that it was not only in his resurrection that Jesus became the Son of God and therefore the good news. They realized that all through his ministry Jesus was the Son of God, and therefore the good news. They began to think that it was at his baptism, the beginning of his public ministry, that Jesus *became* the Son of God and therefore the good news. That was the understanding at the time that Mark's Gospel was written, shortly before the year 70 AD (about thirty years after the resurrection). Mark begins his good news with the baptism of Jesus. "On coming up out of the water he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit, like a dove, descending upon him. And a voice came from the heavens, 'You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.'"

Further reflection by the believing community convinced them that Jesus, the Son of God, and therefore the good news, was such since his coming into the world.

Matthew's presentation of the good news, therefore, begins by showing that from his conception, Jesus is the Son of God, and therefore the good news.

Saint John's Gospel, written in the 90s (about sixty years after the resurrection), doesn't mess around with an infancy narrative. He goes way back to the beginning to share the good news that Jesus is the Son of God. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God. And the Word was God."

When we read one of the four accounts of the good news, we would do ourselves a favor if we wouldn't use the word "gospel." If we use the words "good news," we will more easily understand that the infancy narratives in Matthew and Luke are not a biography of Jesus; they are the *good news* of Jesus.

Matthew's infancy narrative was composed by the author after the material for the rest of the gospel was in his mind, perhaps even already previously written down, either by him or by others. The meaning of the life of Jesus on which the believing community had reflected was quite developed by the time this gospel was written.

It's good to recall that the recognition of who Jesus is began with the disciples' experience of him after his resurrection. That experience of the risen Lord was the beginning and foundation of their faith in him. In their post-resurrection experiences of Jesus, and their reflection on them, they came to know who he was and how he came to be.

There was a pattern to this initial revelation about Jesus. There was the revelation, then the proclamation of that revelation. And the proclamation was met with two responses: some believed and others rejected.

From that resurrection faith and the pattern of revelation, proclamation and two different responses, they looked back over what they had experienced of him in his earthly life. Now, after the resurrection experience of Jesus, they could make more sense out of what they had experienced of him throughout his life. They recalled the stories and kept retelling them. Now, because of their new-found faith, those events had greater meaning than they had realized at the time they experienced them. And they recognized the same pattern of revelation, proclamation and two different responses throughout Jesus' earthly life.

Matthew and Luke look back even further than Jesus' public life and ministry. And in the heritage of the Hebrew scriptures they recognized that from the very beginning of Jesus' life, he was special. For Matthew, that special quality of Jesus' life is announced in the first sentence of his gospel: The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

The infancy narratives reflect a post-resurrection understanding and theology of Jesus' life. What the community came to believe after the resurrection experience is projected into the infancy narrative. The whole thing is a theological reflection on the meaning of Jesus as the community understood that meaning about forty or fifty years after the resurrection. And in looking back at the stories which circulated about his infancy, they saw the same pattern of revelation, proclamation and two different responses. This pattern gave shape to the infancy narratives.

As was noted earlier, there was no one following Mary and Joseph or the Child Jesus, taking notes to provide posterity with an accurate account of those early days in Jesus' life. Actually, by the time Matthew's Gospel was written, there was probably no one around who had actually experienced the young Jesus. If in these infancy narratives, the historical facts are missing, the meaning of the life of Jesus is portrayed vividly.

Matthew has five Old Testament citations within his infancy narrative. The question has been posed as to whether those Old Testament passages gave rise to the narrative, or did the narrative direct people's attention to the Old Testament passages. Most scholars now agree that there were in existence stories of Jesus infancy prior to Matthew's putting them into a continuous narrative. The addition of the Old Testament citations is almost universally attributed to Matthew.

## **The birth of Jesus - Matthew 1:18-25 [Luke 2:1-14]**

18 Now this is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about. When his mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found with child through the holy Spirit. 19 Joseph her husband, since he was a righteous man, yet unwilling to expose her to shame, decided to divorce her quietly. 20 Such was his intention when, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home. For it is through the holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her. 21 She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." 22 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 23 "Behold, the virgin shall be with child and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means "God is with us." 24 When Joseph awoke, he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took his wife into his home. 25 He had no relations with her until she bore a son, and he named him Jesus.

In the First Century in Judaism, getting married had two stages. First was the betrothal, the marriage promises, after which the couple was considered married. After some months, the husband took his new wife into his own home, thus completing the second stage of their marriage, after which normal married life began.

Well, after Mary was betrothed to Joseph, but before they began to live together, Mary is found to be pregnant. If she had gotten pregnant by Joseph, that would not be a problem. And the people in town would have supposed that Joseph had gotten Mary pregnant, and they wouldn't have wondered about it. But Joseph knew he had not had sex with Mary. So he was the only one who knew something was amiss.

In the Gospel of Luke, this has already been explained by the story of the annunciation. Matthew leaves us hanging. There is no story of the angel bringing the message to Mary that she would become pregnant by the Holy Spirit. So Joseph planned to divorce Mary. But he obviously loved her, and didn't want to cause her embarrassment, social or legal. How that could have been avoided is a mystery. But fortunately it didn't happen, because instead of an annunciation by an angel to Mary, one is made to Joseph in a dream. Joseph is told that Mary's child is conceived by the Holy Spirit, and that Joseph is to name the child Jesus, a name which means "God saves." And by exercising his legal right to name the child, Joseph became the child's legal father.

### **Imagine**

There are a couple of things we can imagine from what Matthew has told us. First, imagine what it must have been like for Mary and Joseph. They both knew that they had not had sex, but Mary was pregnant. Matthew has not told us about any annunciation by an angel to Mary. Was she mystified by being pregnant? And Joseph for sure was mystified. He probably had a hard time thinking that Mary had committed adultery. But how else could she be pregnant? They weren't living together, but they must have had contact with each other in the regular goings-on in Nazareth. You have to wonder how awkward it was for them.

And second, imagine what the audience of Matthew's Gospel must have thought when they read the account. They must have wondered how this difficulty would be resolved. Joseph, after all was a righteous man, and so he couldn't have just gone on as if nothing had happened, but he didn't want to expose Mary to the dictates of the law, which required stoning to death for infidelity.

Already in Mark's Gospel, there has been mention of Jesus brothers and sisters. Some speculate that Joseph must have been a widower with children by his first marriage. That is pure speculation, but one can imagine it.

Matthew resolves the conflict for his audience by telling of the dream Joseph had. That must have satisfied any wonderment Matthew's audience had about Mary's pregnancy. And Matthew gives further theological commentary on the event by quoting the prophecy of Isaiah, which includes the revelation that the child will be called "Emmanuel" which means God is with us. He wrote that Joseph had no relations with Mary "until" she gave birth, demonstrating that the child was miraculously conceived. The "until" doesn't say anything one way or the other about what happened after the birth of Jesus.

From Matthew's Gospel one would get the impression that the birth of Jesus took place in Nazareth, where Mary and Joseph lived. There is no mention of the couple's having to travel to Bethlehem because of the census ordered by the Emperor. However, the first line of Chapter 2 is: "When Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea . . ." This suggests that the story of his birth in Bethlehem was already circulating within the believing community, before Matthew wrote his gospel.

## The visit of the Magi; Infants slaughtered; to Egypt and back - Matthew 2:1-23

### 2:1-12 - Magi

1 When Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of King Herod, 2 behold, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, 3 saying, "Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star at its rising and have come to do him homage." 4 When King Herod heard this, he was greatly troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. 5 Assembling all the chief priests and the scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 6 They said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it has been written through the prophet: 7 'And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; since from you shall come a ruler, who is to shepherd my people Israel.'"

8 Then Herod called the magi secretly and ascertained from them the time of the star's appearance. 9 He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search diligently for the child. When you have found him, bring me word, that I too may go and do him homage."

10 After their audience with the king they set out. And behold, the star that they had seen at its rising preceded them, until it came and stopped over the place where the child was. 11 They were overjoyed at seeing the star, 12 and on entering the house they saw the child with Mary his mother. They prostrated themselves and did him homage. Then they opened their treasures and offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

13 And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed for their country by another way.

Luke has no account of the visit of the Magi. Matthew has no account of the trip to Bethlehem for the census, but without telling us how or why Mary and Joseph got there, he simply says that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. So for Matthew, the visit of the Magi occurs in Bethlehem. Since after the visit of the Magi, Herod orders the death of infants up to two years of age, the visit seems not to have followed immediately after the birth of Jesus. And Matthew says they entered the *house* where the child was; apparently Mary and Joseph and the child were no longer in the stable, where Luke says he was born. (So much for the Christmas crib with the Magi present.)

Matthew tells us that Magi arrived from the east. Because he says three gifts were offered to the "newborn king of the Jews," it became customary to think there were three kings. But Matthew doesn't tell us the number. As the story got told over and over, eventually the three kings were given names. And since the point of the story in Matthew is that *all* Gentiles also are to worship Jesus, eventually one of the Magi was thought to be Black.

### 2:13-15 - Egypt

14 When they had departed, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I tell you. Herod is going to search for the child to destroy him." 15 Joseph rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed for Egypt. 16 He stayed there until the death of Herod, that what the Lord had said through the prophet might be fulfilled, "Out of Egypt I called my son."

The Jewish opposition to Jesus is represented by Herod, who it turns out wants to kill the child. The Gentiles are represented by the Magi. So what question is Matthew answering in his narrative about the Magi? He is teaching that the "king of the Jews" is also the Lord of the Gentiles.

## 2:16-18 - Murder of the innocents

16 When Herod realized that he had been deceived by the magi, he became furious. He ordered the massacre of all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had ascertained from the magi. 17 Then was fulfilled what had been said through Jeremiah the prophet: 18 "A voice was heard in Ramah, sobbing and loud lamentation; Rachel weeping for her children, and she would not be consoled, since they were no more."

Matthew inserts the quotation from Jeremiah (31:15). He is always trying to show how Jesus fulfills the Hebrew scriptures. Rachel was in Bethlehem. When her children were taken from her, her grief was so great that her cry could be heard in Ramah, six miles away.

Notice again the pattern of proclamation and two different responses: the Jewish opposition in the person of Herod; and the Gentile acceptance in the persons of the Magi.

## 2:19-23 - Return from Egypt

19 When Herod had died, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt 20 and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child's life are dead." 21 He rose, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. 22 But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go back there. And because he had been warned in a dream, he departed for the region of Galilee. 23 He went and dwelt in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, "He shall be called a Nazorean."

Throughout the gospel, Matthew will draw the parallel between Jesus and Moses, the one who saved his people and the law giver. This parallel begins to be shown even in the infancy narrative. Just for the fun of it, here are some of those parallels.

### **Jesus**

Matt. 2:13-14: Herod was going to search for the child to destroy him, so Joseph took the child and his mother and went away.

Matt. 2:16: Herod sent to Bethlehem and massacred all the boys of two years of age and under.

Matt. 2:19: Herod died.

Matt. 2:19-20: The angel of the Lord said to Joseph in Egypt, ". . . go back to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead."

Matt. 2:21: Joseph took the child and his mother and went back to the land of Israel.

### **Moses**

Exod. 2:15: The Pharaoh sought to do away with Moses, so Moses went away.

Exod. 1:22: The Pharaoh commanded that every male born to the Hebrews be cast into the Nile.

Exod. 2:23: The King of Egypt died.

Exod. 4:19: The Lord said to Moses in Midian, ". . . return to Egypt for all those who were seeking your life are dead."

Exod. 4:20: Moses took along his wife and his children and returned to Egypt.

So what's Matthew's point? As was true of Moses, in God's designs for his future ministry of leading the people to salvation, Jesus was destined to fulfill God's plan of salvation even before he began his *ministry* of salvation. Jesus is the new Moses. And from his conception, he is the Son of God, the Messiah. In his infancy narratives, Matthew is writing the *good news* of Jesus, not the *biography* of Jesus. The good news in the Magi story is that Jesus is not only the King of the Jews, but also Lord of the Gentiles.

With the story of the flight into Egypt and the return to Israel by the Holy Family, Matthew further cements the parallel between Moses and Jesus. He also claims legitimate ancestry for "our synagogue" as well as for "their synagogue." Matthew quotes Hosea 11:1. In the infancy narratives, Matthew has now shown that Jesus is the son of Abraham, the son of David, the son of Mary and Joseph, and now the Son of God.

### **Summary of the infancy narrative in Matthew**

The composite "Christmas story" which we moderns love, is a compilation of what is found in the infancy narratives in the gospels of Matthew and Luke. Most people don't consider from which of the gospels the stories come. Neither Matthew nor Luke were really interested in giving us a consistent historical narrative. As has been indicated several times already, they were telling us about the *mystery* of Jesus, not his *history*. While it might be difficult for moderns to think that the Christmas stories with which they grew up cannot be verified as historically accurate, on the other hand perhaps we moderns need to apologize to Matthew, telling him that we're sorry we misunderstood what he was trying to tell us: "We thought you were telling us history, when you were really telling us about mystery."

We are moved by the *stories* of the infant Jesus; First Century believers were moved by the *good news* of Jesus, the *meaning* behind and within those stories. Our "Christmas stories" are really faith statements about the adult Christ, not the infant Jesus.



## BOOK ONE: NARRATIVE - 3:1-4:25

### John the Baptist - Matthew 3:1-17

In chapter 3, Matthew begins the public life of Jesus in the same way that Mark did, with the introduction of the precursor, John the Baptist.

3:1-6 - Introducing John the Baptist [Mark 1:2-8; Luke 3:1-20]

1 In those days John the Baptist appeared, preaching in the desert of Judea 2 (and) saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" 3 It was of him that the prophet Isaiah had spoken when he said: "A voice of one crying out in the desert, 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.'" 4 John wore clothing made of camel's hair and had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. 5 At that time Jerusalem, all Judea, and the whole region around the Jordan were going out to him 6 and were being baptized by him in the Jordan River as they acknowledged their sins.

Matthew merely edits Mark in these verses. But the changes he introduces indicate that Matthew's perspective is a bit different from Mark's. Side-by-side, they look like this.

Mark 1:2-6

[Bold appears also in Matthew]

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "Be alert, for I am sending my messenger in advance; he will **prepare your way. The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Make ready a way for the Lord; straighten his beaten track.**" **John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. And there came to him the whole land of Judea and all the people from Jerusalem, and they were baptized by him in the River Jordan, as they confessed their sins. Now John was clothed in camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.**

Matthew 3:1-6

[Italics appears also in Mark]

Now in those days *John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness* of Judea, saying: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has drawn near." For this was the one spoken about through *Isaiah the prophet: "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.'"* Now John had his clothing of camel's hair and a leather belt about his loins. His food was locusts and wild honey. Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region around the Jordan were going out to him and being baptized in the Jordan River by him, confessing their sins.

Perhaps the only notable change in Matthew's editing is that John says exactly what Jesus will say in chapter 4 verse 17, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has drawn near." Other than that Matthew acted simply as an editor of Mark's work.

Except for the five large teaching sections of Matthew's Gospel, the same pattern is followed throughout the gospel. Matthew basically edits Mark's work to make it fit his own purposes.

3:7-12 - John the Baptist's preaching and baptism

7 When he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? 8 Produce good fruit as evidence of your repentance. 9 And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you, God can raise up children to Abraham from these stones. 10 Even now the ax lies at the root of the trees. Therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. 11 I am baptizing you with water, for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is mightier than I. I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the holy Spirit and fire. 12 His winnowing fan is in his hand. He will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

John's condemnation of the Pharisees and Sadducees undoubtedly had its origin at the time of John and Jesus. But by the time Matthew wrote his gospel, the tension was between Matthew's community and the Pharisees (and Sadducees) who opposed Matthew's community. After the destruction of the Jerusalem temple (70 AD) the priestly class, (the Sadducees) lost much of their authority, because the place where they led worship was gone. The rabbis of the Pharisee Party became the real religious leaders, and the place of worship became the synagogue, where the rabbis held the authority as teachers of the Law. Apparently they were, by and large, a very ridged and humorless bunch.

Matthew places his own gripes with the Pharisees of his own time in the mouth of John who had a gripe with the Pharisees in his time, because they teach but do not perform. John calls for them to produce "fruit." Just saying that "We have Abraham as father" is not enough to make one a true Israelite. Again, this is directed at "their synagogue," those who persecuted Matthew's community, who claim religious authority because they are descendants of Abraham.

Matthew draws here on a source besides Mark. There was a written source called "Q" from which these sayings of John the Baptist are taken. Once again, Matthew is editing Mark and adding other sources for his version of the good news of Jesus.

Here again is the way it looks.

Mark 1:7-8

[Bold appears also in Matthew]

And this is what he [John] proclaimed: **"The one who is stronger than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to bend down and untie the thongs of his sandals. I baptized you with water; he will baptize you in the Holy Spirit."**

Matthew 3:11-12

[Italics appears also in Mark]

*"I baptize you in water for repentance. The one who comes after me is mightier than I am; I am not worthy to carry his sandals – he will baptize you in the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the barn; but the chaff he will burn with an unquenchable fire."*

3:13-17 - The Baptism of Jesus [Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22]

13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan to be baptized by him. 14 John tried to prevent him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and yet you are coming to me?" 15 Jesus said to him in reply, "Allow it now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he allowed him. 16 After Jesus was baptized, he came up

from the water and behold, the heavens were opened (for him), and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove (and) coming upon him. 17 And a voice came from the heavens, saying, "This is my beloved Son, 13 with whom I am well pleased."

Here's a quotation from *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*:

The baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist in the Jordan is so important theologically that it is treated by all four evangelists, each in his own way. Mark has a straightforward account (1:9-11), theologically naive and unembarrassed. But, after he had written it down, the story quickly became an embarrassment to the early church, because it was thought unsuitable that the sinless Jesus should be baptized for his sins.

Matthew therefore omits the reference in Mark 1:14 to the forgiveness of sins and adds verses 14 and 15, where John demurs, saying that he (John) should be baptized by Jesus. Nonetheless, Jesus says, "Let it be so for now."

Here again is a comparison of Mark's gospel and the way Matthew edits Mark's description of the baptism of Jesus.

Mark 1:9-11

[Bold appears also in Matthew]

In those days it came to pass that **Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and he was baptized in the Jordan by John. And just then when he was coming up from the water, he saw the heavens torn open and the Spirit, like a dove, descending on him. Then came a voice from the heavens: "You are my beloved son; in you I am well pleased."**

Matthew 3:13-17

[Italics appears also in Mark]

Then *Jesus came from Galilee* to the Jordan to John, *to be baptized by him*. But John tried to prevent him, saying: I have need to be baptized by you, and you come to me?" Jesus answered and said to him: Let it be for now! For thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he agreed. Once he had been baptized, *Jesus emerged immediately from the water. And behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God, descending dove-like coming upon him. And behold, a voice from the heavens was saying: "This is my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased."*

The voice from heaven is identified as God the Father's. The pronouncement draws on figures from the Old Testament to highlight the meaning of Jesus:

My son = Psalm 2:7: The Davidic king is the adopted son of God.

The beloved = Genesis 22:2: Isaac

With whom I am well pleased = Isaiah 42:1 and 44:2: God's Servant.

So, at the outset of Jesus' public ministry he is identified in terms of biblical figures that provide types for his own person and activity.

Matthew writes that "he saw" the Spirit of God, descending dove-like. Matthew does not write that anyone but Jesus saw this event. The descending of the Spirit is an anointing of Jesus as Messiah, and indicates that he has received everything he needs to fulfill that role.

## The Testing of God's Son - Matthew 4:1-11 [Luke 4:1-13]

1 Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. 2 He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was hungry. 3 The tempter approached and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command that these stones become loaves of bread." 4 He said in reply, "It is written: 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of God.'" 5 Then the devil took him to the holy city, and made him stand on the parapet of the temple, 6 and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down. For it is written: 'He will command his angels concerning you and 'with their hands they will support you, lest you dash your foot against a stone.'" 7 Jesus answered him, "Again it is written, 'You shall not put the Lord, your God, to the test.'" 8 Then the devil took him up to a very high mountain, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in their magnificence, 9 and he said to him, "All these I shall give to you, if you will prostrate yourself and worship me." 10 At this, Jesus said to him, "Get away, Satan! It is written: 'The Lord, your God, shall you worship and him alone shall you serve.'" 11 Then the devil left him and, behold, angels came and ministered to him.

Mark's description of Jesus in the desert is very short – two verses. Matthew's expanded version is drawn from sources other than Mark's Gospel, probably from "Q," although the style and complexity of the temptation narratives is unusual for material from "Q." So it's another one of those "Who Knows?"

Here's some background from the First Century Jewish and Christian understandings which Matthew would have shared.

Jesus *fasted forty days and forty nights*. Moses and Elijah had fasted for forty days and forty nights. And Israel was in the desert for forty years.

Jesus was led into *the wilderness*; Israel was tempted in the wilderness in the exodus. Matthew is identifying Jesus with Israel. Jesus is addressed by Satan as "*Son of God*." That identifies him, not only personally, but with Israel, which was called "Son of God." If the devil had called him "Messiah" that would have referred only to Jesus personally.

Jesus is led into the wilderness to be *tested*. That is a term used to describe partners in a covenant; each would test the other for faithfulness to the covenant. In the covenant between God and Israel, only God could do the testing; Israel could not legitimately test God.

All the temptations are not as bizarre as they might seem to us. They were understood to be three temptations against the love of God, who is to be loved with one's whole heart and soul and might. *Heart* refers to the two affective impulses or drives, good and evil. *Soul* means life, even martyrdom. *Might* means wealth, property and other external possessions.

Satan tempts Jesus' heart, soul and might. And Jesus answers each temptation with a quotation for the Book of Deuteronomy. He shows himself to be the new Israel, one who is faithful to the covenant.

Why is this important to Matthew and his community? Because the people in "their synagogue" disputed Matthew's community's legitimate claim of being true descendants of the people with whom God had made a covenant.

## Ministry in Galilee Begins - Matthew 4:12-25

4:12-17 - Jesus moves from Nazareth to Capernaum. [Mark 1:14-15; Luke 4:14, 31]

12 When he heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. 13 He left Nazareth and went to live in Capernaum by the sea, in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali, 14 that what had been said through Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled: 15 "Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the way to the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles, 16 the people who sit in darkness have seen a great light, on those dwelling in a land overshadowed by death light has arisen." 17 From that time on, Jesus began to preach and say, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

The Greek word which is translated "settled" implies that he had a house there. The district where Capernaum is located was no longer called Naphtali by the time Matthew wrote, but he used that ancient name in order to apply Isaiah's prophecy to Jesus' move. The area had fallen to Syrian invasion at the time of Isaiah, and Matthew sees Jesus' arrival as the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy that they will see a great light.

By Matthew's time, Galilee was populated half by Jews and half by Gentiles; it was bilingual, people speaking both Aramaic and Greek. So Matthew sees Isaiah's prophecy fulfilled in Capernaum when Jesus arrives. It's a big deal for Matthew throughout his gospel to see the ancient prophecies fulfilled in Jesus. Some see Jesus' move as a matter of seeking greater safety, because it allows for escape more easily than Nazareth would, because it is located on the shore of the Sea of Galilee.

Jesus began his ministry of preaching around Capernaum. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" is the identical message that John the Baptist delivered back in 3:2. The meaning of "kingdom of heaven" is the same as the meaning of "kingdom of God." But a good Jew was reluctant to use the name "God" so they used the word "heaven." It does not imply the hereafter; rather the kingdom has begun with Jesus' preaching and healing. In the whole New Testament, the kingdom is conceived as "already but not yet," meaning that it has been inaugurated by Jesus, but it is not yet fulfilled.

4:18-22 - The call of the disciples [Mark 1:16-20; Luke 5:1-11]

18 As he was walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon who is called Peter, and his brother Andrew, casting a net into the sea; they were fishermen. 19 He said to them, "Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men." 20 At once they left their nets and followed him. 21 He walked along from there and saw two other brothers, James, the son of Zebedee, and his brother John. They were in a boat, with their father Zebedee, mending their nets. He called them, 22 and immediately they left their boat and their father and followed him.

Here Matthew follows Mark very closely. The fishing business around Capernaum was very prosperous; it supplied not only local residents, but they exported some of their catch beyond the local citizenry. Matthew narrates that Jesus called Simon to whom he gave the new name Peter, meaning rock, and his brother Andrew.

Jesus says, "Come after me." This is a technical phrase indicating the relationship of a teacher to a student or disciple. "I will make you fishers of men" is one of two main images for ministry in the New Testament; the other is "shepherd." "Fishers of men" is more missionary than "shepherd."

James and John were the next ones called. The first four will be Jesus' most intimate companions throughout his life. It was customary that students or disciples would seek out a master. But Jesus reverses the process and seeks out disciples.

4:23-25 - Ministering to the multitudes [Mark 1:39; Luke 4:15]

23 He went around all of Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and curing every disease and illness among the people. 24 His fame spread to all of Syria, and they brought to him all who were sick with various diseases and racked with pain, those who were possessed, lunatics, and paralytics, and he cured them. 25 And great crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, and Judea, and from beyond the Jordan followed him.

Matthew notes that Jesus preached in "their synagogues," those places from which Jesus' followers were by Matthew's time expelled.

The popularity of Jesus and his first four disciples is emphasized by Matthew. What is somewhat strange is how Matthew identifies the crowds. It is unlikely that the Galileans and the Judeans would mingle. The Judeans considered the Galileans to be sort of country bumpkins; and the Galileans resented the special status of Judea and Jerusalem. But they all listened to Jesus.

And next Matthew is going to tell us what they heard: the sermon on the mount.

## BOOK ONE: DISCOURSE - 4:23-7:28

### The Sermon on the Mount: Part 1 “Attitudes” - Matthew 4:23 - 5:16

Matthew’s Jesus going up the mountain to give his inaugural address is reminiscent of Moses going up the mountain to receive the Law. The main motive of Matthew in writing his gospel was to give an account of Jesus’ teachings. This is the first of those occasions to hear Jesus teach.

#### 4:23-5:2 - Introduction to the sermon

23 He went around all of Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and curing every disease and illness among the people. 24 His fame spread to all of Syria, and they brought to him all who were sick with various diseases and racked with pain, those who were possessed, lunatics, and paralytics, and he cured them. 25 And great crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, and Judea, and from beyond the Jordan followed him.

5:1 When he saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he had sat down, his disciples came to him.  
2 He began to teach them, saying:

This short piece summarizes Jesus’ ministry. Jesus went all around Galilee, *teaching* in “their synagogue,” *proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom*, and *healing*. His ministry is in word and in deed. Matthew lists all the places from which people came to hear Jesus, emphasizing the universality of his message and ministry.

#### 5:3-12 - The beatitudes: Christian *attitudes*

3 “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

4 Blessed are they who mourn, for they will be comforted.

5 Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the land.

6 Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied.

7 Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

8 Blessed are the clean of heart, for they will see God.

9 Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

10 Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, 9 for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

11 Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of evil against you (falsely) because of me.

12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven. Thus they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Since whole books have been written on the topic of the beatitudes, this will be a very shortened version of the commentaries. But we begin with a look at the word translated into English as “blessed.” The Greek word is “*makarioi*,” it does not have some particularly spiritual sense; it means “happy, favored, blessed as is typical of the upper class.” It represents the sort of response ordinary folks today would give when they look at the mansions of the wealthy in gated communities: “Wow! Aren’t they blessed!”

All the beatitudes represent various attitudes the followers of Christ should adopt. An attitude is a decision one has made about the way life, or some part of life, is or ought to be. The

beatitudes are not as original with Jesus as we might expect. Jesus was apparently well versed in the religious tradition and scriptures of his ancestors.

Poor in spirit:

Luke writes, “Blessed are you poor . . .” Matthew adds “. . . in spirit.” Matthew spiritualizes the notion of “poor.” Apparently there were some wealthy people in Matthew’s community, and Matthew didn’t want to alienate them.

Jesus begins by saying, favored, blessed as is typical of the upper class are the beggars in spirit.” The Greek word for poor (beggars) translates the Hebrew word “*anawim*” which means those without any material possessions or means of support, and whose confidence is therefore in God alone. Matthew doesn’t say just “poor;” he adds “in spirit,” so as not to exclude anyone, not even those who have material resources. Their attitude can still be one of dependence on God. Although the New American Bible translates the word *anawim* as in Isaiah 61:1 as “afflicted,” the Hebrew word means also “poor.” So this is lifted out of that passage of Isaiah: “The spirit of the Lord God is upon me because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the afflicted (*anawim*).”

Why are they blessed? Because theirs is the kingdom of heaven. The Greek word which is translated as “kingdom” is *basileia*. It means “the reign, rule, influence of a royal person (king).” Since the poor have nothing and no one upon which or whom to rely, they can and must rely on God. They have nothing to get in the way of God’s reign, rule and influence over them. (‡)

Those who mourn:

They will be comforted. The Greek passive construction of this and the consequences listed for the other beatitudes is understood that God will provide the consequences. So in this case, it means “God will comfort them.” The idea is lifted out of Isaiah 61:2: “To announce a year of favor from the Lord and a day of vindication by our God; to comfort all who mourn; to place on those who mourn in Zion a diadem instead of ashes, to give them oil of gladness instead of mourning.”

The meek (slow to anger):

They will inherit the land. Some commentators say “the land” should be understood as “the kingdom,” and therefore it means God will reign, rule and influence their lives. Lifted out of Psalm 37:11: “But the poor will inherit the earth, will delight in great prosperity.”

Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness:

As is true with Matthew’s treatment of “Blessed are the poor *in spirit*,” so here he spiritualizes the notion and adds to those who hunger and thirst “*for righteousness*.” They will be satisfied, or God will satisfy them; that is, will provide them with righteousness. From Psalm 107:5, 8-9: “Let them thank the Lord for his mercy, such wondrous deeds for the children of Adam. For he satisfied the thirsty, filled the hungry with good things.”

The merciful:

They shall be shown mercy. God will show them mercy. Proverbs 14:21: “Whoever despises the hungry comes up short, but happy the one who is kind to the poor.”

The clean of heart:

This means people of integrity. They shall see God. Psalm 24:3-4: “Who may go up the mountain of the Lord? Who can stand in his holy place? The clean of hand and heart.”

The peacemakers:

They shall be called children of God. This is the politically correct translation of the Greek words which say “sons of God,” a title for the angels (Job 1:6 and 2:1); those who proclaimed peace on earth in the infancy narrative. Those who make peace will be called angels.

Those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness:

Theirs is the kingdom of heaven. God will reign, rule and influence their lives.

Those who are insulted, persecuted, and maligned:

Their reward will be great in heaven.

5:13-16 - The missionary consequences of these attitudes

13 "You are the salt of the earth. But if salt loses its taste, with what can it be seasoned? It is no longer good for anything but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot. 14 You are the light of the world. A city set on a mountain cannot be hidden. 15 Nor do they light a lamp and then put it under a bushel basket; it is set on a lampstand, where it gives light to all in the house. 16 Just so, your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father.

The living of the Christian attitudes is not only a matter of personal holiness; it is meant to influence the world. (†) That influence on the world is compared to salt and light and visibility. Salt flavors and preserves; the disciples' lives are to do the same for society. Light helps people see; the lives of the disciples are to help people see what is true and right. The city on a hill *cannot* be hidden. Believers living out these attitudes cannot help but attract attention and give direction.

### **The Sermon on the Mount: Part 2 “Behaviors” - Matthew 5:17-5:48**

For the remainder of Chapter 5, Matthew's Jesus teaches about the way his followers must live out the attitudes they espouse.

5:17-20 - Teaching about the Law

17 "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. 18 Amen, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or the smallest part of a letter will pass from the law, until all things have taken place. 19 Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do so will be called least in the kingdom of heaven. But whoever obeys and teaches these commandments will be called greatest in the kingdom of heaven. 20 I tell you, unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter into the kingdom of heaven.

The Mosaic law has moral and ethical rules and ceremonial rules. In all, the Law of Moses is said to have 613 prescriptions, but that includes the traditions of the elders, which are commentaries on the Law as given by Moses. It appears that Jesus is defending the continued observance of the moral and ethical regulations found in the Law as given by Moses. Because the early believers definitely did not observe all the ceremonial laws and the traditions of the elders, they must have understood that Jesus did not mean that these should be observed.

Paul certainly did not think the followers of Jesus needed to observe all of the prescriptions of the Mosaic law and the traditions of the elders. Matthew's community, made up of both Jewish and Gentile believers, must have been gladdened by Jesus' words (Jewish believers) and chagrined by his words (Gentile believers). Perhaps there was tension within the community because of this. Matthew says that Jesus did not come to do away with the law, but to fulfill it. Jesus shows a positive attitude toward the Jewish inheritance, even though he criticized some of the ways that Law was developed by the traditions of the elders.

One scholar has parsed the problem this way:

- (1) The whole of the Old Testament has religious value for the followers of Jesus and should continue to be preserved, prayed, studied, and preached in the movement he began.
- (2) The prescriptions of the law still bind the immediate (Jewish-Palestinian) followers of Jesus.

However, Jesus does not condemn those who don't observe the whole law. They are not excluded from the kingdom of heaven; they are however the least in the kingdom of heaven. And just teaching the law is not good enough. One must observe it. Your righteousness must surpass that of the Scribes and Pharisees, who only teach it, but don't observe it.

It's possible that by quoting Jesus' teaching on the law Matthew is making room within his community for all of its members: those Jewish Christians who wanted to observe the law, those who were more lax in their observance of the law, and those Gentile Christians who did not observe the law at all. In all cases, the righteousness which is required must go beyond that of the Scribes and Pharisees, who taught but did not observe.

#### 5:21-26 - Teaching on anger

21 "You have heard that it was said to your ancestors, 'You shall not kill; and whoever kills will be liable to judgment.' 22 But I say to you, whoever is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment, and whoever says to his brother, 'Raqa,' will be answerable to the Sanhedrin, and whoever says, 'You fool,' will be liable to fiery Gehenna. 23 Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar, and there recall that your brother has anything against you, 24 leave your gift there at the altar, go first and be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift. 25 Settle with your opponent quickly while on the way to court with him. Otherwise your opponent will hand you over to the judge, and the judge will hand you over to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. 26 Amen, I say to you, you will not be released until you have paid the last penny.

The general formula which is used, "You have heard it said, . . . but I say to you" is a typical rabbinic way of teaching. After a passage of the law was read, a rabbi might say, "You may think, . . . but I say to you." Here Jesus seems to go beyond the Old Testament teaching by deepening and radicalizing it, by returning to the original will of God.

Here Jesus says that the commandment not to murder is not enough; being angry is not allowed. [He is not speaking of the human emotion of anger, which is inevitable whenever someone interprets something as unfair.] The interior disposition which would lead one to commit murder is not permitted. The internal disposition is at the root of unrighteous behavior; that must be avoided.

The command to be reconciled with your brother before offering your gift at the altar highlights the superiority of ethics over cult. (‡)

#### 5:27-30 - Teaching on adultery

27 "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' 28 But I say to you, everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. 29 If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one of your members than to have your whole body thrown into Gehenna. 30 And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one of your members than to have your whole body go into Gehenna.

In this teaching, Jesus again goes beyond the precepts of the law, and focuses on the interior thoughts of the heart. His teaching is not about "impure thoughts." It's about intending to have sex with one other than one's spouse. The intention is already the sin.

The plucking out one's eye, or cutting off one's hand is hyperbole. It means that it is better to do without something one finds desirable than to "have it all" and therefore lose it all.

#### 5:31-32 - Teaching on divorce

31 "It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife must give her a bill of divorce.' 32 But I say to you, whoever divorces his wife (unless the marriage is unlawful) causes her to commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

The tradition among rabbis about the permissibility of divorce is amusing. The law says that a woman caught in adultery is to be stoned. That got mitigated as time went on. The School of Shammai says, "A man may not divorce his wife unless he has found in her indecency in anything." The School of Hillel says, "He may divorce her even if she spoiled a dish for him, for it is written 'Because he hath found in her indecency in *anything*.'" And Rabbi Akiba says, "Even if he found another fairer than she, for it is written 'And it shall be if she find no favor in his eyes.'" Jesus reestablished the law of no divorce and goes beyond the law again. He admits no situation in which divorce is permissible, except in the case that the marriage was not lawful in the first place.

#### 5:33-37 - Teaching on oaths

33 "Again you have heard that it was said to your ancestors, 'Do not take a false oath, but make good to the Lord all that you vow.' 34 But I say to you, do not swear at all; not by heaven, for it is God's throne; 35 nor by the earth, for it is his footstool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. 36 Do not swear by your head, for you cannot make a single hair white or black. 37 Let your 'Yes' mean 'Yes,' and your 'No' mean 'No.' Anything more is from the evil one.

The law dictated that one make good on any oath which was taken. Jesus says don't take an oath at all. Why? Because the practice of taking an oath in order to verify something one is saying arose because people could no longer be believed. Jesus says that taking oaths, therefore, is from the evil one. So, just tell the truth all the time. That way there will be no need to take an oath. Just say "yes" if you mean "yes" and "no" if you mean "no."

#### 5:38-42 - Teaching on retaliation (and more)

38 "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' 39 But I say to you, offer no resistance to one who is evil. When someone strikes you on (your) right cheek, turn the other one to him as well. 40 If anyone wants to go to law with you over your tunic, hand him your cloak as well. 41 Should anyone press you into service for one mile, 26 go with him for two miles. 42 Give to the one who asks of you, and do not turn your back on one who wants to borrow.

"You have heard it said" and then Jesus quotes the law from Exodus 21:22 and following. This was a great improvement over Lamech as described in Genesis 4:23-24. Lamech said that should anyone injure him, he would repay ten or a hundred times. So the law which reduced retaliation to only "an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth" was quite an improvement! Well, Jesus improves it even more: don't retaliate at all.

Not only does Jesus say not to retaliate, but not even to offer resistance to those who abuse you. Turn the other cheek, give your cloak as well, don't go to court, go the extra mile, give to those who ask, don't turn your back on anyone who wants to borrow – quite an improvement on the "eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth."

The point Jesus is making is not to be a doormat, but to shame your opponent into a change of heart. [Think of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.]

#### 5:43-48 - Teaching on the love of enemies

43 "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' 44 But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you, 45 that you may be children of your heavenly Father, for he makes his sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust. 46 For if you love those who love you, what recompense will you have? Do not the tax collectors do the same? 47 And if you greet your brothers only, what is unusual about that? Do not the pagans do the same? 48 So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Up to Jesus' time, hatred of enemies was considered to be right. But Jesus pushes the envelope even further. His disciples are to love even their enemies. The law did say that one was to love one's countryman; but it does *not* say to hate one's enemies. The motive for loving one's enemies is to be like the heavenly Father who does good to both good people and bad people.

### **The Sermon on the Mount: Part 3 "Acts of Piety" - Matthew 6:1-18**

Jewish piety included three special acts: alms-giving, prayer and fasting. Within Matthew's community there was a large contingent of Jewish Christians as well as an equally large Gentile population. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus retains the traditional Jewish acts of piety, but, as in his other teachings, he urges his followers to go beyond what had been the tradition, in

such a way that those traditions now apply to all members of the believing community, not just the Jewish members.

#### 6:1-4 - Alms-giving

1 "(But) take care not to perform righteous deeds in order that people may see them; otherwise, you will have no recompense from your heavenly Father. 2 When you give alms, do not blow a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets to win the praise of others. Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward. 3 But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right is doing, 4 so that your almsgiving may be secret. And your Father who sees in secret will repay you.

Having just given a list of righteous deeds which his followers should perform, including the last one mentioned, love of enemies, Jesus begins his discourse on piety with the warning that righteous deeds should not be done in order to look good to others. The warning is that when you trade your good deeds, such as alms-giving, for the praise of others, you've already "spent" them to gain the favor of others. But if you do your good deeds in secret – if you "save" them (as in a saving account) – then God who sees in secret will repay you. (‡)

#### **You are your secrets**

There's a human psychological dynamic involved with this saying of Jesus. If we "spend" our good deeds in order to gain the acclaim of others, they're gone; we've spent them. If we keep our bad deeds secret, we collect and hold on to them, never showing them to anyone. We "save" them. When an account is required of us, or when we take account of ourselves, all we will have to show is the bad stuff we've saved up. So, we should "spend" the bad things by letting someone know about them, and we should "save" the good stuff in secret. We are our secrets.

#### 6:5-15 - Prayer

5 "When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, who love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on street corners so that others may see them. Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward. 6 But when you pray, go to your inner room, close the door, and pray to your Father in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will repay you. 7 In praying, do not babble like the pagans, who think that they will be heard because of their many words. 8 Do not be like them. Your Father knows what you need before you ask him. 9 "This is how you are to pray: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, 10 your kingdom come, 7 your will be done, on earth as in heaven. 11 Give us today our daily bread; 12 and forgive us our debts, 9 as we forgive our debtors; 13 and do not subject us to the final test, 10 but deliver us from the evil one.

14 If you forgive others their transgressions, your heavenly Father will forgive you. 15 But if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your transgressions.

First of all, Jesus gives instruction on *how* to pray. He's obviously not talking about public community liturgical prayer, but about personal praying. Don't do it in public. Go to your room, shut the door and pray to your Father in secret. Jesus gives the same message about praying that he gave about alms-giving: do it in secret, and your Father will hear you.

And praying is not about multiplying words. Perhaps Matthew had in mind here the way pagans prayed, using invocation after invocation, calling on multiple gods in the hope that one of them will hear and respond. Don't babble on like that.

Then Jesus gives instruction on *what* to pray. We know it as the Our Father, or as the Lord's Prayer. Matthew's version is close to what we are used to; Luke's is a bit different, and probably an earlier version. Again, books have been written on the Lord's prayer. Here are just a few little tidbits.

*Our Father in heaven.* The word "Abba" is a tender and familiar way of addressing one's parent, suggesting a great trust in the Father. There is no awe in this address. Some have suggested that it be understood as "Daddy."

*Hallowed be your name.* This is probably best understood as a petition, asking God to make God's name holy, rather than as the human being praising God.

*Thy kingdom come.* Although the Kingdom of God has been inaugurated by Jesus, it is yet to see its fulfillment. We pray for that fulfillment

*Thy will be done.* Meaning almost the same thing as the previous petition. The will of God is for peace and justice

*On earth as it is in heaven.* The day is hoped for when the peace and justice which reign in heaven will reign also on earth.

*Give us this day our daily bread.* Wouldn't you know it! Matthew uses a Greek word with so many meanings, that it's hard to understand exactly what's meant; it can mean *tomorrow's*, *daily*, *needful*, and *future*. If we put all of those meanings together, it would look like this: the bread is earthly bread, the bread of the poor and needy, and, at the same time, because of the eschatological hour in which it is prayed for and eaten, it is the future bread in this today, the bread of the elect and the blessed. (Lohmeyer) Luke is no help; he uses the same word!

*Forgive us our debts.* The petition is presented as a response God should make because of something we have already done. *As we have forgiven* our debtors. We are asking God to treat us as we *have treated others*, not as we *will* treat others.

*Lead us not into temptation.* The more literal translation of the Greek would be: do not subject us to the final test, or: do not let us succumb to the end-time trial.

*But deliver us from evil.* This probably means in the final end-time trial, do not let us be conquered by the evil one.

The follow up to the Lord's Prayer is that if we forgive others God will forgive us; if we don't forgive, God won't forgive us. (†)

## 6:16-18 - Fasting

16 "When you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites. They neglect their appearance, so that they may appear to others to be fasting. Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward. 17 But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, 18 so that you may not appear to be fasting, except to your Father who is hidden. And your Father who sees what is hidden will repay you.

If you want to fast, do so. But do it privately (except on the feast of Yom Kippur, when the whole community fasted). Fasting was understood as humbling oneself before God, as

strengthening prayer, as related to alms-giving (give away what you save on your food budget), and as a sign of mourning. But if you fast, please don't make a show of it like the hypocrites do. (‡)

#### **The Sermon on the Mount: Part 4 “Other Teachings” - Matthew 6:19-7:29**

Most of the following teachings do not need a lot of commentary. They are very straightforward statements.

##### **6:19-21 - Seeking treasure**

19 "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and decay destroy, and thieves break in and steal. 20 But store up treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor decay destroys, nor thieves break in and steal. 21 For where your treasure is, there also will your heart be.

Where your heart is, there you will go. This is not an overly spiritual or other-worldly admonition. Right now seek precious things which will lead to even more precious things in heaven; for instance, the precious things like love of family, care of friends, observance of the law will lay up treasure also in heaven. (‡)

##### **6:22-23 - Light in your body**

22 "The lamp of the body is the eye. If your eye is sound, your whole body will be filled with light; 23 but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be in darkness. And if the light in you is darkness, how great will the darkness be.

The *way* you look at things (eye) will determine what you see. If you are seeing things wrong (for instance what you think is treasure, from the previous three verses) you are stumbling in the dark.

##### **6:24 - Money**

24 "No one can serve two masters. He will either hate one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.

You cannot go in two opposite directions. If you seek money to such an extent that you serve it (that it dominates your choices) you cannot serve God. (‡)

##### **6:25-34 - Dependence on God**

25 "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat (or drink), or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? 26 Look at the birds in the sky; they do not sow or reap, they gather nothing into barns, yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are not you more important than they? 27 Can any of you by worrying add a single moment to your life-span? 28 Why are you anxious about clothes? Learn from the way the wild flowers grow. They do not work or spin. 29 But I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was clothed like one of them. 30 If God so clothes the grass of the field, which grows today and is thrown into the oven tomorrow, will he not much more provide for you, O you of little faith? 31 So do not worry and say, 'What are we to eat?' or 'What are we to drink?' or 'What are we to wear?' 32 All these things the pagans seek. Your

heavenly Father knows that you need them all. 33 But seek first the kingdom (of God) and his righteousness, 19 and all these things will be given you besides. 34 Do not worry about tomorrow; tomorrow will take care of itself. Sufficient for a day is its own evil.

This teaching must be understood against the background of the very prosperous Galilean economy of Jesus' time. It is addressed to people who have the necessities of life, not to the destitute. It might be considered even an exhortation on moderation. If one has enough food and clothing, don't worry about having more. God knows what you need. And you can't change things by worrying; so don't worry. However, having enough food and clothing, seek the righteousness of God. (‡)

### 7:1-5 - Judging others

7:1 "Stop judging, that you may not be judged. 2 For as you judge, so will you be judged, and the measure with which you measure will be measured out to you. 3 Why do you notice the splinter in your brother's eye, but do not perceive the wooden beam in your own eye? 4 How can you say to your brother, 'Let me remove that splinter from your eye,' while the wooden beam is in your eye? 5 You hypocrite, remove the wooden beam from your eye first; then you will see clearly to remove the splinter from your brother's eye.

The Greek word which is used for "judge" implies the kind of judgment that a judge might make; it includes the notion of condemn. What Jesus forbids is not the making of simple judgements, such as "This is good" or "This is bad." "Do not judge in a condemning way" is what is meant. (‡)

### 7:6 - Pearls before swine

6 "Do not give what is holy to dogs, or throw your pearls before swine, lest they trample them underfoot, and turn and tear you to pieces.

Who knows?

### 7:7-11 - The answer to prayers

7 "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. 8 For everyone who asks, receives; and the one who seeks, finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened. 9 Which one of you would hand his son a stone when he asks for a loaf of bread, 10 or a snake when he asks for a fish? 11 If you then, who are wicked, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good things to those who ask him.

Ask, seek, knock. God cares about you. (‡)

### 7:12 - The golden rule

12 "Do to others whatever you would have them do to you. This is the law and the prophets.

This was known as a principle long before Jesus. He's quoting it, not inventing it. It can be found in a couple of Old Testament places: Leviticus 19:18 - "You shall love your neighbor as yourself;" and Tobit 4:15 - "Do to no one what you yourself dislike." (‡)

### 7:13-14 - The narrow gate

13 "Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road broad that leads to destruction, and those who enter through it are many. 14 How narrow the gate and constricted the road that leads to life. And those who find it are few.

In his sermon, Jesus has laid down some attitudes and behaviors which are required of a true disciple. These expectations rule out and therefore narrow some other options. He doesn't expect that many will follow what he's said.

### 7:15-20- False prophets

15 "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but underneath are ravenous wolves. 16 By their fruits you will know them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? 17 Just so, every good tree bears good fruit, and a rotten tree bears bad fruit. 18 A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a rotten tree bear good fruit. 19 Every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. 20 So by their fruits you will know them.

Some think that within Matthew's community there were people exhibiting a variety of prophetic gifts, or at least claiming to be offering prophetic revelations. Matthew's Jesus warns that it is necessary to test all prophecy. What's the test? The supposed prophet's behavior. (‡)

[Throughout Matthew's Gospel, there runs a theme that suggests that *saying* it isn't good enough; you've got to be *living* it.]

### 7:21-23- The true disciple

21 "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, 10 but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. 22 Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name? Did we not drive out demons in your name? Did we not do mighty deeds in your name?' 23 Then I will declare to them solemnly, 'I never knew you. Depart from me, you evildoers.'

Claiming someone as master and lord does not make one a disciple. The true disciple not only acknowledges his/her master by acclamation "Lord, lord." A true disciple *does* the will of God. Association with Jesus only by performing certain works like prophesying and driving out devils in Jesus' name, and doing mighty deeds in his name, does not make one a true disciple. (‡)

### 7:24-27 - The two foundations

24 "Everyone who listens to these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. 25 The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and buffeted the house. But it did not collapse; it had been set solidly on rock. 26 And everyone who listens to these words of mine but does not act on them will be like a fool who built his house on sand. 27 The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and buffeted the house. And it collapsed and was completely ruined."

It's interesting to note that the same storms beat against both houses. Listening to Jesus' words and *acting on them* does not prevent the onslaught of storms. It just assures that one will not fall. (‡)

#### 7:28-29 - People's reaction to the sermon

28 When Jesus finished these words, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, 29 for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.

It was noted that Jesus was teaching with authority, not like their scribes. Typically, a rabbi would read a passage from the Torah and comment on it. He might also quote other earlier rabbis' opinions on the text which was read, and then give his own opinion. Jesus' way of teaching quoted no scripture text, except when his commentary on it brought it further than had heretofore been thought. His hearers would have imagined that he had some sort of direct line to God in order to ascertain God's will.

## BOOK TWO: NARRATIVE - 8:1-9:38

After the proclamation of the kingdom in *word* in chapters 5, 6 and 7, in chapters 8 and 9 Matthew begins again to follow Mark's narration, but with some significant editing. These chapters portray the inauguration of the kingdom by the *actions* of Jesus. However, in these chapters Jesus also teaches about discipleship and how the disciples are to turn the world upside down by the way they live.

A theme which runs throughout the nine (or ten) miracle stories that follow is that miracles show the power of God at work in Jesus, and they might get the attention of the people who witness them. But accepting the miracles as great attention-getters is insufficient for entry into the kingdom. Faith is what is required, and it is faith that the miracles invite.

There are two interludes in this series of miracle stories: 8:18-22 – would-be followers of Jesus, and 9:9-17 – the call of Matthew and the question of fasting.

### 8:1-4 - The cure of the leper (1) [Mark 1:40-44; Luke 5:12-14]

1 When Jesus came down from the mountain, great crowds followed him. 2 And then a leper approached, did him homage, and said, "Lord, if you wish, you can make me clean." 3 He stretched out his hand, touched him, and said, "I will do it. Be made clean." His leprosy was cleansed immediately. 4 3 Then Jesus said to him, "See that you tell no one, but go show yourself to the priest, and offer the gift that Moses prescribed; that will be proof for them."

Crowds are already following Jesus. The leper must also have heard of him, because he bows down to worship him and calls him Lord. He says he believes that Jesus can cure him if Jesus wants to do so. Jesus says he wills to do what the leper asks. Then Jesus does the unthinkable: he touched the leper who was regarded as unclean, and so by touching him, Jesus presumably would become unclean. Jesus instructs the leper to go and show himself to the priests. That's what the law says one is to do if one thinks he has been cured of leprosy. Matthew shows that Jesus has not come to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it. [Matthew greatly condenses Mark's version of the story (Mark 1:40-44), and Luke will again expand on Matthew's version (Luke 5:12-14). All Matthew is interested in is to show who Jesus is.]

### 8:5-13 - The cure of the centurion's servant (2) [Luke 7:1-10; John 4:46-53]

5 When he entered Capernaum, a centurion approached him and appealed to him, 6 saying, "Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed, suffering dreadfully." 7 He said to him, "I will come and cure him." 8 The centurion said in reply, 6 "Lord, I am not worthy to have you enter under my roof; only say the word and my servant will be healed. 9 For I too am a person subject to authority, with soldiers subject to me. And I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes; and to another, 'Come here,' and he comes; and to my slave, 'Do this,' and he does it." 10 When Jesus heard this, he was amazed and said to those following him, "Amen, I say to you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith. 11 I say to you, many will come from the east and the west, and will recline with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob at the banquet in the kingdom of heaven, 12 but the children of the kingdom will be driven out into the outer darkness, where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth." 13 And Jesus said to the centurion, "You may go; as you have believed, let it be done for you." And at that very hour (his) servant was healed.

In the previous story (8:1-4), the leper is an Israelite; this story is about a cure of a Gentile. The placement of the two stories side-by-side is probably a deliberate message of Matthew's: the

universality of Jesus' mission, which Jesus will say in the following verses. Jesus says he will come to the man's house and cure the servant. Sensitive to the reluctance of a Jew to enter a Gentile's home, the centurion says that he believes it wouldn't be necessary for Jesus to do that. "Only say the word and my servant will be healed." The centurion not only has faith; he is also polite.

The words of Jesus reinforce the message that he has come for more than the "children of the kingdom" who will be cast out into the outer darkness." These are undoubtedly the members of "their synagogue."

#### 8:14-15 - The cure of Peter's mother-in-law (3) [Mark 1:29-34; Luke 4:38-41]

14 Jesus entered the house of Peter, and saw his mother-in-law lying in bed with a fever. 15 He touched her hand, the fever left her, and she rose and waited on him.

Once again, Matthew condenses the story from Mark, and Luke will expand it a bit. The focus is on Jesus, no one else; Matthew doesn't even mention that the first four disciples accompanied him. And he doesn't mention that they told Jesus about her; he sees for himself that she is sick. And having been healed, she rises and waits on *him*. Mark says she waited on *them*. So why the change? Matthew is focusing only on Jesus, not the rest of the disciples or others.

#### 8:16-17 - Evening healings (Interlude)

16 When it was evening, they brought him many who were possessed by demons, and he drove out the spirits by a word and cured all the sick, 17 to fulfill what had been said by Isaiah the prophet: "He took away our infirmities and bore our diseases."

This little summary of Jesus' ministry seems to have meant to Matthew that Jesus' ministry is indeed part of what was prophesied. He quotes the fourth Suffering Servant song from Isaiah. But he doesn't quote it exactly. The Isaiah text says, "He took our infirmities." Matthew says, "He took *away* our infirmities." Matthew wants to keep the link between his ostracized Christian community and its Jewish roots which they share with "their synagogue."

#### 8:18-22 - On following Jesus (Interlude) [Mark 4:35]

18 When Jesus saw a crowd around him, he gave orders to cross to the other side. 19 A scribe approached and said to him, "Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go." 20 Jesus answered him, "Foxes have dens and birds of the sky have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to rest his head." 21 Another of (his) disciples said to him, "Lord, let me go first and bury my father." 22 But Jesus answered him, "Follow me, and let the dead bury their dead."

In the crowd which followed Jesus there was a scribe who seems genuinely interested in becoming Jesus' disciple. Jesus warns him that he will have no permanent residence if he follows him. This would have been important to the scribe, because his profession demanded that he have a home and "office" where he could ply his trade of writing for people. Jesus basically says, your profession and my mission are incompatible. (‡)

The other one who says he will follow Jesus wants first to bury his father. Burying one's parents was one of the most important dictates of the Law. There is no indication here that his

father has died. If the father had already died, the delay in following Jesus would have been only a day, because people were buried immediately. But it seems that the man means I will follow you after my father has died, but right now I can't. Jesus says that's not going to work. If the man wants to follow he has to do so now; he can't wait some indefinite time until he has buried his father. Jesus says leave that task to others.

#### 8:23-27 - Stilling the storm (4) [Mark 4:35-40; Luke 8:22-25]

23 He got into a boat and his disciples followed him. 24 Suddenly a violent storm came up on the sea, so that the boat was being swamped by waves; but he was asleep. 25 They came and woke him, saying, "Lord, save us! We are perishing!" 26 He said to them, "Why are you terrified, O you of little faith?" Then he got up, rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was great calm. 27 The men were amazed and said, "What sort of man is this, whom even the winds and the sea obey?"

In verse 18 Jesus had given the order to cross over to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. His departure was delayed by the encounter with the two men who said they wanted to follow him. Now he and his disciples finally get into the boat. And a storm arises. (The first meaning of the Greek word which is here translated as "storm" is "earthquake;" the word is used by all three synoptic gospels for the events which will accompany the horrors of the last days.)

Jesus is asleep. They wake him and tell him that they are perishing. He gets up and says, "Oh you of little faith." (Mark says "Have you no faith?") Jesus rebukes the storm and it becomes still. In Matthew's version the disciples have some faith, but it needs to grow. Perhaps that is Matthew's message to his community which is being tossed about by the opposition of those in "their synagogue." Matthew's community might wonder if Jesus is asleep.

#### 8:28-34 - The cure of the Gadarene Demoniacs (5) [Mark 5:1-17; Luke 8:26-37]

28 When he came to the other side, to the territory of the Gadarenes, two demoniacs who were coming from the tombs met him. They were so savage that no one could travel by that road. 29 They cried out, "What have you to do with us, Son of God? Have you come here to torment us before the appointed time?" 30 Some distance away a herd of many swine was feeding. 31 The demons pleaded with him, "If you drive us out, send us into the herd of swine." 32 And he said to them, "Go then!" They came out and entered the swine, and the whole herd rushed down the steep bank into the sea where they drowned. 33 The swineherds ran away, and when they came to the town they reported everything, including what had happened to the demoniacs. 34 Thereupon the whole town came out to meet Jesus, and when they saw him they begged him to leave their district.

Mark spends 20 verses telling this story; Matthew only 7. Mark says the demons came from Gerera; Matthew says they came from Gadara. Gadara is about 6 miles east of the Sea of Galilee; Gereia is about 30 miles, as far as anyone can figure out [Who knows?]. Matthew also raises the number of demoniacs to two.

The demons recognize that Jesus is the Son of God. And they protest that Jesus is interfering with them "before the appointed time." In antiquity it was thought that the demons could wander the earth until the end-time. Jesus' presence and ministry is, in fact, the beginning of the end-time. The people in "their synagogue" didn't recognize Jesus as the Son of God, but the demons did! How's that for a slam at the persecutors of the Christian community? They don't know what even the demons know!

We can imagine what the swineherds thought and felt. They were Gentiles who were amused that the Jews detested pigs. They told jokes about that. And here a Jew destroys their whole herd. That they could not regard as funny! Matthew doesn't tell us any more about the men who had been possessed, but like Mark he reports that the people wanted Jesus to leave the area.

#### 9:1-8 - Cure of the paralytic (6) [Mark 2:3-12; Luke 5:18-26]

1 He entered a boat, made the crossing, and came into his own town. 2 And there people brought to him a paralytic lying on a stretcher. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Courage, child, your sins are forgiven." 3 At that, some of the scribes said to themselves, "This man is blaspheming." 4 Jesus knew what they were thinking, and said, "Why do you harbor evil thoughts? 5 Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise and walk'? 6 But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins" - he then said to the paralytic, "Rise, pick up your stretcher, and go home." 7 He rose and went home. 8 When the crowds saw this they were struck with awe and glorified God who had given such authority to human beings. 9 As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the customs post. He said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him.

It's interesting that Matthew finds no conflict between saying here that Jesus went to his own town (Capernaum), and what he wrote in 8:20 "The Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."

When Jesus begins by saying, "Your sins are forgiven," it may be a remnant of the belief that physical suffering is caused by sin. Remember when Jesus was asked who had sinned, the man or his parents that he was born blind. There was an assumption that if something was wrong with you, it was because of your or someone else's sin. The scribes get it; they recognize that only God can forgive sin, so they understand that Jesus is claiming a prerogative belonging only to God; they are scandalized. Jesus demonstrates his ability to forgive sin by telling the man to get up, pick up his stretcher and go home.

#### 9:9-13 - The call of Matthew (Interlude) [Mark 2:13-17; Luke 5:27-32]

9 As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the customs post. He said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him. 10 While he was at table in his house, many tax collectors and sinners came and sat with Jesus and his disciples. 11 The Pharisees saw this and said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher 8 eat with tax collectors and sinners?" 12 He heard this and said, "Those who are well do not need a physician, but the sick do. 13 Go and learn the meaning of the words, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' I did not come to call the righteous but sinners."

Jesus sees Matthew sitting at his customs booth. What exactly that is no one knows. But Matthew was collecting taxes or tolls. Tax collectors were despised because it was suspected that they skimmed off a lot of profit by charging more than the Romans, for whom the tax collectors worked, had assigned. Did they all do that? Who knows? Tax collectors bid for the right to collect taxes. The Romans gave the privilege to the highest bidder, who paid the tax for the whole town. The tax collector recouped his expenditure to the Romans by charging his fellow citizens as much as he could get.

The Pharisees are scandalized that Jesus would eat with tax collectors and sinners. But Jesus gives a very common sense explanation that since he is acting as physician, naturally he would be around those who were sick. And he goes even further saying that God desires mercy

not sacrifice. This might be a slam at the people in “their synagogue” who relied on their observance of the rituals and ceremonies, whereas the people in Matthew’s synagogue acted out of love, not ritual constraints. (‡)

#### 9:14-17 - The question of fasting (Interlude) [Mark 2:18-22]

14 Then the disciples of John approached him and said, "Why do we and the Pharisees fast (much), but your disciples do not fast?" 15 Jesus answered them, "Can the wedding guests mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast. 16 No one patches an old cloak with a piece of unshrunk cloth, for its fullness pulls away from the cloak and the tear gets worse. 17 People do not put new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise the skins burst, the wine spills out, and the skins are ruined. Rather, they pour new wine into fresh wineskins, and both are preserved."

Now it’s John the Baptist’s followers who are scandalized that Jesus’ disciples are not fasting. Jesus’ reply is simply, “This is not the time for fasting. That will come later.” He uses two short parables to emphasize his point.

An old garment which has already been shrunk by multiple washings can be patched, but it must be patched by cloth which has also been already shrunk, or the next time the garment is washed, the new patch will shrink and pull away from the old garment. Nor do you put new fermenting wine into old wineskins, because the fermentation which is going on will destroy the wineskin and the wine will be ruined as well.

These parables could be taken as a rejection of old Israel in favor of new Christianity. But they can also be understood as a way of preserving both the old and the new, which seems to be Matthew’s intent. Remember that his community has only recently been excluded from “their synagogue. Many in Matthew’s community were Jews, who cherished the old Jewish practices. The community also included Gentiles who had no attachment to the older Jewish rituals. Matthew wants to show that there is a way to preserve both, but that way might not be to combine them. That just won’t work. Matthew’s belief is that the followers of Jesus constitute the new Israel, heirs to what went before, but, now with the absence of a temple and a land, the transformation of Judaism which Jesus represents is the only way to go.

I taught sophomore high school students a long time ago. When we considered these parables, I asked the students if they could come up with a modern comparison. Kim raised his hand and when I called on him he said very unceremoniously, “You can’t put a Ford Thunderbird engine into a Model T Ford, because it will shake the shit out of the chassis.” He got Matthew’s point.

First, it was the scribes who were scandalized that Jesus claimed to forgive sin (9:1-8); then it’s the Pharisees who are scandalized that Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners (9:9-13); and then it is the disciples of John the Baptist who are scandalized by the fact that Jesus and his disciples don’t fast (9:14-17). All three groups were probably pestering Matthew’s community about these same sort of things. Nonetheless, Matthew seems to want to preserve both the old and the new without making conflict between them.

Just because someone is picking on you, that doesn't mean you have to fight back.  
Remember 5:39: turn the other cheek.

9:18-19, 23-26 - Cure of the official's daughter (7) [Mark 5:21-24, 35-43; Luke 8:40-42, 49-56]

18 While he was saying these things to them, an official came forward, knelt down before him, and said, "My daughter has just died. But come, lay your hand on her, and she will live." 19 Jesus rose and followed him, and so did his disciples.

23 When Jesus arrived at the official's house and saw the flute players and the crowd who were making a commotion, 24 he said, "Go away! The girl is not dead but sleeping." And they ridiculed him. 25 When the crowd was put out, he came and took her by the hand, and the little girl arose. 26 And news of this spread throughout all that land.

Again Matthew gives sort of a *Readers' Digest* version of Mark's story, even though the point is the same: Jesus has authority over death. But in Matthew's version the focus is much more exclusively on Jesus than in Mark's version which has details about other people in the story.

9:20-22 - Cure of the hemorrhaging woman (8) [Mark 5:25-34; Luke 8:43-48]

20 A woman suffering hemorrhages for twelve years came up behind him and touched the tassel on his cloak. 21 She said to herself, "If only I can touch his cloak, I shall be cured." 22 Jesus turned around and saw her, and said, "Courage, daughter! Your faith has saved you." And from that hour the woman was cured.

Like the leper, this woman with continual bleeding was ritually and legally unclean. She was a pariah not to be touched by anyone. How she could be in a crowd which was pressing on Jesus and on each other is a mystery, unless we imagine that the crowd recognized her for what she was and separated so she could get through to Jesus. Some say that her touching the tassel or fringe of the garment meant that what Jesus was wearing was in accord with the law which prescribed tassels at the edge of garments as a reminder to observe the law (Numbers 15:37-41; Deuteronomy 22:12).

9:27-31 - Cure of two blind men (9) [Matthew 20:29-34; Mark 10:46-52]

27 And as Jesus passed on from there, two blind men followed (him), crying out, "Son of David, have pity on us!" 28 When he entered the house, the blind men approached him and Jesus said to them, "Do you believe that I can do this?" "Yes, Lord," they said to him. 29 Then he touched their eyes and said, "Let it be done for you according to your faith." 30 And their eyes were opened. Jesus warned them sternly, "See that no one knows about this." 31 But they went out and spread word of him through all that land.

This is apparently Matthew's attempt to show that Jesus cures every ill and evil. The story seems to be taken from Mark where there is only one blind man, Bartimaeus. Why another almost identical story appears later in Matthew's Gospel is another of these "who knows" items.

9:32-34 - Cure of the mute man (10) [Luke 11:14-15; Matthew 12:22-24]

32 As they were going out, a demoniac who could not speak was brought to him, 33 and when the demon was driven out the mute person spoke. The crowds were amazed and said, "Nothing like this has ever been seen in Israel." 34 But the Pharisees said, "He drives out demons by the prince of demons."

The controversy over this healing might be found in Matthew 12:22-24; or that may be another incident of curing a man who could not speak. [Who knows?]

9:35-38 - The compassion of Jesus [Luke 8:1; Luke 10:2-12]

35 Jesus went around to all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and curing every disease and illness. 36 At the sight of the crowds, his heart was moved with pity for them because they were troubled and abandoned, like sheep without a shepherd. 37 Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is abundant but the laborers are few; 38 so ask the master of the harvest to send out laborers for his harvest."

This is a transitional passage. We have seen Jesus as the great preacher and healer. Now Matthew will turn to the role of the apostles and disciples in the proclamation of the kingdom. The problem – or opportunity – that the harvest is great but the laborers are few will be taken up by Luke much more fully. Yet, Jesus admonition is not “so get out there and work.” It is “ask the master of the harvest to send laborers.”

Beginning with Chapter 10, we will see that the first ones to be sent are the twelve.



## **BOOK TWO: DISCOURSE - 10:1-11:1**

### **Mission discourse: 10:1-11:1**

The genealogy, then the infancy, then the beginning of Jesus ministry in Galilee, then the Sermon on the Mount, then a series of cures – these have all introduced Jesus, showing where he came from, who he is, what he stands for, and with what authority he does things. Jesus now turns to his disciples to share with them his mission and ministry . . . and authority. His birth, life, death and resurrection inaugurated the kingdom; it is now up to his disciples to bring the kingdom to its fullness by living and preaching in such a way that they continue to turn the world upside down.

10:1-4 - The mission of the twelve [Mark 3:13-19; Luke 6:13-16]

1 Then he summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits to drive them out and to cure every disease and every illness. 2 The names of the twelve apostles 3 are these: first, Simon called Peter, and his brother Andrew; James, the son of Zebedee, and his brother John; 3 Philip and Bartholomew, Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James, the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddeus; 4 Simon the Cananean, and Judas Iscariot who betrayed him.

Matthew's narration is very close to Mark's. Jesus summons the twelve, and he gives them authority. Matthew names the apostles as Mark does. [For information about each of the apostles, see the Gospel of Mark, pages 23-25.]

10:5-16 - The commissioning of the twelve [Mark 6:7-13; Luke 9:1-6]

5 Jesus sent out these twelve after instructing them thus, "Do not go into pagan territory or enter a Samaritan town. 6 Go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. 7 As you go, make this proclamation: 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand.' 8 Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, drive out demons. Without cost you have received; without cost you are to give. 9 Do not take gold or silver or copper for your belts; 10 no sack for the journey, or a second tunic, or sandals, or walking stick. The laborer deserves his keep. 11 Whatever town or village you enter, look for a worthy person in it, and stay there until you leave. 12 As you enter a house, wish it peace. 13 If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; if not, let your peace return to you. 14 Whoever will not receive you or listen to your words - go outside that house or town and shake the dust from your feet. 15 Amen, I say to you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town. 16 "Behold, I am sending you like sheep in the midst of wolves; so be shrewd as serpents and simple as doves.

This is the sending only of the twelve. Later Jesus will commission all his disciples. The twelve are to go only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. For Matthew and his community, this might have felt good, since the community was made up of so many Jewish believers. First the apostles are to go to the countrymen of so many of Matthew's community. They are to show their Jewish brethren that the way of Jesus is the fulfillment of the Torah. The fact that they are sent makes them apostles. The word "apostle" means someone who is sent, not someone who just goes on his/her own whim.

The disciples are to continue the ministry of Jesus. First, the proclamation that the kingdom of heaven is at hand; then to demonstrate that it is at hand by curing the sick, raising the dead, cleansing lepers, driving out demons. And they are to do all this without charging people for

their services. Nor are they to provide for their own sustenance by carrying gold or silver or copper, no suitcase, extra clothing or sandals or walking stick. “The laborer is worth his keep.”

Everywhere the disciples go, they should go in peace. If their fellow Jews receive them, great. If not, don't retaliate in any way. Simply leave that town and shake the dust from your feet. That practice of shaking the dust from one's feet is a message to fellow Jews. They were told to shake the dust from their feet when they left a foreign land; because otherwise the dirt would stick to their sandals, and they would be attempting to worship God while standing on foreign soil. They are to leave to God whatever recompense their rejection might invite on those who don't receive them. (‡)

#### 10:17-25 - Persecution [Mark 13:9-13; Luke 21:12-19]

17 But beware of people, for they will hand you over to courts and scourge you in their synagogues, 18 and you will be led before governors and kings for my sake as a witness before them and the pagans. 19 When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say. You will be given at that moment what you are to say. 20 For it will not be you who speak but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. 21 Brother will hand over brother to death, and the father his child; children will rise up against parents and have them put to death. 22 You will be hated by all because of my name, but whoever endures to the end will be saved. 23 When they persecute you in one town, flee to another. Amen, I say to you, you will not finish the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes. 24 No disciple is above his teacher, no slave above his master. 25 It is enough for the disciple that he become like his teacher, for the slave that he become like his master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more those of his household!

In reading this passage, we need to keep in mind that the make-up of Matthew's community was Jews and Gentiles, all of them subjects of the Roman Empire and the influence of “their synagogue.” In recalling Jesus' words to his community, Matthew is addressing a situation which was very real for them. Both Jews and Gentiles who believed in Jesus put themselves in a precarious position.

For the Jewish believers, separation from family might be the cost of believing. Christians of every kind risked rejection by family members who remained staunch in their Jewish faith and practice. For the Gentile believers, the situation was similar. Each Roman family had its family god or gods. If a member of the family no longer believed in and worshiped those gods, separation from family resulted, at least psychologically. The promise of persecution from the lips of Jesus must have rung true to the experience of Matthew's community. Believers will need to be very clever and yet very simple in their meeting the persecutions they will face.

Jesus' instruction is that you don't have to be so clever that you figure out ahead of time what you would say if you are persecuted. That will be given to you. And you don't just stand there and take what comes your way; flee to another town if they won't accept you where you live.

Of course, Matthew's community was well aware of what happened to Jesus, the master, the teacher. So from Jesus' lips the message that one might suffer and so become like the master or the teacher might sound harsh, but also good news. (‡)

#### 10:26-31 - Courage under persecution [Mark 4:22; Luke 12:2-7]

26 "Therefore do not be afraid of them. Nothing is concealed that will not be revealed, nor secret that will not be known. 27 What I say to you in the darkness, speak in the light; what you hear whispered, proclaim on the

housetops. 28 And do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather, be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in Gehenna. 29 Are not two sparrows sold for a small coin? Yet not one of them falls to the ground without your Father's knowledge. 30 Even all the hairs of your head are counted. 31 So do not be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.

Here in Matthew's Gospel it is clear that it is what *Jesus says* in the darkness the disciples will speak in the light. In Luke's version Jesus says what you *hear* in the darkness. It seems pretty clear that both evangelists were quoting from a common source, probably from "Q."

#### 10:32-33 - Proclaiming Jesus [Mark 8:38; Luke 12:8-9]

32 Everyone who acknowledges me before others I will acknowledge before my heavenly Father. 33 But whoever denies me before others, I will deny before my heavenly Father.

Acknowledging that one is a disciple of Jesus will have its reward because Jesus will acknowledge the disciple before his Father in heaven.

#### 10:34-36 - Jesus, a cause of division [Luke 12:51-53]

34 "Do not think that I have come to bring peace upon the earth. I have come to bring not peace but the sword. 35 For I have come to set a man 'against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; 36 and one's enemies will be those of his household.'

Matthew's community surely had experience of families being divided, both the Jewish and the Roman (Gentile) members of the community.

#### 10:37-39 - Conditions of discipleship [Luke 14:26-27]

37 "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; 38 and whoever does not take up his cross and follow after me is not worthy of me. 39 Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

The passage from Luke is very similar to this one from Matthew. Matthew says "love me more" than mother or father, etc. Luke says "hate" mother and father, etc. The point is clear that one's embrace of Jesus must take priority over attachment to anything or anyone else. It's also clear that both Matthew and Luke are quoting from the same source and modifying it a bit.

It is good to remember that loving Jesus includes doing what he commands. And he commanded that we love others as we love ourselves; that would supposedly include our natural families. In chapter 14, verses 4 to 6, Matthew's Jesus commands love for parents.

#### 10:40-42 - Rewards of discipleship [Mark 9:41; Luke 10:16]

40 "Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me. 41 Whoever receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and whoever receives a righteous man because he is righteous will receive a righteous man's reward. 42 And whoever gives only a cup of cold water to one of these little ones to drink because he is a disciple - amen, I say to you, he will surely not lose his reward."

It was a matter of Jewish law that one who received an emissary receives the one who sent the emissary. God sent Jesus, Jesus sends the apostles, whoever receives the apostle receives Jesus and the Father. Those mentioned by Matthew are a prophet, a righteous person, a little one. That might be sort of an outline of Matthew's community.

11:1 - The typical transition statement of Matthew.

1 When Jesus finished giving these commands to his twelve disciples, he went away from that place to teach and to preach in their towns.

## BOOK THREE: NARRATIVE - 11:2-12:50

### 11:2-19 - John the Baptist [Luke 7:18-28, 16:16]

2 When John heard in prison of the works of the Messiah, he sent his disciples to him 3 with this question, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?" 4 Jesus said to them in reply, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: 5 the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news proclaimed to them. 6 And blessed is the one who takes no offense at me." 7 As they were going off, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John, "What did you go out to the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind? 8 Then what did you go out to see? Someone dressed in fine clothing? Those who wear fine clothing are in royal palaces. 9 Then why did you go out? To see a prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. 10 This is the one about whom it is written: 'Behold, I am sending my messenger ahead of you; he will prepare your way before you.' 11 Amen, I say to you, among those born of women there has been none greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. 12 From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent are taking it by force. 13 All the prophets and the law prophesied up to the time of John. 14 And if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah, the one who is to come. 15 Whoever has ears ought to hear. 16 "To what shall I compare this generation? It is like children who sit in marketplaces and call to one another, 17 'We played the flute for you, but you did not dance, we sang a dirge but you did not mourn.' 18 For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they said, 'He is possessed by a demon.' 19 The Son of Man came eating and drinking and they said, 'Look, he is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.' But wisdom is vindicated by her works."

John is in prison; he heard of the works of *the Messiah*; he sends his disciples to Jesus with the question: "Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?" John wondered if Jesus, his cousin whom he had known all his life, might just be the Messiah. Jesus answers by narrating the works of the expected Messiah, and left John to draw his own conclusions.

Jesus talked to the crowds about his cousin John, suggesting that he also might be more than they had recognized; John also might be the one who was expected to come, Elijah. No one born of woman is greater than John, whose preeminence is that he is the one who announces that the long-awaited reign of God has come. But now that the kingdom has come in Jesus, anyone *in* that kingdom is even greater than the one who announced that the kingdom was coming.

It is hard to know just what is meant by verse 12. From the time of John the Baptist until now, Jesus says, the kingdom of God suffers violence, and the violent are taking it by storm. [Who knows?]

The reference to children playing has many interpretations [Who knows?]. The point is that people who want to reject prophets can always find a reason to do so. They are like kids playing "wedding" and "funeral." John played "funeral" with his austerity; Jesus plays "wedding" with his lack of austerity. People rejected both, claiming that the game which was being played, by John first and then by Jesus, was not the one they wanted to play. Both John and Jesus preached a message which would turn the world upside down. The problem is not in the message, nor in the messenger; it's in the hearers.

### 11:20-24 - Woes on the cities [Luke 10:13-15]

20 Then he began to reproach the towns where most of his mighty deeds had been done, since they had not repented. 21 "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty deeds done in your midst had been

done in Tyre and Sidon, they would long ago have repented in sackcloth and ashes. 22 But I tell you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you. 23 And as for you, Capernaum: 'Will you be exalted to heaven? You will go down to the netherworld.' For if the mighty deeds done in your midst had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. 24 But I tell you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom on the day of judgment than for you."

The connection with the previous section is probably that the cities Jesus mentions which did not listen to his words or accept his deeds, are like the children who would not mourn or play. Corazin and Bethsaida are worse than Tyre and Sidon. And his hometown of Capernaum is worse than Sodom. They did not repent either, but they didn't have the benefit of Jesus, so it will be worse for Corazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum.

#### 11:25-30 - Praise for the Father [Mark 3:23-27; Luke 10:21-22]

25 At that time Jesus said in reply, "I give praise to you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for although you have hidden these things from the wise and the learned you have revealed them to the childlike. 26 Yes, Father, such has been your gracious will. 27 All things have been handed over to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son wishes to reveal him. 28 "Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and you will find rest for your selves. 30 For my yoke is easy, and my burden light."

The cities mentioned in the previous section rejected Jesus. Jesus praises God for having hidden these things from the wise and learned (perhaps Scribes and Pharisees in those cities) and revealing them to mere children.

Jesus' claim to exclusive knowledge of the Father and the Father's knowledge of him is regarded by some commentators as the basis for all of Christology (the study of who is Jesus).

Jesus' invitation to all those who are weary and heavily burdened to come to him may be a reference to people at Matthew's time who were burdened by the dictates of the Pharisees. These will find rest in Jesus. His yoke is easy, and his burden is light.

One scripture scholar has taken the Greek word for "easy" to mean "it fits." Apparently the yokes for oxen had to be carved to fit the particular ox, because as strong as the ox is, the skin around its shoulders is folded and has many crevices. Therefore the yoke had to be carved to fit that particular ox. If that is the case, Jesus is saying to take his yoke upon oneself, because it fits just you; it was made just for you. Jesus, the carpenter, might have carved such yokes.

It's possible that the next two stories which take place on the Sabbath are meant as examples of Jesus light burden and easy yoke, when compared with the Pharisees in these stories, who want to place the burden of Sabbath observance on the disciples.

#### 12:1-8 - Plucking grain on the Sabbath [Mark 2:23-28; Luke 6:1-5]

1 At that time Jesus was going through a field of grain on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick the heads of grain and eat them. 2 When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, "See, your disciples are doing what is unlawful to do on the Sabbath." 3 He said to them, "Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry, 4 how he went into the house of God and ate the bread of offering, which neither he nor his companions but only the priests could lawfully eat? 5 Or have you not read in the law that on the Sabbath the priests serving in the temple violate the Sabbath and are innocent? 6 I say to you, something greater than the temple is here. 7

If you knew what this meant, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned these innocent men. 8 For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."

Matthew returns to the story line of Mark, from which he departed in chapter 9, verse 18.

The Old Testament gives a simple commandment to keep the Sabbath holy. By Matthew's time, the rabbis had generated 39 categories of required Sabbath observances in order to fulfill that command, including the prohibition against harvesting. So when the Pharisees saw Jesus and his disciples walking through the standing grain, and the disciples pulling off the heads of grain and eating them because they were hungry, they criticized them for not observing the law which forbade harvesting.

Jesus' response to the Pharisees' accusation was to quote some more Old Testament passages, namely David and his hungry men eating food in the temple which was reserved for the priests, and the fact that the priests had to work on the Sabbath. And he goes beyond the legal arguments to claim that he, the Son of Man, is lord even of the Sabbath.

#### 12:9-14 - Healing on the Sabbath [Mark 3:1-6; Luke 6:6-11]

9 Moving on from there, he went into their synagogue. 10 And behold, there was a man there who had a withered hand. They questioned him, "Is it lawful to cure on the Sabbath?" so that they might accuse him. 11 He said to them, "Which one of you who has a sheep that falls into a pit on the Sabbath will not take hold of it and lift it out? 12 How much more valuable a person is than a sheep. So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath." 13 Then he said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and it was restored as sound as the other. 14 But the Pharisees went out and took counsel against him to put him to death.

The Sabbath controversy continues with the story of the man with the withered hand. Matthew keeps the basic narration of Mark, but cuts out all the personal details such as Jesus' feelings. (Read Mark for a more engaging account of the incident.) Matthew notes that Jesus entered "their synagogue." The argument Jesus uses in Matthew's version of the story is a legal argument; Mark's version is more humanitarian. The legal questions are the source of the controversy as far as Matthew's community is concerned; "their synagogue" and the legalism which existed there is the source of annoyance for Matthew's community.

Jesus counters the Pharisees' accusation, based on legal grounds, with a legal argument of his own. The law would allow a person to take his animal out of a pit into which it had fallen on the Sabbath, so, presumably the law would allow doing good to a human person on the Sabbath.

But the Pharisees went out and took counsel about how to put Jesus to death.

#### 12:15-21 - Jesus as the Suffering Servant [Mark 3:7-12]

15 When Jesus realized this, he withdrew from that place. Many (people) followed him, and he cured them all, 16 but he warned them not to make him known. 17 This was to fulfill what had been spoken through Isaiah the prophet: 18 "Behold, my servant whom I have chosen, my beloved in whom I delight; I shall place my spirit upon him, and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles. 19 He will not contend or cry out, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets. 20 A bruised reed he will not break, a smoldering wick he will not quench, until he brings justice to victory. 21 And in his name the Gentiles will hope."

Because Jesus realized that the Pharisees wanted to put him to death, he withdraws from there; he does not dispute; he just goes away. Matthew, in recording this, sets his audience up for his quotation from Isaiah's Suffering Servant Song. The Servant does not dispute.

Twice in the passage from Isaiah, the Gentiles are mentioned as recipients of the Servant's ministry and sacrifice. That must have felt good to the large Gentile population of Matthew's community. Matthew has captured the theme of the meekness and gentleness of the Servant, which is more important than his suffering. Again, the mention of the Gentiles sharing in the meekness and gentleness of the Servant would have felt good to the Gentile members of Matthew's community.

#### 12:22-32 - Jesus and Beelzebul [Mark 3:22-30; Luke 11:14-15]

22 Then they brought to him a demoniac who was blind and mute. He cured the mute person so that he could speak and see. 23 All the crowd was astounded, and said, "Could this perhaps be the Son of David?" 24 But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, "This man drives out demons only by the power of Beelzebul, the prince of demons." 25 But he knew what they were thinking and said to them, "Every kingdom divided against itself will be laid waste, and no town or house divided against itself will stand. 26 And if Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself; how, then, will his kingdom stand? 27 And if I drive out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your own people 18 drive them out? Therefore they will be your judges. 28 But if it is by the Spirit of God that I drive out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. 29 How can anyone enter a strong man's house and steal his property, unless he first ties up the strong man? Then he can plunder his house. 30 Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters. 31 Therefore, I say to you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. 32 And whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven; but whoever speaks against the holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.

When Jesus is accused of casting out devils because he is the prince of devils, he uses simple logic to refute the charge. A house divided cannot stand. But, he counters, if he casts out devils by the Spirit of God, then the power of God must be among you. And, he continues, by whom do "your people" drive out devils.

But if a strong man (the devil) is overcome by a stronger one (Jesus), then the kingdom of God is among you. The point: in Jesus ministry the Kingdom of God has been inaugurated.

Then Matthew's Jesus says something one author described as very un-ecumenical: "Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters." [Of course, in Mark 9:40 and Luke 9:50 Jesus says just the opposite: "Whoever is not against you is for you."] But for Matthew's church, the persistent harassing of the people from "their synagogue" might have warranted such a comment from Jesus.

Jesus says that every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven except blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. Since the Pharisees called the exorcism of Jesus evil, and in fact it was the work of the Holy Spirit, the Pharisees will never be able to embrace the ministry of Jesus, because they think it is evil. Human beings cannot move toward anything unless they see in it something that is good, at least good for them. So the sin can never be forgiven because it can't be repented.

#### 12:33-37 - Good tree, good fruit [Luke 6:43-45]

33 "Either declare the tree good and its fruit is good, or declare the tree rotten and its fruit is rotten, for a tree is known by its fruit. 34 You brood of vipers, how can you say good things when you are evil? For from the fullness of

the heart the mouth speaks. 35 A good person brings forth good out of a store of goodness, but an evil person brings forth evil out of a store of evil. 36 I tell you, on the day of judgment people will render an account for every careless word they speak. 37 By your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned."

Linked to the preceding episode, the point is that since the "fruit" of Jesus ministry is the expelling of evil, Jesus must be good. Jesus shifts the emphasis to the words people speak. If people speak bad words, it indicates that they are bad. If they speak good words, it indicates that they are good. Does Jesus mean to apply this to the Pharisees who spoke bad words about Jesus' expelling of a demon? For sure, the point is that you can judge a person by his or her words.

#### 12:38-42 - The sign of Jonah [Mark 8:11-12; Luke 11:29-32]

38 Then some of the scribes and Pharisees said to him, "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you." 39 He said to them in reply, "An evil and unfaithful generation seeks a sign, but no sign will be given it except the sign of Jonah the prophet. 40 Just as Jonah was in the belly of the whale three days and three nights, so will the Son of Man be in the heart of the earth three days and three nights. 41 At the judgment, the men of Nineveh will arise with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and there is something greater than Jonah here. 42 At the judgment the queen of the south will arise with this generation and condemn it, because she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and there is something greater than Solomon here.

The Book of Jonah is not an historical book. It is part of the section of the bible which contains the books of the prophets; it's a prophetic book in allegory. If the bible is a library, the Book of Jonah is in the humor section. But Matthew and Jesus seem to take the book quite literally. So Jesus says that the sign of Jonah is that he (Jesus) will be in the tomb for three days.

Nineveh and the Queen of the South will rise up to condemn this generation, because Nineveh repented at Jonah's preaching, and the Queen of the South sought wisdom from Solomon. Jesus is greater than Jonah and greater than Solomon.

All this was said in response to some scribes and Pharisees asking Jesus for a sign. They got no spectacular sign from him. The sign which the scribes and Pharisees demand must be something more than miracles; they've seen many miracles worked by Jesus. The scribes and Pharisees want some kind of authentication that Jesus is from God. Back in verse 22, they suggested that Jesus' powers came from the devil. Here they continue badgering Jesus about who he is and by what power he does what he does.

#### 12:43-45 - The return of the evil spirit [Luke 11:24-26]

43 "When an unclean spirit goes out of a person it roams through arid regions searching for rest but finds none. 44 Then it says, 'I will return to my home from which I came.' But upon returning, it finds it empty, swept clean, and put in order. 45 Then it goes and brings back with itself seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they move in and dwell there; and the last condition of that person is worse than the first. Thus it will be with this evil generation."

When the evil spirit is driven out of a person, that person cannot remain empty. The interior space must be filled with goodness, or the evil spirit will return. Jesus says that is the case with "this evil generation," possibly referring to those in the evil generation which asked him for a sign in verse 39. (†)

## 12:46-50 - The family of Jesus [Mark 3:31-35; Luke 8:19-21]

46 While he was still speaking to the crowds, his mother and his brothers appeared outside, wishing to speak with him. 47 (Someone told him, "Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, asking to speak with you.") 48 But he said in reply to the one who told him, "Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?" 49 And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers. 50 For whoever does the will of my heavenly Father is my brother, and sister, and mother."

The appearance of Jesus' mother and family occasion Jesus' pronouncement that his real family is those who do the will of his heavenly Father. Again, remembering that many of the members of Matthew's community, both Jews and Gentiles, had probably lost family ties because of their belief in Jesus, it is clear that this statement was definitely good news.

## **BOOK THREE: DISCOURSE - 13:1-13:52**

### **Parables of the kingdom - Matthew 13:1-52**

This section of Matthew's Gospel is the center (structurally) and the high point. Both the parables and the narratives are about the kingdom of heaven. As we begin to listen to what Jesus said about the kingdom of heaven, remember that the word for kingdom means, "where God reigns, rules and has influence;" it's not a place. And what he says of the kingdom can be heard as something for individuals and for the wider society.

#### 13:1-9 - Parable of the sower [Mark 4:1-9; Luke 8:4-8]

1 On that day, Jesus went out of the house and sat down by the sea. 2 Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat down, and the whole crowd stood along the shore. 3 And he spoke to them at length in parables, saying: "A sower went out to sow. 4 And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and birds came and ate it up. 5 Some fell on rocky ground, where it had little soil. It sprang up at once because the soil was not deep, 6 and when the sun rose it was scorched, and it withered for lack of roots. 7 Some seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it. 8 But some seed fell on rich soil, and produced fruit, a hundred or sixty or thirtyfold. 9 Whoever has ears ought to hear."

It's such a familiar and bucolic story that the punch is often lost. The focus of the parable is not the sower nor the seed, but the soil: foot path, rocky ground, among thorns, and good ground. It's a story about why the hearing of the gospel does not bear fruit in many who receive the word gladly. Jesus' teachings, if observed, would have the power to turn the world upside down. But the obstacles to that happening are not failures to hear the message; they are the failures to allow the seed, the message, to take root and produce a harvest of righteousness. (†)

This is the only one of the parables which does not start out, "The kingdom of heaven is like. . ." But it, too, is a parable about the kingdom of heaven.

#### 13:10-15 - Why Jesus speaks in parables [Mark 4:10-12; Luke 8:9-10]

10 The disciples approached him and said, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" 11 He said to them in reply, "Because knowledge of the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven has been granted to you, but to them it has not been granted. 12 To anyone who has, more will be given and he will grow rich; from anyone who has not, even what he has will be taken away. 13 This is why I speak to them in parables, because 'they look but do not see and hear but do not listen or understand.' 14 Isaiah's prophecy is fulfilled in them, which says: 'You shall indeed hear but not understand you shall indeed look but never see. 15 Gross is the heart of this people, they will hardly hear with their ears, they have closed their eyes, lest they see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and be converted, and I heal them.'

The reason for Jesus' teaching in parables is not to be obscure. Parables are to reveal something. The fault for not getting the message is in the ones to whom the message is addressed,

not in the obscurity of the message. Some simply will not hear. But blessed are the ones who do hear. (‡)

“To the one who has, more will be given” seems to mean that if one opens oneself to receive the word and understanding it, God will increase that one’s understanding. And the opposite will be true of the one who doesn’t open oneself to receive. Jesus concludes by telling his disciples that they are blessed because they have seen.

### 13:16-17 - The privilege of the disciples

16 “But blessed are your eyes, because they see, and your ears, because they hear. 17 Amen, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.

To the disciples it has been granted to see and to hear.

### 13:18-23 - The sower parable explained [Mark 4:18-20; Luke 8:11-15]

18 “Hear then the parable of the sower. 19 The seed sown on the path is the one who hears the word of the kingdom without understanding it, and the evil one comes and steals away what was sown in his heart. 20 The seed sown on rocky ground is the one who hears the word and receives it at once with joy. 21 But he has no root and lasts only for a time. When some tribulation or persecution comes because of the word, he immediately falls away. 22 The seed sown among thorns is the one who hears the word, but then worldly anxiety and the lure of riches choke the word and it bears no fruit. 23 But the seed sown on rich soil is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields a hundred or sixty or thirtyfold.”

There has been much debate about whether Jesus gave the explanation of the parable or whether it was added by the early church. Even the most staunch defender of the position which says Jesus explained the parable has decided that cannot be the case.

Some have assumed that the parable contrasts Matthew’s Christian community with all of Israel. That’s close, but really it is a contrast between the *Jewish Christians*, along with their Gentile co-believers, and those Jews at Matthew’s time who do not accept Jesus.

The explanation given by Matthew’s community is an attempt to understand why some who have heard the “word of the kingdom” do not accept it. The reasons which are given are the evil one’s activity (snatching up the seed which fell on the path), personal shallowness (rocky soil which allowed no depth), and worldly concerns and desire for wealth (among the thorns).

But the amazing thing about the good soil’s receiving the word *and understanding it* is that no one could possibly expect a yield of one hundred or sixty or thirty fold. The seed available in the First Century was just not that good. That’s the punch! The word, if received, will produce so much more than anyone could possibly expect. Perhaps even enough to help believers turn the world upside down. (‡)

### 13:24-30 - Weeds among the wheat

He proposed another parable to them. “The kingdom of heaven may be likened to a man who sowed good seed in his field. 25 While everyone was asleep his enemy came and sowed weeds all through the wheat, and then went off. 26 When the crop grew and bore fruit, the weeds appeared as well. 27 The slaves of the householder came to him

and said, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where have the weeds come from?' 28He answered, 'An enemy has done this.' His slaves said to him, 'Do you want us to go and pull them up?' 29He replied, 'No, if you pull up the weeds you might uproot the wheat along with them. 30Let them grow together until harvest; then at harvest time I will say to the harvesters, "First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles for burning; but gather the wheat into my barn."'"

While there is no parallel passage in Mark or Luke, some say it is Matthew's elaboration on Mark's parable of the seed growing silently (Mark 4:26-29).

Apparently the weeds in the story look very much like the young wheat. In the early stages of their development, one can hardly tell them apart.

Matthew may have included this parable because he realized that his own community was made up of wheat (worthy) and weeds (unworthy) people. Perhaps he thought that even within each individual member of the community there were traces of "worthy" and "unworthy. Patience and tolerance of others and even of oneself are required on the part of all "until the harvest." That would seem to be the meaning which Jesus gives in verses 36 to 43. (‡)

#### 13:31-32 - Mustard seed [Mark 4:30-32; Luke 13:18-21]

31 He proposed another parable to them. "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that a person took and sowed in a field. 32 It is the smallest of all the seeds, yet when full-grown it is the largest of plants. It becomes a large bush, and the 'birds of the sky come and dwell in its branches.'"

While not literally the smallest of seeds, the mustard seed is small compared to the plant which it produces. That's the point of Jesus saying. What's happening now is small but more powerful than you can possibly expect. From these meager beginnings a growth will occur which will allow "the birds of the sky" to find shelter. One scholar thinks the "birds of the sky" represent Gentiles. Of course Jesus was addressing his words to Jews, so the inclusion of Gentiles might also seem more than could possibly be expected.

#### 13:33 - Yeast [Luke 13:20-21]

33He spoke to them another parable. "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed with three measures of wheat flour until the whole batch was leavened."

The point of this story is the same as the mustard seed. Great results come from small beginnings. Three measures of flour could feed a hundred people!

#### 13:34-35 - Jesus' use of parables [Mark 4:33-34]

34 All these things Jesus spoke to the crowds in parables. He spoke to them only in parables, 35to fulfill what had been said through the prophet:

"I will open my mouth in parables,  
I will announce what has lain hidden from the foundation [of the world]."

In the previous verses, Jesus has urged patience and tolerance. This passage is sort of an intermission in the drama which Jesus has been unfolding, an invitation to ponder what he has said.

### 13:36-43 - Interpretation of the parable of the weeds and wheat [No parallels in Mark or Luke]

36 Then, dismissing the crowds, he went into the house. His disciples approached him and said, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field." 37 He said in reply, "He who sows good seed is the Son of Man, 38 the field is the world, the good seed the children of the kingdom. The weeds are the children of the evil one, 39 and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels. 40 Just as weeds are collected and burned [up] with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. 41 The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all who cause others to sin and all evildoers. 42 They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth. 43 Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Whoever has ears ought to hear.

Matthew says that Jesus dismissed the crowds. From here on he is instructing his disciples. His explanation of the parable of the weeds and wheat again is an urging for patience, tolerance and forbearance until the time of fulfillment. But it ought not be construed as a laissez-faire attitude toward the preaching of and establishment and thriving of that kingdom. (‡)

Jesus' interpretation of the parable is this: the sower is the Son of Man; the field is the world; the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one; the harvest is the end of the age; and the harvesters are the angels. At the "end of the age" the final sorting of the weeds and wheat will take place

The parables of the sower and seed which produces 100 or 60 or 30 fold, the parable of the mustard seed and of the yeast point to the power embedded in the inauguration by Jesus of the kingdom of heaven. This kingdom will produce fruit and permeate the world. The preaching of that kingdom will turn the world upside down.

### 13:44-50 - Three more short parables

44 "The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure buried in a field, which a person finds and hides again, and out of joy goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. 45 Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant searching for fine pearls. 46 When he finds a pearl of great price, he goes and sells all that he has and buys it. 47 Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net thrown into the sea, which collects fish of every kind. 48 When it is full they haul it ashore and sit down to put what is good into buckets. What is bad they throw away. 49 Thus it will be at the end of the age. The angels will go out and separate the wicked from the righteous 50 and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth.

Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to a treasure buried in a field. When a person discovers it, he doesn't take the treasure out of the field; he sells all he has and buys the whole field. Perhaps this is related to Matthew's community. The treasure is there, but you have to buy the whole thing if you want the treasure. This is probably another allusion to the fact that in that field (the community) are weeds as well as wheat.

The kingdom of heaven is a merchant's search for fine pearls. Again, when he finds one of great price, he sells all his has and buys that pearl.

The kingdom of heaven is like a net thrown into the sea which gathers all sorts of fish. Again, a mixed bag. But not until the end of the age will things be sorted out.

In these parables Jesus again indicates that for all the power which exists in the kingdom of heaven as the result of his life and preaching, tolerance, patience and forbearance are necessary until the end of the age. (‡)

13:51-52 - Do you get it?

51“Do you understand all these things?” They answered, “Yes.” 52 And he replied, “Then every scribe who has been instructed in the kingdom of heaven is like the head of a household who brings from his storeroom both the new and the old.” 53When Jesus finished these parables, he went away from there.

This passage is thought to be Matthew’s signature on the gospel. He is a householder who can bring forth from his storehouse both the old and the new.

13:53 - Transition

53When Jesus finished these parables, he went away from there.

This brings to a conclusion the teaching segment of the third book in Matthew’s Gospel.



## BOOK FOUR: NARRATIVE - 13:53- 17:27

Various authors give various names to this section of Matthew's Gospel, but they all seem to agree that a new section begins with chapter 13, verse 53.

13:53-58 - Jesus rejected at home [Mark 6:1-6; Luke 4:16-30]

53 When Jesus finished these parables, he went away from there. 54 He came to his native place and taught the people in their synagogue. They were astonished and said, "Where did this man get such wisdom and mighty deeds? 55 Is he not the carpenter's son? Is not his mother named Mary and his brothers James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas? 56 Are not his sisters all with us? Where did this man get all this?" 57 And they took offense at him. But Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor except in his native place and in his own house." 58 And he did not work many mighty deeds there because of their lack of faith.

Note again that Matthew changes Mark's designation from "the" synagogue to "their" synagogue.

Earlier it was mentioned that Matthew seems at times to be embarrassed by Mark's narratives. In this short section, that becomes more evident. Mark wrote that Jesus was a carpenter; Matthew changes that to he was a "son of a carpenter." Mark wrote that Jesus was the son of Mary; Matthew changed it to "Is not his mother named Mary?" Since lineage is traced through the father, Matthew may have thought Mark's statement that Jesus was the son of a woman was belittling of Jesus. Mark wrote that Jesus *could not* work many mighty deeds there because of their lack of faith; Matthew wrote that Jesus *did not* work many mighty signs there, removing any thought that Jesus was limited by people's lack of faith. Mark wrote that Jesus was *amazed* at the people's lack of faith; Matthew omits that bit entirely, possibly thinking that Jesus could not be amazed. Basically, Matthew cleans up Mark's story in order to protect Jesus' reputation.

Both Matthew and Mark note that the people took offense at Jesus, and the quotation that a prophet is not without honor except in his own country. Neither evangelist explains exactly why people took offense at Jesus; perhaps it's all a matter of familiarity breeds contempt. The people saw the kid grow up as an ordinary kid, and he returns home and seems to them to be sort of pretentious, teaching in the synagogue; perhaps Jesus never did that when he lived there before his public ministry began.

14:1-2 - Herod's opinion concerning Jesus [Mark 6:14-16]

1 At that time Herod the tetrarch heard of the reputation of Jesus 2 and said to his servants, "This man is John the Baptist. He has been raised from the dead; that is why mighty powers are at work in him."

Matthew shortens Mark's narrative. Herod Antipas is the son of Herod the Great. He is called a tetrarch. The word means "ruler of a quarter," because he received only a quarter of his father's kingdom. Herod expresses the opinion that Jesus is John the Baptist risen from the dead.

14:3-12 - Herod gives a party; the death of John the Baptist [Mark 6:17-29; Luke 3:19-20;]

3 Now Herod had arrested John, bound [him], and put him in prison on account of Herodias,[c] the wife of his brother Philip, 4 for John had said to him, “It is not lawful for you to have her.” 5 Although he wanted to kill him, he feared the people, for they regarded him as a prophet. 6 But at a birthday celebration for Herod, the daughter of Herodias performed a dance before the guests and delighted Herod 7 so much that he swore to give her whatever she might ask for. 8 Prompted by her mother, she said, “Give me here on a platter the head of John the Baptist.” 9 The king was distressed, but because of his oaths and the guests who were present, he ordered that it be given, 10 and he had John beheaded in the prison. 11 His head was brought in on a platter and given to the girl, who took it to her mother. 12 His disciples came and took away the corpse and buried him; and they went and told Jesus.

In Matthew’s version of the story, Herod feared the people because they regarded John as a prophet, not John himself; and that’s why he kept John in prison instead of killing him outright. In Matthew’s version of the story the blame for John’s death is more clearly on Herod, rather on the instigation of Herodias and her daughter. Luke tells us that the party Herod threw was for the important people in his kingdom. Matthew doesn’t give that information, but notes that because of Herod’s oath and the guests, he did what the girl and her mother had asked.

14:13- 21 - Jesus gives a party; feeding five thousand [Mark 6:30-44; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-13]

13 When Jesus heard of it, he withdrew in a boat to a deserted place by himself. The crowds heard of this and followed him on foot from their towns. 14 When he disembarked and saw the vast crowd, his heart was moved with pity for them, and he cured their sick. 15 When it was evening, the disciples approached him and said, “This is a deserted place and it is already late; dismiss the crowds so that they can go to the villages and buy food for themselves.” 16 [Jesus] said to them, “There is no need for them to go away; give them some food yourselves.” 17 But they said to him, “Five loaves and two fish are all we have here.” 18 Then he said, “Bring them here to me,” 19 and he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up to heaven, he said the blessing, broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, who in turn gave them to the crowds. 20 They all ate and were satisfied, and they picked up the fragments left over—twelve wicker baskets full. 21 Those who ate were about five thousand men, not counting women and children.

In chapter ten, Jesus sent the apostles off on a ministry trip. Apparently they have returned, because they are available to take Jesus away.

The miracle of feeding five thousand is the only miracle recounted by all four evangelists. Matthew is following the order of Mark’s Gospel. (One may wonder if Mark went to bed one night feeling sort of clever and satisfied with himself for having put the stories of the two parties one after the other in his narrative.)

Although Matthew doesn’t mention the kinds of guests who were at Herod’s party, he clearly indicates that the guests at Jesus’ party were people who invited themselves, and whom Jesus accepted and was willing to feed. Their inviting themselves caused some consternation to the disciples who wanted to send them home so they could get something to eat. But Jesus told the disciples to feed them themselves.

The way Matthew narrates Jesus’ actions – “taking the loaves . . . looking up to heaven . . . said the blessing . . . broke the loaves . . . and gave them to the disciples to distribute” – would have sounded as familiar to Matthew’s community as they do to us. Although those actions correspond to ordinary Jewish meals, they might have been interpreted as a parallel to the

celebration of Eucharist, especially since the distribution of any fish is missing from Matthew's account. The note that the disciples were given the bread to distribute to the crowd is again Matthew's attempt to "upgrade" the role of the disciples from Mark's narration.

If five thousand men were fed, not counting the women and children, that would mean that perhaps as many as twenty thousand people were present.

What to do with the left-overs? Always a concern for a host or hostess! Matthew's Jesus doesn't give the direction to gather up the left-overs, as is reported in John's Gospel. The crowds represent all of Israel. The twelve baskets represent the twelve tribes.

#### 14:22-33 - Walking on the water [Mark 6:45-52; John 6:15-21]

22 Then he made the disciples get into the boat and precede him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. 23 After doing so, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When it was evening he was there alone. 24 Meanwhile the boat, already a few miles offshore, was being tossed about by the waves, for the wind was against it. 25 During the fourth watch of the night, he came toward them, walking on the sea. 26 When the disciples saw him walking on the sea they were terrified. "It is a ghost," they said, and they cried out in fear. 27 At once [Jesus] spoke to them, "Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid." 28 Peter said to him in reply, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." 29 He said, "Come." Peter got out of the boat and began to walk on the water toward Jesus. 30 But when he saw how [strong] the wind was he became frightened; and, beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!" 31 Immediately Jesus stretched out his hand and caught him, and said to him, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" 32 After they got into the boat, the wind died down. 33 Those who were in the boat did him homage, saying, "Truly, you are the Son of God."

After all the action involved in the multiplication of loaves and the crowd of a few thousand, Jesus tells the disciples to get into a boat and go over to the other side while Jesus dismisses the crowd. Jesus then goes off by himself to pray. This could be a teaching about personal praying. In the multiplication of loaves Matthew demonstrates communal praying in his recounting of the typical community prayer of an Israelite before meals and in the wording which would recall the Eucharist. Here he suggests another kind of praying as part of the Christian life.

(↓)

Matthew follows Mark pretty closely with some significant additions and changes. The wind being against the disciples in their boat might symbolize the resistance the Christian community experienced from "their synagogue." In the midst of that storm, the disciples see Jesus walking on the water. They are terrified, thinking they are seeing a ghost. But Jesus says, "Take courage. It is I. Do not be afraid." If the wind is a sign of the opposition the Christian community is experiencing, these are indeed consoling words. "It is I" translates the Greek "ego emi," which is the name God gave Himself when speaking to Moses in the burning bush. The end of the story indicates that to some extent the disciples understood the message, for they did him homage and said, "Truly you are the Son of God."

Before this act of faith by the disciples, Matthew inserts the story of Peter leaving the boat, walking on the water, beginning to sink, and being rescued by Jesus who says, "Oh you of little faith, why did you doubt?" Where Matthew got this story is unknown; perhaps he composed it himself. But the point which is brought out is that Peter, while having "little faith" still has some faith. This and the profession of faith by the other disciples are in contrast to what Mark writes: "They were completely astounded. They had not understood the incident of the loaves. On the

contrary, their hearts were hardened.” Matthew is again trying to upgrade the profile which Mark has given to Peter and the other disciples.

Perhaps a point to be taken is that the presence of storms for the community does not indicate that Jesus is absent. (‡)

#### 14:34-36 - Healings at Gennesaret [Mark 6:53-56]

34 After making the crossing, they came to land at Gennesaret. 35 When the men of that place recognized him, they sent word to all the surrounding country. People brought to him all those who were sick 36 and begged him that they might touch only the tassel on his cloak, and as many as touched it were healed.

Once again Matthew is cleaning up Mark’s narration. Mark says that Jesus told the disciples to get into the boat and cross to Bethsaida; and he says that they landed in Gennesaret. Apparently that embarrassed Matthew because they didn’t get to the place for which they had set out. So Matthew doesn’t record that they set out for Bethsaida, only that they came to Gennesaret. On the other hand, since Bethsaida is a bit farther inland from the shore of the Sea of Galilee, one might land at Gennesaret and walk overland to Bethsaida.

Matthew continues his story by returning to Mark’s narration. The people of Gennesaret welcomed Jesus, and all they wanted to do was touch the tassel of his garment in order to be healed. And they were healed. In light of the next story, Matthew might have implied that Jesus might have become ritually unclean because the sick people touched him.

#### 15:1-20 - Debate about tradition [Mark 7:1-23]

1 Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, 2 “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They do not wash [their] hands when they eat a meal.” 3 He said to them in reply, “And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? 4 For God said, ‘Honor your father and your mother,’ and ‘Whoever curses father or mother shall die.’ 5 But you say, ‘Whoever says to father or mother, “Any support you might have had from me is dedicated to God,” 6 need not honor his father.’ You have nullified the word of God for the sake of your tradition. 7 Hypocrites, well did Isaiah prophesy about you when he said:

8 ‘This people honors me with their lips,

but their hearts are far from me;

9 in vain do they worship me,

teaching as doctrines human precepts.’”

10 He summoned the crowd and said to them, “Hear and understand. 11 It is not what enters one’s mouth that defiles that person; but what comes out of the mouth is what defiles one.” 12 Then his disciples approached and said to him, “Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?” 13 He said in reply, “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. 14 Let them alone; they are blind guides (of the blind). If a blind person leads a blind person, both will fall into a pit.” 15 Then Peter said to him in reply, “Explain [this] parable to us.” 16 He said to them, “Are even you still without understanding? 17 Do you not realize that everything that enters the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled into the latrine? 18 But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile. 19 For from the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, unchastity, theft, false witness, blasphemy. 20 These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.”

It could seem that this section describes not only Jesus’ debate with the Pharisees, but also Matthew’s debate with Mark. Matthew carefully rewrites Mark in such a way that he remains sensitive to the fact that he, along with some of his community, are Jewish believers in Jesus who

still observe the Torah and parts of the “traditions of the elders,” which made more concrete some of the more general teachings in the Torah and included matters not treated in the Torah. In Mark’s Gospel it seems that Jesus does away with the Torah. For Matthew Jesus does away only with some of the traditions of the elders.

Matthew clearly focuses on two elements: washing of hands and the korban law, both of which are “the tradition of the elders” rather than things in the Torah. The washing of hands was not a matter of hygiene, but of ritual purity. The korban regulations stated that anything one had dedicated to God could not be used for anything else, not even the care of aging parents. The point Jesus makes about korban is that refusing to care for (honor) one’s parents is a violation of the Torah while observing “the traditions of the elders.”

What goes into the mouth does not defile; this is a matter only of ritual purity. Jesus confronts the Pharisees with their concern for ritual defilement while neglecting what would lead to moral defilement. (†) However Matthew does not quote what Mark writes “making all things clean,” because some things in the Torah are designated as unclean. (It’s pretty clear that Jesus did not clearly declare all things clean; the debate over such practices in the First Century Christian community is evident from the writings of Saint Paul and in the Acts of the Apostles.)

Matthew doesn’t include that section from Mark’s Gospel where Mark explains to his Gentile community the various Jewish practices. Matthew has no need to explain that to his community, because so many of them were raised in observing those practices. Mark’s community needed some explanation.

The plant which God will uproot is the Pharisees and their “traditions of the elders,” because God never planted them in the first place.

Peter asks for an explanation of the saying, and Jesus says it’s what comes out of the mouth that defiles; and he lists seven things, and they are all things which come from the Torah. Mark lists twelve, some of which are from the “traditions of the elders.”

#### 15:21-28 - Healing of the Canaanite Woman [Mark 7:24-30]

21 Then Jesus went from that place and withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. 22 And behold, a Canaanite woman of that district came and called out, “Have pity on me, Lord, Son of David! My daughter is tormented by a demon.” 23 But he did not say a word in answer to her. His disciples came and asked him, “Send her away, for she keeps calling out after us.” 24 He said in reply, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” 25 But the woman came and did him homage, saying, “Lord, help me.” 26 He said in reply, “It is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs.” 27 She said, “Please, Lord, for even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from the table of their masters.” 28 Then Jesus said to her in reply, “O woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed from that hour.

The woman’s approach to Jesus is offensive on two counts: first, she is a woman; and secondly, she is a Gentile, and therefore unclean. Mark calls her a Syrophenician, the name of the region in times contemporary with Jesus. Matthew calls her a Canaanite, the name of the region of pagan Gentile from antiquity.

The woman calls out to Jesus, but Jesus does not respond. The reason for his lack of response is given in the next verse: Jesus is sent only to the House of Israel. But the woman is insistent. And Jesus, who said that it is not right to give the children’s food to dogs, is bested in the argument by the woman’s reply that even the dogs get the scraps which fall from the table.

Jesus commends her faith and grants her request. The Jews-first-then-Gentiles motif was simply accepted in the First Century believing community. Since Matthew's community was made up of Jews and Gentiles, the Gentile woman's faith and Jesus admitting her into his ministry validated the make-up of Matthew's community.

#### 15:29-31 - Healing many people [Mark 7:31-37 (sort of)]

29 Moving on from there Jesus walked by the Sea of Galilee, went up on the mountain, and sat down there. 30 Great crowds came to him, having with them the lame, the blind, the deformed, the mute, and many others. They placed them at his feet, and he cured them. 31 The crowds were amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the deformed made whole, the lame walking, and the blind able to see, and they glorified the God of Israel.

Mark records only the healing of a deaf man at this point in the gospel story. Matthew reports many healings, but does not mention anyone who was deaf! (Is he still debating with Mark?) All the people healed in Matthew's account glorify the God of Israel. Some commentators have suggested that the people cured were Gentiles, because if they were Jews they would be reported as only "glorifying God."

#### 15:32-39 - Feeding of four thousand [Mark 8:1-10]

32 Jesus summoned his disciples and said, "My heart is moved with pity for the crowd, for they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat. I do not want to send them away hungry, for fear they may collapse on the way." 33 The disciples said to him, "Where could we ever get enough bread in this deserted place to satisfy such a crowd?" 34 Jesus said to them, "How many loaves do you have?" "Seven," they replied, "and a few fish." 35 He ordered the crowd to sit down on the ground. 36 Then he took the seven loaves and the fish, gave thanks, broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, who in turn gave them to the crowds. 37 They all ate and were satisfied. They picked up the fragments left over—seven baskets full. 38 Those who ate were four thousand men, not counting women and children. 39 And when he had dismissed the crowds, he got into the boat and came to the district of Magadan.

So the question arises: were there two multiplications of loaves, or only two different stories of the same event? The details in the feeding of the five thousand reflect a Jewish milieu; in this story the details reflect Gentile milieu.

The number seven is sort of a Gentile number; reminiscent of the seventy nations of Gentiles. The word for basket in this story is a Greek word, whereas in the previous story of feeding the crowd it is a Hebrew word. As is true in the feeding of the five thousand, the role of the disciples is highlighted as the distributors of the bread.

#### 16:1-4 - The demand for a sign [Mark 8:11-13; Luke 12:54-56]

1 The Pharisees and Sadducees came and, to test him, asked him to show them a sign from heaven. 2 He said to them in reply, "[In the evening you say, 'Tomorrow will be fair, for the sky is red'; 3 and, in the morning, 'Today will be stormy, for the sky is red and threatening.' You know how to judge the appearance of the sky, but you cannot judge the signs of the times.] 4 An evil and unfaithful generation seeks a sign, but no sign will be given it except the sign of Jonah." Then he left them and went away.

The Pharisees and the Sadducees join together to test Jesus. It is unusual that these two groups would work in consort, because they disagreed so violently with one another about such things as the resurrection from the dead. Their common effort here is to oppose Jesus. Matthew says they asked for a sign from heaven in order to test him. The word for “test” is the same word which is used in Matthew chapter four when the devil is going to “tempt” Jesus. The suggestion might be that the Pharisees and Sadducees are equivalent to Satan. The Sadducees had ceased to exist by the time Matthew wrote.

Jesus’ reply is real clever. He basically tells them that they can read the signs of the weather, but not the signs of the kingdom. (These two verses are missing in early manuscripts, and seem to have made their way from Luke’s account (12:54-56) into Matthew’s. How did this happen? [Who knows?])

This section is a throwback to Matthew 12:40, where the “sign of Jonah” is described. It’s as if Matthew were saying to his audience, “I covered this already.”

#### 16:5-12 - The leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees [Mark 8:14-21]

5 In coming to the other side of the sea, the disciples had forgotten to bring bread. 6 Jesus said to them, “Look out, and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” 7 They concluded among themselves, saying, “It is because we have brought no bread.” 8 When Jesus became aware of this he said, “You of little faith, why do you conclude among yourselves that it is because you have no bread? 9 Do you not yet understand, and do you not remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many wicker baskets you took up? 10 Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many baskets you took up? 11 How do you not comprehend that I was not speaking to you about bread? Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” 12 Then they understood that he was not telling them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

This story begins with the simple statement that the disciples had forgotten to bring bread for their trip across the lake. Jesus becomes aware of their consternation and dismisses it; he had already demonstrated that he could provide bread. But Jesus directs the disciples’ attention, not to bread, but to leaven. People use leaven as a good thing in baking bread. But essentially it is a corrupting agent which breaks down the bond which water and flour would naturally form. So Jesus is warning against the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees, that is their teaching as a corruptive influence. It’s strange that Matthew includes Sadducees in his condemnation, because as a party they no longer existed in Matthew’s time. The Sadducee Party was linked to the temple worship, and with the disappearance of the temple, the Sadducees also disappeared. Perhaps they are included here as a symbol of nostalgia for the temple days, which some of the other Jewish groups surrounding Matthew’s community might have still entertained. If that is not the case, it’s strange that anyone would link the Pharisees and the Sadducees, because they disagreed between themselves on so many religious topics.

Again Matthew softens Jesus’ criticism of the disciples which is found in Mark. In Mark Jesus says, “Do you still not understand?” Matthew grants that they have faith, but it is little faith.

#### 16:13-20 - Peter’s confession [Mark 8:27-30; Luke 9:18-21]

13 When Jesus went into the region of Caesarea Philippi he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” 14 They replied, “Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” 15 He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” 16 Simon Peter said in reply, “You are the Messiah,

the Son of the living God.” 17 Jesus said to him in reply, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah. For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father. 18 And so I say to you, you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it. 19 I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” 20 Then he strictly ordered his disciples to tell no one that he was the Messiah.

In Mark’s Gospel, this is the high point. Besides the Centurion’s who pierced Jesus side, this is the only profession of faith from anyone in Mark’s Gospel. Matthew edits Mark’s story, principally by additions.

In response to Jesus’ question, “But who do you say I am?” Peter says, “You are the messiah, the Son of the living God.” Mark has just “messiah.” In response to Peter’s confession, Jesus identifies him as the rock upon which he will build his church. The word for church in Greek means “assembly.” “Rock” is actually a play on the Greek name for Peter; it’s sort of a nickname – you know, “Rocky.”

The gates of hell – death and other opposition – will not prevail over Jesus’ assembly. And Peter holds the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Later in Matthew’s Gospel, we will hear Jesus say that the Pharisees have refused to enter the kingdom of heaven, and they have shut the door to others who want to enter. Peter is the one who will open or shut, he is also the one who will bind or loose, which could mean to lay down rules and make exemptions to those rules, to impose excommunications and to lift them, to forgive sins and not to forgive sins. Whatever is bound or loosed on earth will also be bound or loosed in heaven. This establishes a close relationship of the church on earth with the kingdom of heaven; however, the church on earth is not the kingdom of heaven.

Let’s put a bit of political spin on all this. Matthew’s church is made up largely of Jewish believers in Jesus, but also of Gentile believers. From the Acts of the Apostles, we learn that James was the leader of the Jerusalem church; the Jews in Matthew’s community would probably have voted for James to lead the group. If the Gentiles could have voted for their leader, it would probably have been Paul. So Peter represents a compromise candidate between the extremes of Judaism and Gentile-ism (that’s not actually a word, but you get the point). Smooth move, Jesus!

16:21-23 - First prediction of the passion [Mark 8:31-33; Luke 9:22]

21 From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer greatly from the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed and on the third day be raised. 22 Then Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, “God forbid, Lord! No such thing shall ever happen to you.” 23 He turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are an obstacle to me. You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do.”

(Now here’s a strange thing. In the New American Bible Revised Edition the wording is “Jesus began to show his disciples . . .” The previous edition of the New American Bible wording is “Jesus [the Messiah] began to show his disciples . . .” One of the Greek New Testaments which I have at my disposal (1966) definitely says “Jesus Christ began to show . . .” The other one (1983) doesn’t have that. Neither of my Greek New Testaments is an ancient manuscript; they cannot be appealed to as authentic versions of this sentence; but it is interesting that the designation of “the Messiah” or “Christ” has been removed from the latest English translation. What does that mean? Who knows? Well, the scholars do, but I don’t.)

Matthew says that Jesus spoke plainly of his coming suffering in Jerusalem, his death and his resurrection. It is likely that Matthew is here allowing his resurrection faith to color and influence his narration of Jesus' prediction of the events.

Peter clearly understood what Jesus was saying, and took him aside (he didn't want to criticize him publicly?) and rebuked him, saying no such thing is going to happen. Jesus calls Peter a stumbling block to Jesus' following his destiny. There may be an ironic connection here between Jesus having earlier called Peter the rock, and now a stumbling block.

#### 16:24-28 - Discipleship [Mark 8:34-9:1; Luke 9:23-27]

24 Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. 25 For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. 26 What profit would there be for one to gain the whole world and forfeit his life? Or what can one give in exchange for his life? 27 For the Son of Man will come with his angels in his Father's glory, and then he will repay everyone according to his conduct. 28 Amen, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

This is reminiscent of Matthew 10:37-39. Jesus says anyone who would follow him must deny himself. The word "deny" means "disown." If you deny someone, you disown him or her. In order to follow Jesus a person must disown himself as the center of the universe, and love God with one's *whole* heart and mind and strength; there is no room for self. The disciples must "take up their cross and follow" Jesus. This is not really a reference to the crucifixion of Jesus; it is a proverbial image of suffering.

"Saving one's soul (or life)" means avoiding martyrdom and thereby gaining the whole world. One commentator writes: The sayings express a profound psychological truth that happiness eludes those who seek it directly rather than seeking first the will of God, i.e., what is right. The apocalyptic coming of the Son of Man will reward each one according to his or her behavior.

Jesus said, "I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom." Some say this refers to the disciples' seeing Jesus after his resurrection when the kingdom has been fully inaugurated. Others see it as linked with the following passage on the transfiguration.

The disciples have been with Jesus and experienced his popularity with the crowds; and they have basked in the light and warmth of his popularity. Now he is telling them that he is not going to be popular much longer, and he is not going to protect them from the rejection and suffering he himself will endure. He's inviting them instead to share in it. Now he has really turned their world upside down! (‡)

#### 17:1-8 - The Transfiguration [Mark 9:2-8; Luke 9:28-36]

1 After six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. 2 And he was transfigured before them; his face shone like the sun and his clothes became white as light. 3 And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, conversing with him. 4 Then Peter said to Jesus in reply, "Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." 5 While he was still speaking, behold, a bright cloud cast a shadow over them, then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him." 6 When the disciples heard this, they fell

prostrate and were very much afraid. 7 But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Rise, and do not be afraid.” 8 And when the disciples raised their eyes, they saw no one else but Jesus alone.

Jesus takes his intimates, Peter, James and John, up a mountain. These are the same three he chooses to accompany him in the garden before his passion. Jesus is transformed before their eyes. Moses and Elijah appear with Jesus; these represent the Law and the prophets. Matthew’s description of the event mirrors the experience of Moses on Mount Sinai. Moses face shown like the sun; so does Jesus’ face. It is Matthew’s way of saying to “their synagogue” that Jesus inherits and fulfills the Law and the prophets, the heritage of Israel; he does not abrogate them. Peter says that it is good that they were there, and offers to build three tents, one for Moses, one for Elijah and one for Jesus.

Apparently Peter wants to show that Jesus is on a par the with Law-giver and the prophet. But the voice from the cloud assures the disciples that it is Jesus to whom they must listen. He’s more than the Law and the prophets. This is probably part of Matthew arguing with the Jewish leaders of “their synagogue.” Peter addresses Jesus as “Lord,” rather than Mark’s “rabbi.” Again, this is probably done to distance the Christian community from the Jewish community.

The voice from the cloud corrects Peter’s assumption (turns it upside down?) that Jesus is equal to the Law-giver and the prophet. The voice says, as was said at his baptism, “This is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to *him*.” That scared the three disciples. But Jesus came to them and touched them and told them not to be afraid.

#### 17:9-13 - The coming of Elijah [Mark 9:9-13]

9 As they were coming down from the mountain, Jesus charged them, “Do not tell the vision to anyone until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.” 10 Then the disciples asked him, “Why do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?” 11 He said in reply, “Elijah will indeed come and restore all things; 12 but I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him but did to him whatever they pleased. So also will the Son of Man suffer at their hands.” 13 Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist.

Jesus commands silence about the vision the disciples have had “until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead.” Having had a vision of Jesus with Moses and Elijah, the disciples ask Jesus why the scribes say that Elijah must come first. What they meant by “first” is unclear, but it probably means before the Son of Man has been raised from the dead. Jesus responds that Elijah has already come; he has already identified John the Baptist as Elijah in 11:14. And the disciples got what he meant.

#### 17:14-20 - Healing of the possessed boy [Mark 9:14-29; Luke 9:37-43]

14 When they came to the crowd a man approached, knelt down before him, 15 and said, “Lord, have pity on my son, for he is a lunatic and suffers severely; often he falls into fire, and often into water. 16 I brought him to your disciples, but they could not cure him.” 17 Jesus said in reply, “O faithless and perverse generation, how long will I be with you? How long will I endure you? Bring him here to me.” 18 Jesus rebuked him and the demon came out of him, and from that hour the boy was cured. 19 Then the disciples approached Jesus in private and said, “Why could we not drive it out?” 20 He said to them, “Because of your little faith. Amen, I say to you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.”

Matthew has greatly shortened Mark's account of the incident, because he's not interested in the details; he just wants to show again who Jesus is. The father of the boy shows his faith by prostrating in front of Jesus and calling him "Lord," instead of Mark's "Rabbi." (Remember, Matthew was not enamored of those who were called "Rabbi" in "their synagogue.") The father says that his son is a "lunatic" or "moonstruck." The Greek word Matthew uses is also used to describe epilepsy. Here it is understood that he is such because he is possessed by a demon.

The father says he brought his boy to the disciples, but they could not cure him. Jesus response to hearing that is, "O faithless and perverse generation, how long will I be with you? How long will I endure you?" No one quite knows to whom Jesus addresses these words. He usually calls his disciples men of "little faith" not "faithless." The father of the boy has already indicated his faith by prostrating himself before Jesus and calling him "Lord." So, to whom does Jesus address these words? Commentators suggest that it's addressed to neither the disciples nor the father of the boy, but generally to the Jews of "their synagogue" who do not believe what Matthew's community believes about Jesus.

Mark's version of the story focuses on the boy's father's faith; Matthew has changed the focus to the disciples' little faith. But the assurance remains that even a little faith can move mountains.

17:21 has been deleted from the bible because it is thought to have been inserted by a scribe somewhere along the way.

17:22-23 - The second prediction of the passion [Mark 9:30-32; Luke 9:43-45]

22 As they were gathering in Galilee, Jesus said to them, "The Son of Man is to be handed over to men, 23 and they will kill him, and he will be raised on the third day." And they were overwhelmed with grief.

This is very short and to the point. Matthew changes Mark's description of the disciples' reaction to Jesus' words. Mark says they did not understand; Matthew says they were grieved at hearing Jesus' words.

17:24-27 - The temple tax

24 When they came to Capernaum, the collectors of the temple tax approached Peter and said, "Doesn't your teacher pay the temple tax?" 25 "Yes," he said. When he came into the house, before he had time to speak, Jesus asked him, "What is your opinion, Simon? From whom do the kings of the earth take tolls or census tax? From their subjects or from foreigners?" 26 When he said, "From foreigners," Jesus said to him, "Then the subjects are exempt. 27 But that we may not offend them, go to the sea, drop in a hook, and take the first fish that comes up. Open its mouth and you will find a coin worth twice the temple tax. Give that to them for me and for you."

This puzzling episode is found only in Matthew. Matthew may be referring to something in the life of Jesus, with no connection to his own contemporary situation. The temple no longer existed at Matthew's time. There are all sorts of suggestions about what this might refer to at the time Matthew was writing, but there is no consensus on the matter. Taken as a story relating to Jesus' earthly existence, Jesus words might refer to himself as the Son of God, and therefore he would have no need to pay a temple tax since the temple is the house of God.

After the destruction of the temple and the occupation of the country by the Romans, they continued to collect the temple tax, but diverted it to the upkeep of the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus in Rome.

In terms of Matthew's story about Jesus's ordering Peter to pay the temple tax, it may have related to the tax collected at Matthew's time, even though it did not go any longer to the Jerusalem temple but to a Roman one. If the Jews who believed in Jesus did not continue to pay the temple tax they might have scandalized their fellow Jews in "their synagogue," and thereby invite more animosity from that group.

## BOOK FOUR: DISCOURSE - 18:1-35

18:1-5 - True greatness [Mark 9:33-37; Luke 9:46-48; see also Matthew 20:20-28]

1 At that time the disciples approached Jesus and said, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” 2 He called a child over, placed it in their midst, 3 and said, “Amen, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. 4 Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. 5 And whoever receives one child such as this in my name receives me.

Here again Matthew cleans up Mark. In Mark the disciples were arguing about who was the greatest; Matthew has them just asking the question. The disciples appear in a better light in Matthew than they do in Mark.

To the disciples’ question about who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven, Jesus called a little child over and stood the child in the midst of the disciples. Jesus said that unless one became as a little child one would not enter the kingdom of heaven, that is, would not have the reign, rule or influence of God in their lives.

The Greek word Matthew uses for “child” means a person under the age of twelve. Such a person was not regarded even as a person in the First Century. A child had no status nor legal standing. A child was a nobody.

Returning to chapter 5, verse 3, where Matthew’s Jesus says that the poor in spirit are blessed because theirs is the kingdom of heaven, this meaning of child might metaphorically include even those older than twelve who have nothing and no one upon which or whom to depend other than God.

The argument about greatness perhaps already had ramifications for Matthew’s church. The values which surround the church community almost inevitably infect the values within the church. Among those values from outside would be the rise of ambition for administrative positions. Jesus’ holding up the little child as the model for discipleship indicates that the greatest in the church are the humble who depend on God and are open to God’s rule, rather than those who might wish to rule in a human community. (‡)

18:6-9 - Temptations to sin [Mark 9:42-48; Luke 9:49-50, 17:1-2]

6 “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. 7 Woe to the world because of things that cause sin! Such things must come, but woe to the one through whom they come! 8 If your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter into life maimed or crippled than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into eternal fire. 9 And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter into life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into fiery Gehenna.

Taking off on the theme of “child,” Matthew’s Jesus continues that it will be really bad for anyone who causes one of these little ones to sin, and says woe to those through whom sin enters the world. It would be better to lose a hand or foot or eye than to introduce sin into the community. The point would seem to be that causing scandal within the community is a really bad thing to do. (‡)

## 18:10-14 - Parable of the lost sheep [Luke 15:3-7]

10 “See that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that their angels in heaven always look upon the face of my heavenly Father. [11 ] 12 What is your opinion? If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them goes astray, will he not leave the ninety-nine in the hills and go in search of the stray? 13 And if he finds it, amen, I say to you, he rejoices more over it than over the ninety-nine that did not stray. 14 In just the same way, it is not the will of your heavenly Father that one of these little ones be lost.

However, if members of the community did sin (sheep gone astray), they would have the special care of the shepherd, who would seek them out and rejoice over finding them.

18:11- This verse is excluded from the gospel now, on the supposition that it was not Matthew’s writing, but an addition by a scribe somewhere along the way.

## 18:15-18 - Procedures for dealing with sin

15 “If your brother sins [against you], go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have won over your brother. 16 If he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, so that ‘every fact may be established on the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ 17 If he refuses to listen to them, tell the church. If he refuses to listen even to the church, then treat him as you would a Gentile or a tax collector. 18 Amen, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

Everything Jesus says is sort of a legal procedure for the community to follow. First, privately confront the one who has done wrong; if that doesn’t bring about change, go with two or three others to convince the erring one to repent. If that doesn’t work, bring the matter before the whole local community. And if the person will not listen to the community, let the person be regarded as a Gentile or a tax collector. In other words let that person be excommunicated. (Which is sort of ironic, since Matthew records that Jesus hung around with tax collectors, and even called one of them to be an apostle; and he granted favors to Gentiles.)

Jesus goes on to give instructions again, as he did in 16:19, about the power of binding and loosing. In the previous episode, only Peter is granted the power of binding and loosing. Here it seems to be given to the whole local community. Jesus then moves on to the community praying for things.

## 18:19-20 - Praying for things

19 Again, [amen,] I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything for which they are to pray, it shall be granted to them by my heavenly Father. 20 For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.”

Scholars debate about whether this ought to be understood as part of the topic of dealing with a community member who has sinned, or should it be considered a change of topic. The word used for “anything” in the New American Bible Revised is a translation of the Greek words *pantos pragmatos* which would mean “every thing.” *Pragmatos* can also mean simply a “thing” or

“case.” Jesus’ words could be understood, “If two of you on earth agree on any case for which they are to pray, it shall be granted to them by my heavenly Father.” [Who knows?]

On the assumption that the meaning is related to dealing with “church matters,” the statement means that the community ought to be praying about decisions regarding its members who have sinned, not simply being juridical about them. Then the statement about Jesus being present where two or three agree on asking for *pantos pagmatos* and it being granted, would mean a resolution for the case which is being decided about the sinning member of the community.

Otherwise, it seems like an abrupt change of topic. [Who knows?]

#### 18:21-35 - The unforgiving servant [Luke 17:4]

21 Then Peter approaching asked him, “Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive him? As many as seven times?” 22 Jesus answered, “I say to you, not seven times but seventy-seven times. 23 That is why the kingdom of heaven may be likened to a king who decided to settle accounts with his servants. 24 When he began the accounting, a debtor was brought before him who owed him a huge amount. 25 Since he had no way of paying it back, his master ordered him to be sold, along with his wife, his children, and all his property, in payment of the debt. 26 At that, the servant fell down, did him homage, and said, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back in full.’ 27 Moved with compassion the master of that servant let him go and forgave him the loan. 28 When that servant had left, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a much smaller amount. He seized him and started to choke him, demanding, ‘Pay back what you owe.’ 29 Falling to his knees, his fellow servant begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.’ 30 But he refused. Instead, he had him put in prison until he paid back the debt. 31 Now when his fellow servants saw what had happened, they were deeply disturbed, and went to their master and reported the whole affair. 32 His master summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you your entire debt because you begged me to. 33 Should you not have had pity on your fellow servant, as I had pity on you?’ 34 Then in anger his master handed him over to the torturers until he should pay back the whole debt. 35 So will my heavenly Father do to you, unless each of you forgives his brother from his heart.”

Some say this parable is inserted here, but really does not belong here in the flow of the narration, which was an answer to Peter’s question about how often to forgive. However, if the previous story is about praying over the matter of a community member who has sinned and therefore needs forgiveness, this parable fits the context very well.

So, Peter wants to know how often he should forgive [the sinning member of the community?]. As often as seven times? And Jesus’ reply suggests there is no limit to the number of times forgiveness must be offered. In Jesus’ response to Peter’s question about forgiving seven times, Jesus says you must forgive seventy-seven times. There may be intended here a reversal of the story in Genesis 4:24 about Lamech, who boasted that although Cain might be avenged sevenfold, Lamech would seek vengeance for offences seventy-sevenfold. And then Jesus tells the parable.

If, indeed, this is part of Matthew’s dealing with affairs of his community, it could be a warning to the members of the community who were unwilling to forgive the sinning member we learned about in 18:15-18.



## BOOK FIVE: NARRATIVE - 19:1-21:27

Although different scholars name this section in different ways, they all seem to agree that chapter nineteen begins a new section of the Gospel, because it begins with the typical Matthew statement indicating the end of a discourse section of his Gospel, “When Jesus finished these words . . .” But only with difficulty can this section be considered a narrative section, since it contains teachings as well.

### 19:1-12 - Teaching on divorce [Mark 10:1-12]

1 When Jesus finished these words, he left Galilee and went to the district of Judea across the Jordan. 2 Great crowds followed him, and he cured them there. 3 Some Pharisees approached him, and tested him, saying, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause whatever?” 4 He said in reply, “Have you not read that from the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female’ 5 and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? 6 So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, no human being must separate.” 7 They said to him, “Then why did Moses command that the man give the woman a bill of divorce and dismiss [her]?” 8 He said to them, “Because of the hardness of your hearts Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. 9 I say to you, whoever divorces his wife (unless the marriage is unlawful) and marries another commits adultery.” 10 [His] disciples said to him, “If that is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry.” 11 He answered, “Not all can accept [this] word, but only those to whom that is granted. 12 Some are incapable of marriage because they were born so; some, because they were made so by others; some, because they have renounced marriage for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Whoever can accept this ought to accept it.”

Matthew follows Mark, but as always with several changes. Mark’s “crowds” becomes Matthew’s “large crowds;” Mark’s crowd “gathered” while Matthew’s “followed,” a word usually used to indicate discipleship; Jesus was “teaching” Mark’s crowd; he was “healing” Matthew’s crowd. Is there significance to these changes? [Who knows?]

Both Mark’s and Matthew’s Pharisees test Jesus by asking if it is lawful for a man to divorce his wife. Matthew adds “for any cause.” By adding the phrase “for any cause,” Matthew changes the Pharisees’ question as presented by Mark from one about the legality of divorce to the question of the grounds for divorce. Is there significance to these changes?

Moses’ allowing for the possibility of divorce cuts no ice with Jesus. He says that was done as a concession because of the hardness of people’s heart. Quoting Genesis, Jesus says that it is not permissible to divorce one’s wife, bringing the discussion back to the question of the legality of divorce, instead of the grounds for divorce. Jesus makes one exception to this rule: unless “the marriage is unlawful.” The Greek word “pornia” is used here, and many people have tried to make sense of that. The New American Bible Revised doesn’t translate the word literally, but gives the sense of the word in the present context, indicating that if the marriage wasn’t “valid” in the first place, there’s no problem with seeking a “divorce.”

The disciples’ question suggests that getting married without the possibility of getting a divorce later is foolish at best. An inappropriate question, perhaps, but it leads to a discussion of why one might not marry, that is, why one might be a eunuch. Some are born such, others are castrated, and still others refrain from marriage “for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.” This latter reason is often taken to reference the vow of celibacy, or at least its forerunner in the life of Jesus and several, but not all, of his apostles.

### 19:13-15 - The little children [ Mark 10:13-16; Luke 18:15-17]

13 Then children were brought to him that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples rebuked them, 14 but Jesus said, "Let the children come to me, and do not prevent them; for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." 15 After he placed his hands on them, he went away.

Mark wrote that people were bringing children to Jesus so that he might touch them. Matthew writes that "little children were brought to him that he might lay his hands on them and pray." Both report that the disciples rebuked them. After all, children were non-entities in the First Century. But in both gospels, Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me; do not prevent them."

If we ask why this little story was remembered, it is because it is the answer the believing community gave to the question about whether to baptize the infant born of the pregnant woman who was baptized on Pentecost. All of a sudden the community has an infant who is incapable of believing in Jesus, and yet is a member of the community because its mother is a member. Mark writes that Jesus became indignant when the disciples tried to *prevent* the infants from coming to Jesus.

Early in the Christian era, part of the baptismal ceremony was asking the question, "Is there anything to *prevent* this person from being baptized?" This passage from the gospels indicates why the early community baptized infants.

### 19:16-30 - The rich young man [Mark 10:17-31; Luke 18:18-30]

16 Now someone approached him and said, "Teacher, what good must I do to gain eternal life?" 17 He answered him, "Why do you ask me about the good? There is only One who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments." 18 He asked him, "Which ones?" And Jesus replied, " 'You shall not kill; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness; 19 honor your father and your mother'; and 'you shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" 20 The young man said to him, "All of these I have observed. What do I still lack?" 21 Jesus said to him, "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to [the] poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." 22 When the young man heard this statement, he went away sad, for he had many possessions. 23 Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Amen, I say to you, it will be hard for one who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. 24 Again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for one who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." 25 When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and said, "Who then can be saved?" 26 Jesus looked at them and said, "For human beings this is impossible, but for God all things are possible." 27 Then Peter said to him in reply, "We have given up everything and followed you. What will there be for us?" 28 Jesus said to them, "Amen, I say to you that you who have followed me, in the new age, when the Son of Man is seated on his throne of glory, will yourselves sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. 29 And everyone who has given up houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands for the sake of my name will receive a hundred times more, and will inherit eternal life. 30 But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.

Matthew follows Mark's story very closely, except for the touching human parts. Matthew doesn't tell us that Jesus looked at him *and loved him*, probably because Matthew doesn't want to present Jesus as someone who could be disappointed by what someone else did or didn't do. Matthew tells us that the man was young; Mark doesn't. Matthew also changes the part of the exchange between the young man and Jesus in which Jesus says, "Why do you call me good? No

one is good but God alone.” That sounded to Matthew as though Jesus were denying he was God. Oh, Mark, how embarrassing! Matthew changes it to “Why do you *ask me about* what is good?”

Jesus’ response to the man’s question about what he must do to enter into life is “Keep the commandments.” And the man says he’s done that all his life, and asks, “What do I still lack?” to which Jesus responds, “If you wish to be perfect, go sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven.” Jesus switches from the question about what one must do to enter into life, to what one must do in order *to be perfect*. By saying this, Jesus is not suggesting that there is a two-tier set of requirements – to enter life keep the commandments, to be perfect sell your possessions and follow me. Earlier Jesus has said that all are called to be perfect as his Heavenly Father is perfect (5:48). The perfection here is to be found in the following of Jesus as a disciple, for which it will be necessary to sell one’s possessions and take up the itinerant lifestyle of Jesus. And the young man didn’t want to do that and he went away sad because he had many possessions.

Let’s take a look at the mind-set of people at the time of both Jesus and Matthew. Wealth was considered to be a blessing from God, supposedly given by God to people who lived deserving lives. Giving up one’s possessions was tantamount to giving away God’s blessings, and thereby suggesting that the person’s life was no longer deserving.

Once again, Jesus turns that accepted belief upside down in his conversation with his disciples. He says it will be difficult for one who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven; it will be easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle. This is hyperbole. And the disciples were astonished and asked, “Who then can be saved?” And Jesus answers that it is impossible for human beings to accomplish entering the kingdom of heaven, but for God all things are possible. (↓)

So what’s Matthew’s point? Riches were thought to be a sign of God’s favor, and people who are rich come to rely on their riches because riches give power, and power is thought to enable people to accomplish whatever they want. But riches and power will not get one into the kingdom of heaven. Instead riches become an obstacle to entering the kingdom, because people begin to rely on their own ability to get what they want. The kingdom of heaven is where God reigns, rules and has influence. When people think they can manage for themselves, they find it very difficult to allow God to reign, to rule and to have influence in their lives. (↓)

Well, Peter has given up everything, he says, and so he wants a cut of the good things Jesus promises. Jesus’ promise to Peter and the other apostles is that when the Son of Man comes in his glory, they will sit on twelve thrones and judge all the tribes of Israel (none of which existed at Jesus’ or Matthew’s time). And to all others who have given up things Jesus promises that they will receive a hundredfold, and eternal life besides. Mark says that the hundredfold will be now in this life, along with persecution; Matthew’s Jesus makes no such promise.

The saying that first shall be last and the last first is something of a mystery. Perhaps it is setting the scene for the following parable, at the end of which the saying shows up again but in reverse order.

## 20:1-16 - Workers in the vineyard

1 “The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out at dawn to hire laborers for his vineyard. 2 After agreeing with them for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. 3 Going out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace, 4 and he said to them, ‘You too go into my vineyard, and I will give you what

is just.’ 5 So they went off. [And] he went out again around noon, and around three o’clock, and did likewise. 6 Going out about five o’clock, he found others standing around, and said to them, ‘Why do you stand here idle all day?’ 7 They answered, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You too go into my vineyard.’ 8 When it was evening the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Summon the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and ending with the first.’ 9 When those who had started about five o’clock came, each received the usual daily wage. 10 So when the first came, they thought that they would receive more, but each of them also got the usual wage. 11 And on receiving it they grumbled against the landowner, 12 saying, ‘These last ones worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us, who bore the day’s burden and the heat.’ 13 He said to one of them in reply, ‘My friend, I am not cheating you. Did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? 14 Take what is yours and go. What if I wish to give this last one the same as you? 15 [Or] am I not free to do as I wish with my own money? Are you envious because I am generous?’ 16 Thus, the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

This parable is peculiar to Matthew. It is a straight-forward story the point of which is meant to show God’s generosity. It’s only a story, but the story has a flaw. The last group hired says that the reason they are standing there idle is because no one has hired them. Well, the owner of the vineyard has been out five times to hire any who were looking for work, and this last group seems not to have been available until the last visit by the owner of the vineyard.

Might it also be a story aimed at the members of “their synagogue” indicating that the last to be hired (the Jews who believed in Christ) will receive the same reward as those who have been observing the Law all along?

20:17-19 - Third prediction of the passion [Mark 10:32-34; Luke 18:31-34]

17 As Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve [disciples] aside by themselves, and said to them on the way, 18 “Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death, 19 and hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and scourged and crucified, and he will be raised on the third day.”

Matthew follows Mark very closely. He does, however, upgrade the disciples by omitting what Mark wrote: the disciples were amazed and afraid. This prediction is more explicit than the previous ones. We are told that Jesus will be *crucified*, not just *killed* as Mark says.

20:20-28 - Request of James and John; lesson on leadership [Mark 10:35-45]

20 Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee approached him with her sons and did him homage, wishing to ask him for something. 21 He said to her, “What do you wish?” She answered him, “Command that these two sons of mine sit, one at your right and the other at your left, in your kingdom.” 22 Jesus said in reply, “You do not know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup that I am going to drink?” They said to him, “We can.” 23 He replied, “My cup you will indeed drink, but to sit at my right and at my left [, this] is not mine to give but is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father.” 24 When the ten heard this, they became indignant at the two brothers. 25 But Jesus summoned them and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and the great ones make their authority over them felt. 26 But it shall not be so among you. Rather, whoever wishes to be great among you shall be your servant; 27 whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave. 28 Just so, the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Once again, Matthew is upgrading the image of the disciples. Mark tells us that James and John made the request of Jesus; Matthew writes that it was their mother who made the request. The request is the same, namely to sit at Jesus’ right and left; Matthew adds “in your kingdom.”

Mark wrote “in your glory.” Jesus’ response is the same, telling the boys they don’t know what they are asking, and asks if they can drink of the cup he will drink. They may have thought he was speaking about a cup of wine in a banquet. The glory looks good, but the path to that glory won’t be pleasant. Jesus will be cruelly treated and give his life for the ransom of many. The “many” does not mean for some but not for others; it’s a Semitic expression meaning the whole collectivity. But the boys assure Jesus that they can handle that. And Jesus assures them that indeed they will *have to* handle that.

As to granting their request, Jesus tells the boys that it is not his to give, but the giving of the glory they seek is the Father’s prerogative.

The other disciples became indignant at James and John (not at their mother). That invited Jesus’ teaching on leadership. Among the Gentiles, the great ones lord it over the others and make their authority felt. It is not to be so among the disciples. The leaders are to serve, because Jesus did not come to be served, but to serve. (†)

Matthew follows Mark’s narrative structure. The passion is predicted; it is misunderstood; and then Jesus gives a teaching on leadership within the community. And that teaching certainly turns the world upside down!

#### 20:29-34 - Healing two blind men [Matthew 9:27-31; Mark 10:46-52; Luke 18:35-43]

29 As they left Jericho, a great crowd followed him. 30 Two blind men were sitting by the roadside, and when they heard that Jesus was passing by, they cried out, “[Lord,] Son of David, have pity on us!” 31 The crowd warned them to be silent, but they called out all the more, “Lord, Son of David, have pity on us!” 32 Jesus stopped and called them and said, “What do you want me to do for you?” 33 They answered him, “Lord, let our eyes be opened.” 34 Moved with pity, Jesus touched their eyes. Immediately they received their sight, and followed him.

This is the second time Matthew tells the story of Jesus healing two blind men. Matthew has two blind men, while Mark writes about one blind man, Bartimaeus. But apparently both are writing about the same incident in Jesus’ life. And presumably both Matthew and Mark are making the same point. The disciples, James and John and the rest of the disciples hear Jesus’ prediction of his passion and they don’t get it. They think they can see, but they can’t. But the blind man does not ask for glory; he wants to see. And Jesus grants his request. The irony is more obvious in Mark’s account, where Jesus asks the identical question of James and John and of the blind man: What is it you want me to do for you? The disciples say they want glory; the blind man wants to see. In both Mark and Matthew, the formerly blind begin to see and to follow Jesus. (†)

#### 21:1-11 - Entry into Jerusalem [Mark 11:1-11; Luke 19:28-38; John 12:12-19]

1 When they drew near Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, 2 saying to them, “Go into the village opposite you, and immediately you will find an ass tethered, and a colt with her. Untie them and bring them here to me. 3 And if anyone should say anything to you, reply, ‘The master has need of them.’ Then he will send them at once.” 4 This happened so that what had been spoken through the prophet might be fulfilled:

5 “Say to daughter Zion,  
‘Behold, your king comes to you,  
meek and riding on an ass,  
and on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.’”

6 The disciples went and did as Jesus had ordered them. 7 They brought the ass and the colt and laid their cloaks over them, and he sat upon them. 8 The very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and strewed them on the road. 9 The crowds preceding him and those following kept crying out and saying: “Hosanna to the Son of David;

blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord; hosanna in the highest.”

10 And when he entered Jerusalem the whole city was shaken and asked, “Who is this?” 11 And the crowds replied, “This is Jesus the prophet, from Nazareth in Galilee.”

Here’s another of those rare instances when a story appears in all four gospels.

Jesus has been journeying with his disciples toward Jerusalem ever since Peter’s profession that Jesus is the messiah (16:31). They have now reached the villages on the Mount of Olives, Bethsaida and Bethphage, just east of Jerusalem. (Bethsaida’s location can be verified today, but traces of Bethphage no longer exist.) Jesus instructs his disciples to go into the village. Which one? [Who knows?] And they will find an ass and a colt. Matthew then quotes the prophet Zechariah 9:9, which says: “Exalt greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout for joy, O daughter Jerusalem! Behold: your king is coming to you, [a just savior is he,] humble, and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” Matthew omits the bracketed phrase.

Some argue that Matthew’s misunderstanding of the prophet Zechariah indicates that he really was not Jewish after all, because if he were Jewish, he would have understood that the prophet was talking about only one animal. Matthew seems to think there were two, even though no one can imagine how Jesus could have been riding into Jerusalem on two animals.

21:12-17 - Cleansing the temple [Mark 11:15-19; Luke 19:39-48; John 2:13-22]

12 Jesus entered the temple area and drove out all those engaged in selling and buying there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who were selling doves. 13 And he said to them, “It is written: ‘My house shall be a house of prayer,’

but you are making it a den of thieves.”

14 The blind and the lame approached him in the temple area, and he cured them. 15 When the chief priests and the scribes saw the wondrous things he was doing, and the children crying out in the temple area, “Hosanna to the Son of David,” they were indignant 16 and said to him, “Do you hear what they are saying?” Jesus said to them, “Yes; and have you never read the text, ‘Out of the mouths of infants and nurslings you have brought forth praise?’” 17 And leaving them, he went out of the city to Bethany, and there he spent the night.

Again, this is reported in all four gospels, although John presents it at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry.

Jesus went right to the temple, as any pilgrim to Jerusalem would have done; but he goes as more than a pilgrim. Matthew “softens” the image of Jesus by omitting Mark’s statement that Jesus would not allow people to carry things about in the temple. Money changers were required for temple donations, because the pilgrims’ Roman money had to be changed into the coinage which was not profane. The Court of the Gentiles where the money changing and sale of animals and birds for sacrifice was quite large. Jesus must have cut quite a figure to disrupt all the goings-on there.

Jesus cures some sick people in the temple. Their sicknesses must not have made them “unclean” or they would not have been allowed into the temple. The children cry out their joy at the coming of “the Son of David.” This directs Matthew’s readers back to the first line of his

Gospel where Jesus is called the Son of David. When the priests and the scribes saw this, they were indignant, and they could see that this sort of activity would threaten their livelihood. They accosted Jesus, who asked them if they had forgotten Psalm 8, which says that the mouths of babes and infants will sing praise.

That was enough for one day. Jesus left and went to Bethany where he spent the night. According to John's Gospel, Jesus' friends, Martha, Mary and Lazarus lived there. Supposedly Jesus stayed with them.

#### 21:18-22 - Cursing the fig tree [Mark 11:12-14,20-24; Luke 13:6-9]

18 When he was going back to the city in the morning, he was hungry. 19 Seeing a fig tree by the road, he went over to it, but found nothing on it except leaves. And he said to it, "May no fruit ever come from you again." And immediately the fig tree withered. 20 When the disciples saw this, they were amazed and said, "How was it that the fig tree withered immediately?" 21 Jesus said to them in reply, "Amen, I say to you, if you have faith and do not waver, not only will you do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, 'Be lifted up and thrown into the sea,' it will be done. 22 Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive."

Matthew shortens Mark's narrative and cleans it up. Mark narrates sort of a parenthetical remark that when Jesus found no fruit on the tree "it was not the season for figs." That part of Mark's narrative would make Jesus look foolish, so Matthew omits it. In the settings of Matthew and Mark, the fruitless fig tree can be a symbol of the fruitless temple worship, and therefore a condemnation of the leadership of the people, not the whole Jewish race. Luke turns this incident into a parable, rather than an event.

Matthew turns the incident into a lesson on the power of prayer and the need for faith when praying.

#### 21:23-27 - Jesus' authority questioned [Mark 11:27-33; Luke 20:1-8]

23 When he had come into the temple area, the chief priests and the elders of the people approached him as he was teaching and said, "By what authority are you doing these things? And who gave you this authority?" 24 Jesus said to them in reply, "I shall ask you one question, and if you answer it for me, then I shall tell you by what authority I do these things. 25 Where was John's baptism from? Was it of heavenly or of human origin?" They discussed this among themselves and said, "If we say 'Of heavenly origin,' he will say to us, 'Then why did you not believe him?' 26 But if we say, 'Of human origin,' we fear the crowd, for they all regard John as a prophet." 27 So they said to Jesus in reply, "We do not know." He himself said to them, "Neither shall I tell you by what authority I do these things."

This section and continuing on to the end of chapter 23, could be called "The gloves come off." Jesus will be in controversy with the religious authorities and will condemn them outright and through parables. Whoever came up with the phrase "gentle Jesus, meek and mild" never read this section of Matthew's Gospel.

Jesus has already made quite a stir in Jerusalem since his arrival with his actions and his words. Now the chief priests and the elders of the community want to know by what authority he is doing these things. Jesus realizing, one could suppose, that they are not really interested in the question of authority, but are making an attempt to discredit him by making him say that his authority comes from God, so they can accuse him of blasphemy, questions *them* about authority. He asks them about John's authority and where it came from. They are afraid to give an answer,

because they will convict themselves of not listening to a prophet if they say John's authority came from God, and they will come under fire from the people who regarded John as a prophet if they say John's authority had a human origin. So they say they don't know where his authority came from. And Jesus says to them that their interest in authority must be minimal, so he won't bother answering their question about his authority.

## BOOK FIVE: DISCOURSE - 21:28-25:46

### 21:28-32 - The parable of the two sons

28 “What is your opinion? A man had two sons. He came to the first and said, ‘Son, go out and work in the vineyard today.’ 29 He said in reply, ‘I will not,’ but afterwards he changed his mind and went. 30 The man came to the other son and gave the same order. He said in reply, ‘Yes, sir,’ but did not go. 31 Which of the two did his father’s will?” They answered, “The first.” Jesus said to them, “Amen, I say to you, tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God before you. 32 When John came to you in the way of righteousness, you did not believe him; but tax collectors and prostitutes did. Yet even when you saw that, you did not later change your minds and believe him.

Not all parables are allegorical; that is, the characters in the parable represent actual people in real life. But this and the following two parables are allegorical. For Jesus, the characters in his parables represent real people and institutions of his time. For Matthew they may also represent people and institutions with whom and with which Matthew and his community must deal.

This parable of the two sons, which is particular to Matthew, and the two which follow it, are addressed to the chief priests and the scribes of Jesus time, and probably are meant to be addressed to the leaders of “their synagogue” of Matthew’s time.

This parable should not be understood as though the two sons were Jews and Christians, but between two kinds of Jews, faithless leaders and faithful outcasts. (Remember that Matthew’s community were outcasts.) The Gentile members of Matthew’s community can also be included among the believing sinners.

Public sinners, tax collectors and prostitutes, are the son who said “No” but changed his mind. They knew they needed to repent. The leaders, however, thought they were righteous and had no need to change their minds. (†)

### 21:33-46 - The vineyard and the wicked tenants [Mark 12:1-12; Luke 20:9-19]

33 “Hear another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a hedge around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a tower. Then he leased it to tenants and went on a journey. 34 When vintage time drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to obtain his produce. 35 But the tenants seized the servants and one they beat, another they killed, and a third they stoned. 36 Again he sent other servants, more numerous than the first ones, but they treated them in the same way. 37 Finally, he sent his son to them, thinking, ‘They will respect my son.’ 38 But when the tenants saw the son, they said to one another, ‘This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and acquire his inheritance.’ 39 They seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. 40 What will the owner of the vineyard do to those tenants when he comes?” 41 They answered him, “He will put those wretched men to a wretched death and lease his vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the proper times.” 42 Jesus said to them, “Did you never read in the scriptures:

‘The stone that the builders rejected  
has become the cornerstone;  
by the Lord has this been done,  
and it is wonderful in our eyes’?

43 Therefore, I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that will produce its fruit. 44 [The one who falls on this stone will be dashed to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.]” 45 When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they knew that he was speaking about them. 46 And although they were attempting to arrest him, they feared the crowds, for they regarded him as a prophet.

It needs to be remembered that this parable is an allegory, and therefore the various elements can be applied to existing people. The wicked tenants are the *leaders* of the Jewish community, not the whole Jewish race. Following Isaiah, Matthew equates the vineyard with all of Israel, to which Matthew maintains that his community still belongs, even though it also contains Gentiles. The earlier servants sent by the owner of the vineyard (God) are the prophets. And the son who is sent in the end is Jesus. It is not the vineyard which must be replaced; it's the wicked tenants. And the other tenants to whom the master will give the vineyard are not the Christians.

There are parts of this allegorical parable which suggest that, although Jesus might have said something like this to the leaders in Jerusalem, in its present form it was shaped after the death of Jesus (outside of the walls), and after the destruction of the temple.

There's a flaw in the thinking of the wicked tenants; just because they kill the son, they still cannot inherit the vineyard, because the owner is still alive. If the owner didn't destroy them, and if they hung on until the owner died without an heir, then they might be able to inherit the vineyard.

#### 22:1-14 - Parable of the wedding feast [Luke 14:15-24]

1 Jesus again in reply spoke to them in parables, saying, 2 "The kingdom of heaven may be likened to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son. 3 He dispatched his servants to summon the invited guests to the feast, but they refused to come. 4 A second time he sent other servants, saying, "Behold, I have prepared my banquet, my calves and fattened cattle are killed, and everything is ready; come to the feast." 5 Some ignored the invitation and went away, one to his farm, another to his business. 6 The rest laid hold of his servants, mistreated them, and killed them. 7 The king was enraged and sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. 8 Then he said to his servants, "The feast is ready, but those who were invited were not worthy to come. 9 Go out, therefore, into the main roads and invite to the feast whomever you find." 10 The servants went out into the streets and gathered all they found, bad and good alike, and the hall was filled with guests. 11 But when the king came in to meet the guests he saw a man there not dressed in a wedding garment. 12 He said to him, "My friend, how is it that you came in here without a wedding garment?" But he was reduced to silence. 13 Then the king said to his attendants, "Bind his hands and feet, and cast him into the darkness outside, where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth." 14 Many are invited, but few are chosen."

This parable, too, is sort of allegorical. The king (God) is giving a feast for the wedding of his son (Jesus). All the "proper" guests (Israel) have been invited. The king sends out his servants (the prophets) to tell the invited guests that the feast is ready. The feast is ready (urgent eschatological meaning). The invited guests made light of the invitation (there is no urgency). Verses six and seven sort of break up the logic of the allegory. These verses, especially the bit about burning their city, probably refer to the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. The guests originally invited proved not worthy of participation in the feast. The main roads, to which the frustrated king finally sends his servants, were places where the more or less destitute – financially and morally – gathered. (†)

The bad and the good are gathered into the wedding feast; sinners, too, are invited. Possibly this is Matthew's recognition that his community is made up of saints and sinners. The lack of the appropriate wedding garment means that the sinners within the community have not repented. That the initially invited did not respond means they have excluded themselves from the

kingdom. Those believers who have responded to the invitation are warned that accepting the invitation is not enough; they must not be complacent; they must produce fruit (the wedding garment).

22:15-22 - Paying taxes to the emperor [Mark 12:13-17; Luke 20-26]

15 Then the Pharisees went off and plotted how they might entrap him in speech. 16 They sent their disciples to him, with the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, we know that you are a truthful man and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. And you are not concerned with anyone’s opinion, for you do not regard a person’s status. 17 Tell us, then, what is your opinion: Is it lawful to pay the census tax to Caesar or not?” 18 Knowing their malice, Jesus said, “Why are you testing me, you hypocrites? 19 Show me the coin that pays the census tax.” Then they handed him the Roman coin. 20 He said to them, “Whose image is this and whose inscription?” 21 They replied, “Caesar’s.” At that he said to them, “Then repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.” 22 When they heard this they were amazed, and leaving him they went away.

This is the first of four controversies with various Jewish leaders: the Pharisees, the Herodians, and the Sadducees.

Matthew says from the outset that the *Pharisees* were out to entrap Jesus; they are joined by the Herodians. Their question is designed to force Jesus to take one of two positions: it is lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, which would be unpopular with the people; to not to pay the taxes, which would put Jesus in opposition to the occupying Romans. The fact that Jesus is confronted by both Pharisees and Herodians complicates the situation for him, because the Herodians would favor paying the tax; the Pharisees would not favor it. So Jesus is set up to upset one of the groups which is questioning him. Entrapping Jesus is probably one of the very few things that the Pharisees and the Herodians ever agreed on.

Jesus nicely turns the tables on his questioners by asking to whom does the coin for paying the tax belong. The answer is Caesar. (Although there was a local coinage used in everyday transactions, in paying the tax that currency had to be changed into Roman currency, and on the Roman coinage was the picture and inscription of Caesar. So, Jesus says, give to Caesar what belongs to him. Then he adds, “And give to God what belongs to God.” The point Jesus makes is that these religious leaders ought to be as concerned about whether or not God gets God’s due as they are about whether or not Caesar should get his due. (‡)

22:23-33 - About resurrection [Mark 12:18-27; Luke 20:27-40]

23 On that day Sadducees approached him, saying that there is no resurrection. They put this question to him, 24 saying, “Teacher, Moses said, ‘If a man dies without children, his brother shall marry his wife and raise up descendants for his brother.’ 25 Now there were seven brothers among us. The first married and died and, having no descendants, left his wife to his brother. 26 The same happened with the second and the third, through all seven. 27 Finally the woman died. 28 Now at the resurrection, of the seven, whose wife will she be? For they all had been married to her.” 29 Jesus said to them in reply, “You are misled because you do not know the scriptures or the power of God. 30 At the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage but are like the angels in heaven. 31 And concerning the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God, 32 ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is not the God of the dead but of the living.” 33 When the crowds heard this, they were astonished at his teaching.

This controversy is with the *Sadducees* who claim there is no resurrection. They accepted only the Torah, the first five books of the bible, and rejected all the rest. They found no basis for belief in an afterlife or for resurrection in the Torah. For them, when a person dies that person is no more. They must have asked their question with something of a sneer on their faces, because their question was surely going to show that any thought of a life after death, or of a resurrection, was ridiculously complicated.

Jesus does more than answer the ridiculous story of one woman being married to seven brothers, all of whom die without an heir. He simply says that they don't understand the power of God. Then, he challenges the Sadducees on the basis of the only books of the Old Testament which they accept, the book of Exodus in chapter three when God appears to Moses in the burning bush. God identifies Himself as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, all of whom are dead at Moses' time. But, Jesus argues, God is the God of the living, so if God is the God of the patriarchs, the patriarchs must be living.

Matthew takes all the foregoing from Mark. But he adds the last line about the crowds being amazed at Jesus. This is again Matthew arguing with the *leaders* of "their synagogue," while trying not to alienate the bulk of the Jews who are members of their synagogue.

22:34-40 - The great commandment [Mark 12:28-34; Luke 10:25-28]

34 When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, 35 and one of them [a scholar of the law] tested him by asking, 36 "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" 37 He said to him, "You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. 38 This is the greatest and the first commandment. 39 The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. 40 The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments."

This is another controversy with a *Pharisee*, who is a scholar in the law, making him also a *scribe*, one learned in the Torah. The story starts out by saying that the Pharisees had heard about Jesus' silencing of the Sadducees; that would have pleased them. So, this scribe of the Pharisee Party takes up the task of testing Jesus, also on the grounds of what Jesus believes that the Torah teaches. In Mark's telling of the story, it takes the shape of a friendly conversation between Jesus and a scribe. Matthew's telling of the story heightens the tension between Jesus and his questioner, possibly in response to his own feeling of the tension between himself and the leaders of "their synagogue."

In questioning about which law in the Torah was the greatest, the questioner was coming from his Pharisaic background of overdeveloping minor laws in the Torah. In the rabbinic tradition to love God with one's whole heart, soul and strength meant one's will, life and wealth. Jesus quotes the traditional teaching. But he immediately adds another law, this time from Leviticus, about the love of one's neighbor as one's self. This linking of the two commandments of the Law into one marks an advance in the understanding of the Torah at Jesus' time. One could make the case that Jesus linked religious observance and social justice. (↓)

22:41-46 - Question about David's son [Mark 12:35-37; Luke 20:41-44]

41 While the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus questioned them, 42 saying, "What is your opinion about the Messiah? Whose son is he?" They replied, "David's." 43 He said to them, "How, then, does David, inspired by the Spirit, call him 'lord,' saying:

44 'The Lord said to my lord,

"Sit at my right hand

until I place your enemies under your feet"?"

45 If David calls him 'lord,' how can he be his son?" 46 No one was able to answer him a word, nor from that day on did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

This time Jesus starts the controversy. He asks the assembled *Pharisees* the question about the messiah being David's son. When the Pharisees answer that of course the messiah is David's son, Jesus asks how can the messiah be David's son when David himself in Psalm 110 calls him "lord." Well, that shut them up. From then on no one asked Jesus any more questions. Thus ends the controversies.

23:1-12 - Prestige in the community [Mark 12:38-40; Luke 11:37-52, 20:45-47]

1 Then Jesus spoke to the crowds and to his disciples, 2 saying, "The scribes and the Pharisees have taken their seat on the chair of Moses. 3 Therefore, do and observe all things whatsoever they tell you, but do not follow their example. For they preach but they do not practice. 4 They tie up heavy burdens [hard to carry] and lay them on people's shoulders, but they will not lift a finger to move them. 5 All their works are performed to be seen. They widen their phylacteries and lengthen their tassels. 6 They love places of honor at banquets, seats of honor in synagogues, 7 greetings in marketplaces, and the salutation 'Rabbi.' 8 As for you, do not be called 'Rabbi.' You have but one teacher, and you are all brothers. 9 Call no one on earth your father; you have but one Father in heaven. 10 Do not be called 'Master'; you have but one master, the Messiah. 11 The greatest among you must be your servant. 12 Whoever exalts himself will be humbled; but whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

This and the following section represent, not only Jesus' opposition to the behavior of the religious leaders of his time, but also to the opposition Matthew faced from "their synagogue" in his time, as well as the behavior of some members of his own community.

The scribes and Pharisees have taken their place on the chair of Moses, that is, they claim his teaching authority. Some suggest that Matthew's use of the past tense – "have taken" – means that their authority is now in the past. But the admonition of Matthew's Jesus is that his community should do what they teach, but avoid their kind of behavior. (This seems like Matthew's last concession to the scribes and Pharisees and the leaders of "their synagogue.") Many of the teachings of the Torah were observed by the members of the Jewish-Christian community. There's good in the practice of the Torah prescriptions. But do your observing for the right religious reasons, not for show. But the scribes and Pharisees followed more than the Law of Moses; they had a whole body of rules and regulations about ritual purity, originally intended for priests who ministered in the temple. The Pharisees at Jesus' and Matthew's time wanted to impose these on everybody. Their "heavy burdens" Matthew contrasts with Jesus "light burden" back in 11:30.

Phylacteries were small leather boxes which contained small sections of the law inside, and they were worn on the forehead and on the forearm of the devout Jew when praying morning prayer. The tassels were at the corners of the outer garment, commanded by the law, as a way to remember the law.

The honorific titles and signs of prestige which the Pharisees liked and employed are to be avoided by Jesus' followers (and the members of Matthew's community).

## 23:13-36 - Woes [Luke 11:52]

13 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites. You lock the kingdom of heaven before human beings. You do not enter yourselves, nor do you allow entrance to those trying to enter. [14 ]

23:13 - By hindering the spread of the gospel, you lock heaven and you do not enter it yourselves, nor do you let other people enter it. This is contrasted to Peter who was given the keys to the kingdom in order to admit people.

15 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites. You traverse sea and land to make one convert, and when that happens you make him a child of Gehenna twice as much as yourselves.

23:14 - This verse is thought to have been added by a scribe later.

23:15 - You travel around making converts to your way of thinking, and in their enthusiasm for their new membership in your group, they are more ardent than even you are. You are all going to Gehenna.

16 “Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘If one swears by the temple, it means nothing, but if one swears by the gold of the temple, one is obligated.’ 17 Blind fools, which is greater, the gold, or the temple that made the gold sacred? 18 And you say, ‘If one swears by the altar, it means nothing, but if one swears by the gift on the altar, one is obligated.’ 19 You blind ones, which is greater, the gift, or the altar that makes the gift sacred? 20 One who swears by the altar swears by it and all that is upon it; 21 one who swears by the temple swears by it and by him who dwells in it; 22 one who swears by heaven swears by the throne of God and by him who is seated on it.

23:16-22 - You are blind guides making picayune distinctions in the matter of oaths by which you want others to live.

23 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites. You pay tithes of mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier things of the law: judgment and mercy and fidelity. [But] these you should have done, without neglecting the others. 24 Blind guides, who strain out the gnat and swallow the camel!

23:23-24 - You are all caught up on paying tithes on certain things and thinking that makes you holy; but you neglect the really important things like “judgment and mercy and fidelity.” It’s good to pay your tithes; but you shouldn’t neglect the weightier things of the Law.

25 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites. You cleanse the outside of cup and dish, but inside they are full of plunder and self-indulgence. 26 Blind Pharisee, cleanse first the inside of the cup, so that the outside also may be clean.

23:25-26 - You get all caught up in the ritual purity of the outside of dishes, but neglect what is inside: plunder and self-indulgence.

27 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites. You are like whitewashed tombs, which appear beautiful on the outside, but inside are full of dead men’s bones and every kind of filth. 28 Even so, on the outside you appear righteous, but inside you are filled with hypocrisy and evildoing.

23:27-28 - You are like whitewashed tombs. You look really good on the outside, but inwardly you are filled with dead men’s bones and all kinds of filth.

29 “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites. You build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the memorials of the righteous, 30 and you say, ‘If we had lived in the days of our ancestors, we would not have joined them in shedding the prophets’ blood.’ 31 Thus you bear witness against yourselves that you are the children of those who murdered the prophets; 32 now fill up what your ancestors measured out! 33 You serpents, you brood of vipers, how can you flee from the judgment of Gehenna? 34 Therefore, behold, I send to you prophets and wise men and scribes; some of them you will kill and crucify, some of them you will scourge in your synagogues and pursue from town to town, 35 so that there may come upon you all the righteous blood shed upon earth, from the righteous blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, the son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. 36 Amen, I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation.

23:29-36 - You build monuments to the righteous and the prophets, and you say that if you had lived in those days of your ancestors you would not have killed them. But you thereby admit that you are the offspring of those who killed the prophets. And Jesus commands the scribes and Pharisees to “fill up what your ancestors measured out!” This is based on the thought that there was a certain amount of evil which had to take place prior to the coming of God’s kingdom. Jesus says that *he* will send wise men and prophets, and you will treat them the way your ancestors treated the prophets, until the full amount of evil has taken place.

The series of seven “Woes” addressed to the scribes and Pharisees needs to be understood, not only as Jesus’ condemnation of the religious leaders of his time, but also of the leaders of “their synagogue” of Matthew’s time. Matthew has been building up to this polemic throughout his gospel. And now he lets loose. And to the extent to which these woes might apply to his own community members, this becomes an invitation to change their lives.

The summary of all the woes is a condemnation of a life of hypocrisy – when looking good becomes more important than being good. (↓)

23:37-39 - Lament over Jerusalem [Luke 13:34-35]

37 “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how many times I yearned to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her young under her wings, but you were unwilling! 38 Behold, your house will be abandoned, desolate. 39 I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’”

Despite the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees, and despite the hypocrisy of the leaders of “their synagogue,” Matthew’s Jesus laments his rejection by the people he came to love. But one day they will say, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.”

### **The eschatological discourse - 24:1-25:46**

The discourse can be divided into two parts: 24:1-44, where Matthew follows Mark very closely, and 24:45-25:46, where Matthew relies his own sources.

24:1-14 - Destruction of the temple and the beginning of the woes [Mark 13:1-13; Luke 21:5-19]

1 Jesus left the temple area and was going away, when his disciples approached him to point out the temple buildings. 2 He said to them in reply, “You see all these things, do you not? Amen, I say to you, there will not be left here a stone upon another stone that will not be thrown down.”

3 As he was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples approached him privately and said, "Tell us, when will this happen, and what sign will there be of your coming, and of the end of the age?" 4 Jesus said to them in reply, "See that no one deceives you. 5 For many will come in my name, saying, 'I am the Messiah,' and they will deceive many. 6 You will hear of wars and reports of wars; see that you are not alarmed, for these things must happen, but it will not yet be the end. 7 Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be famines and earthquakes from place to place. 8 All these are the beginning of the labor pains. 9 Then they will hand you over to persecution, and they will kill you. You will be hated by all nations because of my name. 10 And then many will be led into sin; they will betray and hate one another. 11 Many false prophets will arise and deceive many; 12 and because of the increase of evil-doing, the love of many will grow cold. 13 But the one who perseveres to the end will be saved. 14 And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the world as a witness to all nations, and then the end will come.

Jesus went into the temple in 21:23, so the controversies and the woes in the last two chapters have all taken place in the temple area. Now he comes out of the temple and goes to the Mount of Olives. His disciples express admiration for the temple buildings. But Jesus tells them that there will not be left one stone upon another. Now, of course, by Matthew's time the destruction of the temple had already taken place. For Jesus it is a prophecy; for Matthew it is an accomplished fact. It was important for Matthew to let his community know that Jesus had foretold the temple's destruction.

The disciples ask Jesus when these things will happen, and what will be the sign of *your* coming and the end of the age. By using the word "your" Matthew sets up the identification of Jesus with the Son of Man in the later part of the discourse. Matthew writes that Jesus said many will come claiming to be the messiah (Mark writes that they will say, "I am he.") Matthew makes it more specific. Jesus says that the things which were expected to accompany the end, wars and reports of war, earthquakes and famine, are not to fool the disciples; the end is not yet. But they are the labor pains which signal the beginning of the end. And they will hand you over and kill you, and you will be hated by all because of Jesus.

Those are the things which will take place outside of the believing community. But within the community there will also be disruption: many will be led astray and will betray and hate one another. There will be false prophets and an increase in evil-doing, so that the love within the community will grow cold. But whoever hangs in there will be saved. The gospel will be preached to the whole world. By writing that last bit, Matthew effectively refutes the expectation on the part of his community that the parousia would happen soon.

#### 24:15-28 - Great tribulation [Mark 13:14-27; Luke 21:20-24]

15 "When you see the desolating abomination spoken of through Daniel the prophet standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), 16 then those in Judea must flee to the mountains, 17 a person on the housetop must not go down to get things out of his house, 18 a person in the field must not return to get his cloak. 19 Woe to pregnant women and nursing mothers in those days. 20 Pray that your flight not be in winter or on the Sabbath, 21 for at that time there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever will be. 22 And if those days had not been shortened, no one would be saved; but for the sake of the elect they will be shortened. 23 If anyone says to you then, 'Look, here is the Messiah!' or, 'There he is!' do not believe it. 24 False messiahs and false prophets will arise, and they will perform signs and wonders so great as to deceive, if that were possible, even the elect. 25 Behold, I have told it to you beforehand. 26 So if they say to you, 'He is in the desert,' do not go out there; if they say, 'He is in the inner rooms,' do not believe it. 27 For just as lightning comes from the east and is seen as far as the west, so will the coming of the Son of Man be. 28 Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.

Those things which Matthew reports Jesus said, had, by both Jesus' and Matthew's time, already happened. The "desolating abomination" refers, as Jesus says, to what the Syrian king Antiochus IV Epiphanes did in I Maccabees 1:54, where it is described that the king set up a statue of Zeus in the Holy of Holies. That activity in 167 B.C. should be regarded as a prophecy of what is to come.

When the abomination takes place, speed in fleeing is essential, but would be difficult for a woman in labor or nursing, or on the Sabbath, since a good Jew could by law travel only a short distance on the Sabbath. This may be a consideration for the Law-following members of Matthew's community. Of what event in the future as far as Jesus is concerned, but in the past as far as Matthew is concerned, is this being spoken? Possibly the desecration of the temple by the Romans in the year 70 A.D.

The faithful are not to be misled by reports that the messiah is in some distant or secret place, because his coming will be evident to all.

#### 24:29-31 - The coming of the Son of Man [Mark 13:24-27; Luke 21:25]

29 "Immediately after the tribulation of those days,  
the sun will be darkened,  
and the moon will not give its light,  
and the stars will fall from the sky,  
and the powers of the heavens will be shaken.

30 And then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming upon the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. 31 And he will send out his angels with a trumpet blast, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other.

Jesus says that "immediately" after those days, the Son of Man will come. But that is a typical way of expressing the certainty of the *fact* of a future event without any assurance about the *time* of the event; just say that it is immanent. Matthew obviously knew that the appearance of the Son of Man did not take place "immediately." He's writing about sixty years later, and it hasn't happened yet. But the Son of Man will come, and his arrival will be obvious. Matthew uses a quotation from Isaiah about the events in the cosmos which will indicate the coming of the Son of Man.

Now that we have looked at all the specifics in Matthew's Jesus' description of the end-time, let's step back and take a look at it all together and receive its message that *the coming of the Son of Man will turn the whole world upside down!* And the kingdom has been inaugurated by Jesus' life, death and resurrection; it's both here already, but also not yet. (‡)

If we are to participate in the coming of the Son of Man, we must be ready for his arrival. Matthew now turns to the need for being prepared.

#### 24:32-35 - The lesson from the fig tree [Mark 13:28-31; Luke 21:29-33]

32 "Learn a lesson from the fig tree. When its branch becomes tender and sprouts leaves, you know that summer is near. 33 In the same way, when you see all these things, know that he is near, at the gates. 34 Amen, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. 35 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

Matthew takes this section word-for-word from Mark. And the whole point is vigilance, because things are going to change, and we must be ready. Beyond vigilance and readiness to read the signs of the times, no one knows what this might mean. When Jesus says that this generation will not pass away until this is fulfilled, no one seems to know what “this generation” means.

24:36-44 - The unknown day and hour [Mark 13:32-37; Luke 17:26-30, 34-36]

36 “But of that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone. 37 For as it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. 38 In [those] days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day that Noah entered the ark. 39 They did not know until the flood came and carried them all away. So will it be [also] at the coming of the Son of Man. 40 Two men will be out in the field; one will be taken, and one will be left. 41 Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken, and one will be left. 42 Therefore, stay awake! For you do not know on which day your Lord will come. 43 Be sure of this: if the master of the house had known the hour of night when the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and not let his house be broken into. 44 So too, you also must be prepared, for at an hour you do not expect, the Son of Man will come.

Some will be taken into the kingdom, some will be left. It probably means that those who are ready will be taken into the kingdom, those who are not ready will be left. Jesus is seldom compared to a thief, but that is Matthew’s simile here. And again the message is “be ready.” (†)

24:45-51 - Faithful and unfaithful servants [Luke 12:41-46]

45 “Who, then, is the faithful and prudent servant, whom the master has put in charge of his household to distribute to them their food at the proper time? 46 Blessed is that servant whom his master on his arrival finds doing so. 47 Amen, I say to you, he will put him in charge of all his property. 48 But if that wicked servant says to himself, ‘My master is long delayed,’ 49 and begins to beat his fellow servants, and eat and drink with drunkards, 50 the servant’s master will come on an unexpected day and at an unknown hour 51 and will punish him severely and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth.

Here begins the second section of the discourse. There is no reliance on Mark in this section. Apparently this part of the discourse is addressed to the leaders of Matthew’s community. The leader is a servant; as all the others in the community are servants. The servant is charged with providing for the other servants. Readiness for the master’s return does not mean one is not to discharge one’s duties until the master comes. The community of Matthew was suffering from the lack of knowledge about when the master will return. But the leaders of the community must discharge their duties until whatever hour the master might return, and must do so as servants. (†)

25:1-13 - The parable of the ten virgins

1 “Then the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. 2 Five of them were foolish and five were wise. 3 The foolish ones, when taking their lamps, brought no oil with them, 4 but the wise brought flasks of oil with their lamps. 5 Since the bridegroom was long delayed, they all became drowsy and fell asleep. 6 At midnight, there was a cry, ‘Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!’ 7 Then all those virgins got up and trimmed their lamps. 8 The foolish ones said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ 9 But the wise ones replied, ‘No, for there may not be enough for us and you. Go instead to the merchants and buy some for yourselves.’ 10 While they went off to buy it, the bridegroom came and those who were ready went into the wedding feast with him. Then the door was locked. 11 Afterwards the other virgins came and said, ‘Lord, Lord, open the door for us!’ 12 But he said in reply, ‘Amen, I say to you, I do not know you.’ 13

Therefore, stay awake, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

This parable is very familiar. And it is allegorical in many respects. That means the hearers are to identify each character in the story with some character in real life. Many have tried to do so, with some interpretations frankly anti-Semitic. That could hardly be Matthew's intention, since he and much of his community were Jews.

All the characters in the story are members of Matthew's community, with the exception of the bridegroom who is the Son of Man, Jesus. They are awaiting the return of the Son of Man. Some are designated already at the beginning of the story as wise; some are designated as foolish. The judgement is passed on them before Matthew tells us about what made them either wise or foolish. From both Jesus' point of view and from Matthew's point of view, all the maidens are the ones who await the return of the bridegroom to his home after he had negotiated the final arrangements with the father of his bride. The foolish, ones who took insufficient oil to provide for an unexpected delay in the bridegroom's coming, are those who lack good works when the bridegroom finally comes. The wise are those who have the oil of good works with them.

In Matthew's eyes, the wise might represent the members of his community of believing Jews and Gentiles, who though having fallen asleep, are still prepared for the arrival of the bridegroom because of their good works. The foolish might be the members of "their synagogue" who have fallen asleep and are not ready to meet the bridegroom. Matthew may also have thought that both kinds of maidens are to be found in his own community.

However one resolves the puzzle of the allegory, the message is clearly stated at the end of the story: "Stay awake, for you know neither the day nor the hour."

## 25:14-30 - The parable of the talents

14 "It will be as when a man who was going on a journey called in his servants and entrusted his possessions to them. 15 To one he gave five talents; to another, two; to a third, one—to each according to his ability. Then he went away. Immediately 16 the one who received five talents went and traded with them, and made another five. 17 Likewise, the one who received two made another two. 18 But the man who received one went off and dug a hole in the ground and buried his master's money. 19 After a long time the master of those servants came back and settled accounts with them. 20 The one who had received five talents came forward bringing the additional five. He said, 'Master, you gave me five talents. See, I have made five more.' 21 His master said to him, 'Well done, my good and faithful servant. Since you were faithful in small matters, I will give you great responsibilities. Come, share your master's joy.' 22 [Then] the one who had received two talents also came forward and said, 'Master, you gave me two talents. See, I have made two more.' 23 His master said to him, 'Well done, my good and faithful servant. Since you were faithful in small matters, I will give you great responsibilities. Come, share your master's joy.' 24 Then the one who had received the one talent came forward and said, 'Master, I knew you were a demanding person, harvesting where you did not plant and gathering where you did not scatter; 25 so out of fear I went off and buried your talent in the ground. Here it is back.' 26 His master said to him in reply, 'You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I did not plant and gather where I did not scatter? 27 Should you not then have put my money in the bank so that I could have got it back with interest on my return? 28 Now then! Take the talent from him and give it to the one with ten. 29 For to everyone who has, more will be given and he will grow rich; but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. 30 And throw this useless servant into the darkness outside, where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth.'

Although there is no parallel passage in Luke's or Mark's Gospels, on the assumption that Matthew had Mark's gospel at hand, this could be an extended commentary on two of Mark's short statements. In 4:25 Mark writes, "To the one who has, more will be given; from the one who

has not, even what he has will be taken away.” It could also be a further commentary by Matthew on Mark’s writing in 13:34: “It is like a man traveling abroad. He leaves home and places his servants in charge, each with his work.”

As if to confirm that the allegorical story preceding this one did indeed have to do with the oil of good works, this parable emphasizes the need for good works. The worth of a talent is not known for sure, but some have estimated that is the amount a person would earn in fifteen years of labor. The point is that it is a very large amount.

Both the “long time” that the master (Lord) will be away and the reference to the “Lord” settling accounts makes this a parable about the last judgement. The point here is that reasonable activity is expected while awaiting the master’s return. The third servant said that he buried his master’s money because he was afraid of the master. The master doesn’t buy that; he blames the servant for being wicked and lazy.

In narrating this parable, what point might Matthew have wanted to make? Here’s a possibility. Both the members of “their synagogue” and Matthew’s Jewish Christian community had been affected by the destruction of the temple and of Jerusalem. Matthew’s community looked forward to the future fulfillment of all that the temple and Jerusalem had stood for. The members of “their synagogue” held onto a static attitude toward religious tradition; they sort of built a hedge around the observance of the Torah and other ritual practices to prevent them from being changed. They could be considered to be like the third servant who buried the talent, while the Jewish Christians of Matthew’s community could be considered the industrious servants who looked forward to a better future and the return of the master.

## 25:31-46 - Parable on Judgement

31 “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit upon his glorious throne, 32 and all the nations will be assembled before him. And he will separate them one from another, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. 33 He will place the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. 34 Then the king will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. 35 For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, 36 naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me.’ 37 Then the righteous will answer him and say, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? 38 When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? 39 When did we see you ill or in prison, and visit you?’ 40 And the king will say to them in reply, ‘Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.’ 41 Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you accursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. 42 For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, 43 a stranger and you gave me no welcome, naked and you gave me no clothing, ill and in prison, and you did not care for me.’ 44 Then they will answer and say, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or ill or in prison, and not minister to your needs?’ 45 He will answer them, ‘Amen, I say to you, what you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me.’ 46 And these will go off to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”

This is perhaps the best known parable of Jesus, and the one needing the least commentary on its individual parts. However, there is much discussion about how the parable as a whole should be viewed. The nub of the question is the translation of the Greek phrase which is translated sometimes as “all the nations” and at other times as “all the Gentiles.” “All the nations” could therefore include Israel, while obviously “all the Gentiles” would not. The corresponding debate concerns the understanding of “one of these least brothers of mine.”

There's good reason to go with "all the Gentiles," and the following commentary will accept that translation of the Greek. This commentary will also accept that the "least brothers of mine" refers to believers in Jesus. That being said, what point is Matthew making by narrating this parable of Jesus?

The question posed might be, "What about the others?" meaning those who are not members of "their synagogue" and those who do not believe in Jesus. The answer is that the others will be judged by the way they treat the Christians, and particularly the Christian missionaries. This may have had special significance for the Gentile members of Matthew's community, whose lives and family ties were disrupted by their coming to believe in Jesus. They don't have to worry about the salvation of their families who do not believe in Jesus, because if they continue to treat the believers well, they will be among the sheep gathered at the Kings' right hand. (‡)



## PASSION AND DEATH - 26:1-27:66

### 26:1-5 - Plot to kill Jesus [Mark 14:1-2; Luke 22:1-2; John 11:45-54]

1 When Jesus finished all these words, he said to his disciples, 2 “You know that in two days’ time it will be Passover, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified.” 3 Then the chief priests and the elders of the people assembled in the palace of the high priest, who was called Caiaphas, 4 and they consulted together to arrest Jesus by treachery and put him to death. 5 But they said, “Not during the festival, that there may not be a riot among the people.”

This is the first of three scenes in the plot to kill Jesus. It features Jesus foretelling his coming death, and the chief priests and the elders assembling with the high priest, Caiaphas, to carry out a plan, but not during the feast of Passover. The Pharisees, who have dogged Jesus throughout Matthew’s Gospel, are conspicuously absent from the plan. The plotters wanted to wait until after the festival, but the offer by Judas may have induced them to act earlier than they had planned.

### 26:6-13 - Anointing at Bethany [Mark 14:3-9; Luke 22:1-2; John 12:1-8]

6 Now when Jesus was in Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, 7 a woman came up to him with an alabaster jar of costly perfumed oil, and poured it on his head while he was reclining at table. 8 When the disciples saw this, they were indignant and said, “Why this waste? 9 It could have been sold for much, and the money given to the poor.” 10 Since Jesus knew this, he said to them, “Why do you make trouble for the woman? She has done a good thing for me. 11 The poor you will always have with you; but you will not always have me. 12 In pouring this perfumed oil upon my body, she did it to prepare me for burial. 13 Amen, I say to you, wherever this gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be spoken of, in memory of her.”

This is the second scene in the plot to kill Jesus. Jesus goes to Bethany to the house of Simon the Leper (perhaps someone Jesus had healed earlier). John says it was to the home of Lazarus, Martha and Mary. The woman who anoints Jesus’ head is not named. Somebody became indignant at this waste of precious ointment; Matthew says it was the disciples; Luke says it was a Pharisee; and John says it was Judas. Well, we can surmise that somebody became indignant.

Jesus defends the woman’s action as a preparation for his burial. Even though Matthew doesn’t name the woman, he says that wherever the good news is preached she will be remembered. Only John names the woman as Mary of Bethany. Because Matthew has this anointing at this point of his narration, he doesn’t mention that after Jesus’ death the women were going to the tomb to anoint his body.

### 26:14-16 - Judas agrees to betray [Mark 14:10-11; Luke 22:3-6]

14 Then one of the Twelve, who was called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests 15 and said, “What are you willing to give me if I hand him over to you?” They paid him thirty pieces of silver, 16 and from that time on he looked for an opportunity to hand him over.

The third scene stars Judas. He asks the chief priest what he would be willing to pay for Judas’ handing Jesus over. This suggests that Judas’ motive was greed. But speculation about his motive remains just that: speculation. Only Matthew gives the exact amount that was agreed

upon: thirty pieces of silver. This is the compensation which the owner of an ox which gored a slave must pay to the owner of the slave.

There's a little bit of irony involved in Judas and the high priest waiting for an "opportune time" to betray Jesus. The woman who anointed Jesus is said to have done so for his burial. She did the right thing at the opportune time.

26:17-35 - The meal [Mark 14:12-21; Luke 22:7-14; John 13:21-30]

17 On the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the disciples approached Jesus and said, "Where do you want us to prepare for you to eat the Passover?" 18 He said, "Go into the city to a certain man and tell him, 'The teacher says, "My appointed time draws near; in your house I shall celebrate the Passover with my disciples.'" 19 The disciples then did as Jesus had ordered, and prepared the Passover.

20 When it was evening, he reclined at table with the Twelve. 21 And while they were eating, he said, "Amen, I say to you, one of you will betray me." 22 Deeply distressed at this, they began to say to him one after another, "Surely it is not I, Lord?" 23 He said in reply, "He who has dipped his hand into the dish with me is the one who will betray me. 24 The Son of Man indeed goes, as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed. It would be better for that man if he had never been born." 25 Then Judas, his betrayer, said in reply, "Surely it is not I, Rabbi?" He answered, "You have said so."

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and giving it to his disciples said, "Take and eat; this is my body." 27 Then he took a cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you, 28 for this is my blood of the covenant, which will be shed on behalf of many for the forgiveness of sins. 29 I tell you, from now on I shall not drink this fruit of the vine until the day when I drink it with you new in the kingdom of my Father." 30 Then, after singing a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

31 Then Jesus said to them, "This night all of you will have your faith in me shaken, for it is written: 'I will strike the shepherd,

and the sheep of the flock will be dispersed'; 32 but after I have been raised up, I shall go before you to Galilee." 33 Peter said to him in reply, "Though all may have their faith in you shaken, mine will never be." 34 Jesus said to him, "Amen, I say to you, this very night before the cock crows, you will deny me three times." 35 Peter said to him, "Even though I should have to die with you, I will not deny you." And all the disciples spoke likewise.

This is usually thought of as the Passover meal. However, it is taking place on what we would call Thursday night; in the Hebrew reckoning that would already be Friday. But the Passover seems to have been on what we would call Saturday, in Hebrew reckoning beginning on Friday night. [Who knows?]

Throughout the passion narrative Matthew portrays Jesus as the one in charge. Events are not happening to him; he knows what is going to happen and he embraces it.

When Jesus tells his apostles that one of them will betray him, they all ask, "Surely it is not I, *Lord?*" When Judas responds, he says, "Surely it is not I, *Rabbi?*" Is there significance in the way Matthew worded this? [Who knows?] In 23:7-8, Jesus has said that no one should be called "Rabbi." And when Judas betrays Jesus in the garden he addresses Jesus as "Rabbi." Jesus' response to Judas at the supper is, "You have said so." He uses the same words in answering to the high priest and Pilate.

Jesus says that the Son of Man goes as it is written of him. There is no exact statement in the Hebrew scriptures that the Son of Man will suffer and die. But it is part of the divine plan. However, Matthew is clear that the one who betrays the Son of Man is not simply a pawn in God's plan; he bears responsibility for his actions.

Matthew follows up this exchange with his institution narrative. As would have been expected during a Passover meal, the host would have taken bread, said the blessing and distributed the bread to the members of the household. The typical Hebrew blessing is “Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the universe, who brings forth bread from the earth . . .” But when he said, “Take and eat; this is my body,” the apostles must have been stunned. And also when he said the blessing over the cup and said, “Drink from it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which will be shed on behalf of many for the forgiveness of sins.” “The blood of the covenant” would have had a familiar ring to it in the ears of the apostles, but *my* blood of the covenant must have been a shock.

The wording Matthew uses in his narrative may have been modeled on an already established liturgical formula used in his community.

After they sang the appropriate psalms for the occasion, they all went out to the Mount of Olives. At the time of the Passover festival, this would have looked like a campsite filled with pilgrims who could not find a room in Jerusalem. It’s actually sort of amazing that Jesus and his apostles could find a room in Jerusalem for their meal.

After the meal they head for the Mount of Olives. Apparently it is on the way there that Jesus tells Peter and the others about their flight and denial.

Most paintings of the agony in the garden seem to show Jesus and his apostles alone in the garden of Gethsemane, which is on the slope of the Mount of Olives. For that to be true, there must have been a privately owned garden, somehow walled off from its surroundings, and not accessible to the rest of the campers on the Mount of Olives.

#### 26:36-46 - Gethsemane [Mark 14:32-42; Luke 22:39-46]

36 Then Jesus came with them to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, “Sit here while I go over there and pray.” 37 He took along Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to feel sorrow and distress. 38 Then he said to them, “My soul is sorrowful even to death. Remain here and keep watch with me.” 39 He advanced a little and fell prostrate in prayer, saying, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet, not as I will, but as you will.” 40 When he returned to his disciples he found them asleep. He said to Peter, “So you could not keep watch with me for one hour? 41 Watch and pray that you may not undergo the test. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” 42 Withdrawing a second time, he prayed again, “My Father, if it is not possible that this cup pass without my drinking it, your will be done!” 43 Then he returned once more and found them asleep, for they could not keep their eyes open. 44 He left them and withdrew again and prayed a third time, saying the same thing again. 45 Then he returned to his disciples and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? Behold, the hour is at hand when the Son of Man is to be handed over to sinners. 46 Get up, let us go. Look, my betrayer is at hand.”

The scene is of Jesus and his disciples, with particular attention paid to Peter, James and John. Jesus’ prayer in some ways echoes the Lord’s Prayer: “Father,” “Your will be done,” “that you may not undergo the test.” For the most part Matthew follows Mark, but he omits a couple of things and adds a couple, all designed to keep the focus more steadily on Jesus, rather than on the disciples.

#### 26:47-56 - Betrayal and arrest [Mark 14:43-50; Luke 22:47-53; John 18:3-12]

47 While he was still speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, arrived, accompanied by a large crowd, with swords and clubs, who had come from the chief priests and the elders of the people. 48 His betrayer had arranged a

sign with them, saying, “The man I shall kiss is the one; arrest him.” 49 Immediately he went over to Jesus and said, “Hail, Rabbi!” and he kissed him. 50 Jesus answered him, “Friend, do what you have come for.” Then stepping forward they laid hands on Jesus and arrested him. 51 And behold, one of those who accompanied Jesus put his hand to his sword, drew it, and struck the high priest’s servant, cutting off his ear. 52 Then Jesus said to him, “Put your sword back into its sheath, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. 53 Do you think that I cannot call upon my Father and he will not provide me at this moment with more than twelve legions of angels? 54 But then how would the scriptures be fulfilled which say that it must come to pass in this way?” 55 At that hour Jesus said to the crowds, “Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs to seize me? Day after day I sat teaching in the temple area, yet you did not arrest me. 56 But all this has come to pass that the writings of the prophets may be fulfilled.” Then all the disciples left him and fled.

It was night, and it was dark. Judas had arranged, with his delegation of temple police, under the authority of the chief priest and the elders, a sign which would point out the right person in the dark. A very clear signal was necessary, because of the large number of campers on the Mount of Olives. Judas said, “Hail, Rabbi,” and kissed Jesus. In Matthew’s Gospel Jesus is hailed as Rabbi only twice, here and in 26:25, both times by Judas. Matthew puts that word only in the mouth of the betrayer. His reason might have been his disdain for those in “their synagogue” who enjoyed being called rabbi. In Matthew’s Gospel the term is related to something and someone very negative.

In First Century Israel, both Judas’ word “Rabbi” and the kiss were signs of respect for someone, especially someone of dignity, rather than a sign of friendship. However, Jesus addresses Judas as “Friend, do what you have come for.” They laid hands on Jesus and arrested him. Someone – one of those who accompanied Jesus (in Matthew), one of the bystanders (in Mark), one of them (in Luke), and (in John) Peter – drew a sword and cut off the ear of the high priest’s servant. Only Luke reports that Jesus healed the servant. (But, then, Luke was a physician.) Jesus objects to the violence. He has already said that one should turn the other cheek and love one’s enemies.

Matthew began his gospel with the news that Jesus is the son of David, the son of Abraham; he has very human origins. His genealogy indicates just how human his origins are. Throughout his gospel, he has also shown that Jesus is the Son of God. In the passion narrative, Matthew once again emphasizes that Jesus is also the Son of Man, a fragile human being with very human emotions, including fear, along with his staunch adherence to the will of his Father. The good news in all of this is that nothing truly human can separate human beings from God, because God has become truly human. If fully embraced, that notion could turn a lot of people’s world upside down. Jesus didn’t masquerade as a human being; he was, and is, a human being, as were the disciples who turned and fled when Jesus was arrested. (‡)

From here on, it is difficult to reconstruct the actual history of the events of the passion and death of Jesus. Each gospel has variations. This ought not be surprising, since the stories of the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus were among the first narratives to be passed along by word of mouth. In the oral transmission of the events, the history easily became muddled, although the mystery of the events was always conveyed. Any attempt at a historical concordance of the four accounts in the gospels is futile. Here we will simply follow Matthew's description of the *history* and concentrate on grasping the *mystery* which he attempts to reveal.

26:57-68 - Before the Sanhedrin [Mark 14:53-65; Luke 22:54-55, 63-71; John 18:12-14, 19-24]

57 Those who had arrested Jesus led him away to Caiaphas the high priest, where the scribes and the elders were assembled. 58 Peter was following him at a distance as far as the high priest's courtyard, and going inside he sat down with the servants to see the outcome. 59 The chief priests and the entire Sanhedrin kept trying to obtain false testimony against Jesus in order to put him to death, 60 but they found none, though many false witnesses came forward. Finally two came forward 61 who stated, "This man said, 'I can destroy the temple of God and within three days rebuild it.'" 62 The high priest rose and addressed him, "Have you no answer? What are these men testifying against you?" 63 But Jesus was silent. Then the high priest said to him, "I order you to tell us under oath before the living God whether you are the Messiah, the Son of God." 64 Jesus said to him in reply, "You have said so. But I tell you:

From now on you will see 'the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power' and 'coming on the clouds of heaven.'"

65 Then the high priest tore his robes and said, "He has blasphemed! What further need have we of witnesses? You have now heard the blasphemy; 66 what is your opinion?" They said in reply, "He deserves to die!" 67 Then they spat in his face and struck him, while some slapped him, 68 saying, "Prophecy for us, Messiah: who is it that struck you?"

Some background might be helpful here. By Mosaic Law the sin of blasphemy was punishable by being stoned to death. But with the occupation by the Roman forces in Israel, only the Romans could condemn someone to death and execute a person, usually by crucifixion. Despite these limitations on their powers, the Sanhedrin assembled in the middle of the night in the house of Caiaphas to put Jesus on trial, to arrive at a decision about his guilt, and to condemn him to death. But they knew they were not allowed to carry out their sentence, so other machinations were required.

Matthew has one verse about Peter, who followed Jesus and those who had arrested him into the courtyard of Caiaphas, and sat down with the servants. Matthew says he did so in order to see what would happen. Matthew will take up the story of Peter shortly. But first he describes what was happening inside Caiaphas' house.

Pajamas and bathrobes probably hadn't been invented yet or the members of the Sanhedrin might have shown up in their pajamas. But all these men were most likely hauled out of bed, or delayed their going to bed, in order to take part in what they must have known would be of some historic import. After all, it was seldom that they had the opportunity to condemn someone to death, and Matthew clearly indicates that their intention from the beginning was to condemn Jesus to death.

In the back of Matthew's mind as he describes the "trial" before the Sanhedrin, was probably his consciousness of the leaders of "their synagogue," who refused to accept Jesus as the messiah, and who harassed Matthew's community.

The high priest brought forth many false witnesses, because any condemnation to death had to be on the basis of at least two witnesses. Finally two came forward and accused Jesus of threatening to destroy the temple and within three days to rebuild it. The high priest asked Jesus to make some defense against these claims, but Jesus remained silent. So the high priest demanded that Jesus answer the question about whether or not he was the messiah, the Son of God. Of course Matthew's readers knew the answer to that, and they knew that the high priest didn't believe that. Mark and Luke have Jesus answer the question with the response "I am." which is the name of God. Matthew has Jesus say, "You have said so" and he applies to himself passages from Psalm 110 and from the Book of Daniel.

The high priest loses it and says there is no longer any need of witnesses, because the whole Sanhedrin has heard the blasphemy for themselves. And they all agree that Jesus must die. And since in their eyes he is now a dead man, they insult and hit and taunt him; no more pretense of civility or legality.

According to the historian, Josephus, there had been quite a few people who had come as rabble rousers claiming to be messiah or king or prophet, and each led a band of followers for awhile, but then they disappeared, some by execution by the Romans. So Jesus was not really someone special or unique for the members of the Sanhedrin. He was just another pretender; but this pretender had really gotten under their skin.

26:69-75 - Peter's denials [Mark 14:66-72; Luke 22:56-62; John 18:15-18, 25-27]

69 Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. One of the maids came over to him and said, "You too were with Jesus the Galilean." 70 But he denied it in front of everyone, saying, "I do not know what you are talking about!" 71 As he went out to the gate, another girl saw him and said to those who were there, "This man was with Jesus the Nazorean." 72 Again he denied it with an oath, "I do not know the man!" 73 A little later the bystanders came over and said to Peter, "Surely you too are one of them; even your speech gives you away." 74 At that he began to curse and to swear, "I do not know the man." And immediately a cock crowed. 75 Then Peter remembered the word that Jesus had spoken: "Before the cock crows you will deny me three times." He went out and began to weep bitterly.

Peter's denials provide a foil for Jesus' fidelity. The three denials in Mark follow a line of thinking about apostasy during persecution in Jewish moral theology: a private denial is less serious than a public one; an evasive denial is less serious than an explicit one; and a public direct denial is the worst. Matthew obscures the heightening guilt of Peter's denials by having the first denial a public one, a denial by oath in the second one, and an evasive denial in the third one.

Peter's foretold sin is repented immediately when he hears the cock crow. Both Mark and Matthew note that he wept, but Matthew adds "bitterly."

27:1-2 - Jesus brought to Pilate [Mark 15:1; Luke 23:1-2; John 18:28-32]

1 When it was morning, all the chief priests and the elders of the people took counsel against Jesus to put him to death. 2 They bound him, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate, the governor.

The leaders gathered again in the morning as sort of an official act of confirming the decision made the night before. Since any further condemnation of Jesus by the Jewish authorities was not possible, the leaders bound Jesus and brought him to Pilate. In the reflection on Mark's Gospel, this is what was written of Pilate: He was known to be cruel and obstinate. He was also known to charge into tense situations, and make matters worse.

#### 27:3-10 - The death of Judas [Acts 1:18-19]

3 Then Judas, his betrayer, seeing that Jesus had been condemned, deeply regretted what he had done. He returned the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, 4 saying, "I have sinned in betraying innocent blood." They said, "What is that to us? Look to it yourself." 5 Flinging the money into the temple, he departed and went off and hanged himself. 6 The chief priests gathered up the money, but said, "It is not lawful to deposit this in the temple treasury, for it is the price of blood." 7 After consultation, they used it to buy the potter's field as a burial place for foreigners. 8 That is why that field even today is called the Field of Blood. 9 Then was fulfilled what had been said through Jeremiah the prophet, "And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the value of a man with a price on his head, a price set by some of the Israelites, 10 and they paid it out for the potter's field just as the Lord had commanded me.

Matthew tells his readers that Judas, seeing that Jesus had been condemned, regretted what he had done. (This has caused some to speculate about what was in Judas' mind in the first place. Did he honestly think that Jesus would not be condemned? [Who knows?]) He seems to have made an attempt to undo what he had done, by going to the high priest and admitting that he had betrayed innocent blood, and flinging the money into the temple. The chief priests and elders were not impressed with his repentance, and turned a cold shoulder on Judas, who went out and hanged himself.

The chief priests became suddenly very scrupulous about observance of the Law, and so they didn't put the blood money back into the temple treasury, but bought a field with it for the burial of strangers.

#### 27:11-26 - Jesus before Pilate [Mark 15:2-15; Luke 23:1-5, 13-25; John 18:33-19:16]

11 Now Jesus stood before the governor, and he questioned him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" Jesus said, "You say so." 12 And when he was accused by the chief priests and elders, he made no answer. 13 Then Pilate said to him, "Do you not hear how many things they are testifying against you?" 14 But he did not answer him one word, so that the governor was greatly amazed.

15 Now on the occasion of the feast the governor was accustomed to release to the crowd one prisoner whom they wished. 16 And at that time they had a notorious prisoner called [Jesus] Barabbas. 17 So when they had assembled, Pilate said to them, "Which one do you want me to release to you, [Jesus] Barabbas, or Jesus called Messiah?" 18 For he knew that it was out of envy that they had handed him over. 19 While he was still seated on the bench, his wife sent him a message, "Have nothing to do with that righteous man. I suffered much in a dream today because of him." 20 The chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas but to destroy Jesus. 21 The governor said to them in reply, "Which of the two do you want me to release to you?" They answered, "Barabbas!" 22 Pilate said to them, "Then what shall I do with Jesus called Messiah?" They all said, "Let him be crucified!" 23 But he said, "Why? What evil has he done?" They only shouted the louder, "Let him be crucified!" 24 When Pilate saw that he was not succeeding at all, but that a riot was breaking out instead, he took water and washed his hands in the sight of the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood. Look to it yourselves." 25 And the whole people said in reply, "His blood be upon us and upon our children." 26 Then he released Barabbas to them, but after he had Jesus scourged, he handed him over to be crucified.

While this narrative is about the political machinations between Pilate and the Jewish leaders and crowds, it is again also a religious polemic by Matthew against the leaders of “their synagogue.”

Pilate didn’t usually live in Jerusalem; he resided at Caesarea Maritima. But he was in Jerusalem in case matters of Roman interest, such as riots, occurred during the Passover. He probably imposed on Herod’s hospitality.

As Jesus was standing before him, Pilate got right to the point. He asked if Jesus were the king of the Jews. Anyone proclaiming oneself as king would be a matter of Roman interest. Jesus gives the same kind of answer he gave twice before in the last chapter, “You say so.” That’s sort of an indirect affirmative answer, almost like, “Well, that’s what you might call it.” The chief priests and elders pressed the point by accusing Jesus; of what they accused him before Pilate is not reported, but the accusation would have had to have been of a political, not a religious, nature in order for Pilate to have been interested. Jesus didn’t answer the accusation of the chief priests and elders. That amazed Pilate and made him wonder.

Fulfilling the description of him made earlier, Pilate made matters worse by asking which prisoner the crowd wished him to release, [Jesus] Barabbas or Jesus “called the messiah.” Matthew wrote that Pilate knew it was out of envy that the leaders accused Jesus. Outside of the gospels, there is no record that it was the custom to release a prisoner at Passover time.

As if to complicate Pilate’s life, he gets a message from his wife that he should have nothing to do with this just man. The wife is a Gentile, and Matthew is contrasting her insightful wish with the opposite wish of the chief priests and elders.

The chief priests and the elders stir up the crowd to ask that Pilate release Barabbas with the consequent condemnation of Jesus. Matthew seems to be trying to distance himself and all the crowd from the leaders of the crowd. After all, the crowd was made up of Jewish people, of whom Matthew identified himself as one.

Matthew seems also to want as little guilt for Jesus death to fall on Pilate as possible. Matthew’s fight is not with Roman authority, but with Jewish leaders. Pilate tries to save Jesus by asking what evil has he done, but the leaders of the people stir up the crowd even more to demand that Jesus be crucified. And they seem willing to have Pilate remain blameless for the death of Jesus. “His blood be upon us and upon our children,” they say. This has sometimes been used to support anti-Semitic attitudes, as if all subsequent Jews bore the responsibility for Jesus’ death. But the crowd did not say, “upon us and upon our children’s children.” Perhaps we need to take literally what is recorded in Matthew’s Gospel. The members of “their synagogue” were of the age to have been the children of those who called for Jesus’ death before Pilate. This may be a condemnation by Matthew of his opponents.

Pilate finally capitulates to the crowd’s wishes, but does not pass the death sentence on Jesus. Instead he says, “I am innocent of this man’s blood. See to it yourselves.” Of course, he was not innocent; he didn’t pronounce the death sentence, but he allowed it when he could have prevented it.

So Pilate handed Jesus over to be scourged. Scourging was a preliminary to crucifixion, because it weakened the prisoner and lessened the time he was liable to hang on the cross.

## 27:27-31 - The soldiers mock [Mark 15:16-20; John 19:2-3]

27 Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus inside the praetorium and gathered the whole cohort around him. 28 They stripped off his clothes and threw a scarlet military cloak about him. 29 Weaving a crown out of thorns, they placed it on his head, and a reed in his right hand. And kneeling before him, they mocked him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" 30 They spat upon him and took the reed and kept striking him on the head. 31 And when they had mocked him, they stripped him of the cloak, dressed him in his own clothes, and led him off to crucify him.

Matthew reports that it was Pilate's soldiers who mocked Jesus; Luke inserts in the narrative that Pilate sent Jesus to Herod, and it was Herod's soldiers who mocked Jesus. Matthew writes that the soldiers gathered the whole cohort around Jesus. A cohort is six hundred men. Perhaps there was a cohort in the barracks, stationed there just in case of a riot at Passover time. But it is unlikely that all six hundred took part very much in the actual mocking. Matthew follows Mark here, including the crowning with thorns, but adds the point of a reed being placed in Jesus' hand as sort of a scepter. Matthew changes Mark's "purple cloak" to a scarlet cloak. Purple was the color worn by the very top civil and military leaders. Purple was a dye which was very complicated to make. Matthew writes that it was a scarlet cloak, the color worn by Roman soldiers. Historians note that it is not likely that the soldiers were not ethnic Roman, but rather Syrian mercenaries employed by Roman authorities. [Who knows?]

## 27:32-44 - The crucifixion [Mark 15:21-32; Luke 23:26-43; John 19:17-27]

32 As they were going out, they met a Cyrenian named Simon; this man they pressed into service to carry his cross.

33 And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of the Skull), 34 they gave Jesus wine to drink mixed with gall. But when he had tasted it, he refused to drink. 35 After they had crucified him, they divided his garments by casting lots; 36 then they sat down and kept watch over him there. 37 And they placed over his head the written charge against him: This is Jesus, the King of the Jews. 38 Two revolutionaries were crucified with him, one on his right and the other on his left. 39 Those passing by reviled him, shaking their heads 40 and saying, "You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself, if you are the Son of God, [and] come down from the cross!" 41 Likewise the chief priests with the scribes and elders mocked him and said, 42 "He saved others; he cannot save himself. So he is the king of Israel! Let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. 43 He trusted in God; let him deliver him now if he wants him. For he said, 'I am the Son of God.'" 44 The revolutionaries who were crucified with him also kept abusing him in the same way.

Presumably because Jesus was so weakened by the scourging, Simon of Cyrene (on the north coast of Africa) was pressed into service to help carry the cross. He was probably a pilgrim who came to Jerusalem for the Passover. [That's all we are told about the "way of the cross." Where did all the stations come from in the Catholic devotion? From the early Franciscans in the Fourteenth Century.]

When they arrived at the place of execution, called Golgotha which means "Place of the Skull," they offered Jesus wine to drink mixed with gall, but Jesus refused. Perhaps gall was thought to deaden the pain somewhat. Mark writes that the narcotic was myrrh.

Matthew goes even further than Mark in sanitizing the actual crucifixion. Mark writes that they crucified Jesus; Matthew says simply, "After they had crucified him . . ." There are conspicuously no gory details of the crucifixion, which seem to have fascinated people ever since then.

The soldiers divided Jesus' garments by casting lots for them. This was the practice in the Roman Empire; the executioners divided the clothes of the one whom they executed. Matthew and Mark see in this the fulfillment of the line in Psalm 22:19 - "They divided my garments among them, and for my raiment they cast lots." The tablet affixed to the cross noted the charge against the executed; for Jesus this read, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews." Two revolutionaries were crucified with Jesus that same day. All three were thought to be threats to the Roman Empire.

Jesus was mocked by three groups of people: the passers-by, the chief priests and the elders and the scribes, and the revolutionaries who were crucified with Jesus. The passers-by say, "If you are the Son of God . . .," the same words the devil said in the temptations in chapter four.

27:45-56 - The death of Jesus [Mark 15:33-41; Luke 22:44-49; John 19:28-30]

45 From noon onward, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. 46 And about three o'clock Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" 47 Some of the bystanders who heard it said, "This one is calling for Elijah." 48 Immediately one of them ran to get a sponge; he soaked it in wine, and putting it on a reed, gave it to him to drink. 49 But the rest said, "Wait, let us see if Elijah comes to save him." 50 But Jesus cried out again in a loud voice, and gave up his spirit. 51 And behold, the veil of the sanctuary was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth quaked, rocks were split, 52 tombs were opened, and the bodies of many saints who had fallen asleep were raised. 53 And coming forth from their tombs after his resurrection, they entered the holy city and appeared to many. 54 The centurion and the men with him who were keeping watch over Jesus feared greatly when they saw the earthquake and all that was happening, and they said, "Truly, this was the Son of God!" 55 There were many women there, looking on from a distance, who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to him. 56 Among them were Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.

What Jesus cries out on the cross are the beginning words from Psalm 22, which is a cry for help which ends with praise for God's having delivered the one who is praying. That people thought Jesus was calling Elijah was in line with the fact that they believed that Elijah was taken up into heaven, and that he would return to help those who were afflicted. Someone got a sponge soaked in wine to give to Jesus to drink, but the bystanders stopped him, telling him to wait to see if Elijah would come to save him.

But Jesus cried out again, and (according to the New American Bible Revised) gave up "his" spirit. [This is a problem for the present author, because both here in Matthew and in John 19:30, the same Greek word is used, and the word is "to," which is the definite article meaning "the." Here in Matthew it is translated "his" spirit; in John's Gospel it is translated "the" spirit. Who knows?]

All the portents in nature – the darkness, the earthquake, the splitting of rocks, the veil of the temple being torn, the tombs opening and the dead walking around – are all ways of saying that the death of Jesus turned the whole world upside down.

The centurion, and the other guards with him, all of them Gentiles, were shaken by the events, and they said, "Truly this was the Son of God." This follows Mark's Gospel, where the centurion alone makes only the second profession of faith in Jesus in Mark's entire Gospel.

Matthew now focuses on the women who observed Jesus death from a distance. Among them were Mary Magdalen, Mary the mother of James and Joseph (Jesus' mother was referred to this way in 13:55), and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.

## 27:57-61 - The burial [Mark 15:42-47; Luke 23:50-56; John 19:38-42]

57 When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea named Joseph, who was himself a disciple of Jesus. 58 He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus; then Pilate ordered it to be handed over. 59 Taking the body, Joseph wrapped it [in] clean linen 60 and laid it in his new tomb that he had hewn in the rock. Then he rolled a huge stone across the entrance to the tomb and departed. 61 But Mary Magdalene and the other Mary remained sitting there, facing the tomb.

The point Matthew is making here is that Jesus is really dead. How dead? He was buried. This is such a central tenant of Christian faith.

Following Mark, Joseph of Arimathea is described by Matthew as a rich man who was a disciple of Jesus. But he drops Mark's designation of him as a "distinguished member of the council," not wanting to include him in the Sanhedrin which condemned Jesus. Joseph went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus, and was given permission to take it and bury it in a new tomb which Joseph owned.

Jerusalem was surrounded by tombs, cave-like things with sort of bunk-bed-like sections on the walls. They were typically owned by families for the disposition of bodies of members of the family. People were buried there and remained there for a year, until the body had decomposed and nothing was left but bones, which were then put into vessels which were inscribed with the name of the person whose bones were inside.

It was also important to Matthew to narrate that the women saw where Jesus was buried. This was important because Matthew didn't want anyone to say that there had been a mistake, and that the empty tomb was not really the one in which Jesus was buried.

## 27:62-66 - Setting of the guard

62 The next day, the one following the day of preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate 63 and said, "Sir, we remember that this impostor while still alive said, 'After three days I will be raised up.' 64 Give orders, then, that the grave be secured until the third day, lest his disciples come and steal him and say to the people, 'He has been raised from the dead.' This last imposture would be worse than the first." 65 Pilate said to them, "The guard is yours; go secure it as best you can." 66 So they went and secured the tomb by fixing a seal to the stone and setting the guard.

None of the other evangelists narrate this event. For Matthew it was important because of the leaders of "their synagogue," who refused to believe that Jesus had been raised. The Pharisees are mentioned again; they disappeared from Matthew's narration prior to the passion. Perhaps their mention here is because Pharisees were opponents of Matthew's community's belief in the resurrection of Jesus. For Matthew it had to be established that the report of Jesus' resurrection was not a hoax. After the fact, all agreed that the tomb was empty. The issue for Matthew's community and their opponents was how did it become empty. Matthew established that Jesus was really dead, that the tomb was known by everybody – the women and the guards – that a guard had been set to prevent the disciples from stealing the body. So the only explanation for the empty tomb was that Jesus had been raised!

## HE IS ALIVE - 28:1-20

28:1-10 - He has been raised [Mark 16:1-8; Luke 24:1-12; John 20:1-10]

1 After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to see the tomb. 2 And behold, there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven, approached, rolled back the stone, and sat upon it. 3 His appearance was like lightning and his clothing was white as snow. 4 The guards were shaken with fear of him and became like dead men. 5 Then the angel said to the women in reply, "Do not be afraid! I know that you are seeking Jesus the crucified. 6 He is not here, for he has been raised just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. 7 Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him.' Behold, I have told you." 8 Then they went away quickly from the tomb, fearful yet overjoyed, and ran to announce this to his disciples. 9 And behold, Jesus met them on their way and greeted them. They approached, embraced his feet, and did him homage. 10 Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me."

While following Mark's narrative, Matthew has enlarged it very significantly, and "cleaned it up" a bit. Matthew's writing seems somehow freed up in his description of Easter Sunday. Matthew names the two women, Mary Magdalen and the other Mary, mother of James and Joseph. Mark has just "three women." The two Marys have witnessed the passion, the death and the burial of Jesus. The women are not coming with the intention of anointing the body, which would have been difficult with the stone in front of the entrance and the guards outside. Mark doesn't explain how the stone had been rolled away, but Matthew attributes it to the action of an angel, comparable to Mark's young man. The guards pass out at the earthquake and the rolling back of the stone.

At the time of Jesus some, such as the Pharisees, believed in life after death, and in the resurrection from the dead at the end of the age, when God's kingdom would be established. In Jesus' resurrection that end of the age has begun, that kingdom has been inaugurated.

As the women are going off to tell the apostles the good news, they meet Jesus. They worshiped him. And Jesus gives them the same message that the angel did at the tomb. Galilee is becoming significant as the place to meet Jesus, causing some to wonder if Matthew's community was located in Galilee or close to it. Jesus tells the women to give the news to his "brothers." Back in 12:46, Jesus had said that whoever did the will of the Father was brother to him.

28:11-15 - The guards

11 While they were going, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests all that had happened. 12 They assembled with the elders and took counsel; then they gave a large sum of money to the soldiers, 13 telling them, "You are to say, 'His disciples came by night and stole him while we were asleep.' 14 And if this gets to the ears of the governor, we will satisfy [him] and keep you out of trouble." 15 The soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has circulated among the Jews to the present [day].

None of the other evangelists has this story. It was probably important to Matthew and his community because of their conflict with "their synagogue," whose members possibly spread the word that Jesus had not been raised, but his disciples had stolen the body. Why wouldn't the guards corroborate the story the women told? They were bribed, says Matthew. But he adds that the story of the disciples stealing the body continues to this (Matthew's) day.

28:16-20 - The great commission [Mark 16:14-18; Luke 24:36-49; John 20:19-23; Acts 1:9-11]

16 The eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had ordered them. 17 When they saw him, they worshiped, but they doubted. 18 Then Jesus approached and said to them, "All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age."

Which mountain? [Who knows?] The eleven worship Jesus, but some still doubt. Much of what Matthew reports of Jesus' commissioning of the apostles is a reflection of the Book of Daniel 7:14, where the Son of Man is given dominion, and glory and kingdom, that all peoples, nations and languages should serve him.

Jesus' commission to the apostles is twofold: teach and baptize. Different scholars interpret the "all nations" differently. Some see in this statement the apostles mission to the Gentiles; others think it includes the Jews also. It may have been taken by Matthew's largely Jewish community as a mission to go to the Gentiles for new members, as if they are to give up on trying to attract more members to their community from "their synagogue." Matthew uses what seems to have been a baptismal formula in his community as part of the commission given to the apostles.

The final promise "Behold, *I am* with you all days until the end of the age" recalls 1:22-23 where Jesus is called Emmanuel, and 14:23 where Jesus is walking on the water and says that he is the "I am," the name for God.

One can almost hear this scene echoed in King Arthur's assurance to King Pelinore, "Here is my victory: what we did will be remembered. It *will* be remembered;" and in Arthur's commission to Tom of Warwick, "Ask every person if he's heard the story, and tell it loud and clear if he has not. . . Don't let it be forgot."

The commission comes down to us also. By the way we pray, the way we live, and the way we preach, we are commissioned to turn the world upside down.



# A Reflection on the Gospel according to Luke



## **Introduction**

### **Who is Luke?**

From the New Testament itself, we learn that Luke was a physician, most likely from Antioch. From the Acts of the Apostles, written by Luke, and from Paul's letters, we learn that he traveled with Paul, probably early in Paul's career as a Christian. Why early? Because Luke doesn't seem to be greatly imbued with Paul's theology. Although the authorship of the other two synoptic gospels is not attributed to the persons whose name those gospels bear, we can be pretty sure that Luke's Gospel was written by the person we know about from the scriptures; it is unlikely that another author would affix to his work the name of someone so widely known.

Judging from his way of writing, Luke seems to be of a more gentle nature than Mark, or at least more refined both in his mastery of the Greek language, and in his outlook. Frequently he seems to soften Mark's narratives and his descriptions of Jesus and the disciples.

### **When and where was the gospel written?**

Luke obviously wrote after Mark; sixty percent of Mark's Gospel finds its way into Luke's. Luke also shows knowledge of the destruction of the temple in 70 AD. Luke shows no trace of the controversies which existed between the Christian community and the Pharisaic reconstruction of Judaism which took place after the Council of Jamnia in 85 to 90 AD. So the date of Luke's writing is usually placed between 80 and 85 AD, that is about fifty years after Jesus, twenty years after Mark, and five or ten years before Matthew.

Knowledge about the place at which Luke wrote is unsure: Rome, or Archaia, or Bithynia are the best guesses.

### **Luke-Acts**

Most commentators on the New Testament treat the Acts of the Apostles as, not only the companion piece to the Gospel according to Luke, but almost as the continuation of a single work; so frequently in their commentaries on the Gospel of Luke they draw comparisons between the Gospel and Acts. Or they see in an event described in Acts the fulfillment of something narrated in the Gospel.

Luke does some theology-by-geography in the two books. In the Gospel Jesus journeys from Galilee to Jerusalem, the center of the Jewish world; in Acts, through Paul, Jesus journeys from Jerusalem to Rome, the center of the political world, and therefore to the ends of the earth.

### **What was Luke trying to say?**

By the time Matthew's Gospel was written, there was quite open conflict between the Pharisaic reconstituting of Judaism after the destruction of the temple and its worship and Matthew's Christian community which was made up primarily but not exclusively of Jews. Luke is written when that controversy was only beginning to boil; the tensions were not yet so great, but they were there. Luke-Acts is not written to counter any specific group or problem; it was written in order to vindicate the Christian community's very existence, both in the minds of the believers and in the minds of potential believers. The two books together were written to vindicate the community's turning from evangelizing Jews to sustaining the faith of those who were already Christians and to evangelize Gentiles.

Luke addresses his Gospel to a primarily Gentile congregation which included some well-to-do members. The controversy within Luke's community was questions about God's fidelity to God's promises. If God who made promises to Israel can allow the temple and all of Jerusalem to be destroyed, how can Christians believe that God will be faithful to the promises God made to them? Luke tries to demonstrate that God through Jesus was faithful to the promises made to Israel, but in an unexpected way to include Gentiles, the unclean, the poor, women, Samaritans, rich toll collectors, and assorted other outcasts as well as elected people who are repentant of their initial rejection of Jesus. This is the "reconstituted Israel." That's a phrase to keep in mind through this study of Luke's Gospel. Also there were Jewish members of Luke's community who wanted to force the observance of all the dictates of the Law on Gentiles members and converts. When Luke writes about the Pharisees, he most likely has in mind these members of his own community, most of whom seem to have been wealthy.

The controversies surrounding Luke's community concerned the interpretation of the scriptures. The leaders of the Jewish community didn't want to accept that Jesus fulfilled the Law, while Luke's community understood scripture in such a way that Jesus did fulfill the Law.

### **The Lucan Jesus**

By his compassionate mission to all and by his selection of the Twelve, Jesus laid the foundation for the "reconstituted Israel." Jesus mission is inclusive of many who were considered outcasts, such as the crippled, the lame, the blind and deaf, the sexually mutilated, and most of all, women. Although the leaders of the Jewish community reject Jesus, the people are not as stubborn as they appear in Matthew's Gospel. Luke will show with the infancy narrative, that from the beginning, Jesus is the fulfillment of God's promises to Israel, and that God can be trusted to fulfill his promises to the Christian community.

Of the four gospels, Luke's is perhaps the one which most shows that Jesus is turning the world upside down.

## Preface - Luke 1:1-4

1 Since many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the events that have been fulfilled among us, 2 just as those who were eyewitnesses from the beginning and ministers of the word have handed them down to us, 3 I too have decided, after investigating everything accurately anew, to write it down in an orderly sequence for you, most excellent Theophilus, 4 so that you may realize the certainty of the teachings you have received.

Luke states that he is prepared to offer an orderly account of “what happened among us.” His order is *logical* rather than historical. And Luke’s command of the Greek language is superb, so also is his weaving together of the narrative. He is going to do that in the same way that others have, those others being the eye-witnesses and those who are ministers of the word. The eye-witnesses and the ministers of the word refer to the same group of people, not two different groups. Those eye-witnesses are not those who have only seen the events, but those who have seen the *meaning* of the events, and so have become ministers of the word. So Luke’s narrative is a record of faith, not only of history.

When Luke speaks of an “orderly sequence,” he is speaking of the logical order of the events he narrates. And that logic is this: God’s promise and the fulfillment of that promise. Remember that doubting on the part of some whether or not God would be faithful to the promises to the new Christian community was one of the issues Luke wants to address in his writing for his community.

Luke’s Gospel, as well as Acts, is addressed to “most excellent Theophilus.” Just who that is is a mystery. It may be Luke’s patron, or it may mean any believer, because the name means “lover of God.” In either case, Luke is writing to Theophilus with the assurance that what he has been taught is true.

Luke’s opening words may have been a cloaked criticism of the Gospel of Mark which he had at his disposal. Luke writes, “Since many have undertaken (tried and failed?) to compile a narrative of the events which have happened among us, . . . I have decided, after investigating everything accurately anew, to write it down in an *orderly* sequence for you.” It is certain that Luke’s narrative is much more orderly and complete than was Mark’s, and judging from the changes Luke makes in Mark’s narrative, even while following it quite substantially, he may also have doubted Mark’s accuracy in places.

## The dawn of God's fulfillment of promise - Luke 1:5-1:38

As is true of the infancy narrative in Matthew's Gospel, so also in Luke's the intent is, in part, to "correct" what Mark, who wrote no infancy narrative, may have implied, intentionally or unintentionally, at the beginning of his gospel, namely, that Jesus *became* the Son of God at his baptism.

Perhaps this section of the Luke's Gospel is best thought of as similar to the overture to a musical play. In the theater overtures are heard most of the musical themes one will hear throughout the play. Those themes will be fleshed out during the performance by the addition of the vocal score. In Luke's Gospel, the themes indicated in this section will be fleshed out by his narratives to follow. But the overall theme remains the fulfillment of God's promise.

As is true of Matthew and his gospel, Luke had before him the Gospel of Mark. If the Gospel of Mark were the only one that existed, one might conclude that Jesus *became* the Son of God at his baptism. Like Matthew, Luke adds an infancy section to show that Jesus is the Son of God from his conception.

### 1:5-25 - Announcement of the birth of John

5 In the days of Herod, King of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah of the priestly division of Abijah; his wife was from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. 6 Both were righteous in the eyes of God, observing all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blamelessly. 7 But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren and both were advanced in years. 8 Once when he was serving as priest in his division's turn before God, 9 according to the practice of the priestly service, he was chosen by lot to enter the sanctuary of the Lord to burn incense. 10 Then, when the whole assembly of the people was praying outside at the hour of the incense offering, 11 the angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right of the altar of incense. 12 Zechariah was troubled by what he saw, and fear came upon him. 13 But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, because your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall name him John. 14 And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, 15 for he will be great in the sight of [the] Lord. He will drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will be filled with the holy Spirit even from his mother's womb, 16 and he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. 17 He will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of fathers toward children and the disobedient to the understanding of the righteous, to prepare a people fit for the Lord." 18 Then Zechariah said to the angel, "How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years." 19 And the angel said to him in reply, "I am Gabriel, who stand before God. I was sent to speak to you and to announce to you this good news. 20 But now you will be speechless and unable to talk until the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled at their proper time."

21 Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah and were amazed that he stayed so long in the sanctuary. 22 But when he came out, he was unable to speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He was gesturing to them but remained mute. 23 Then, when his days of ministry were completed, he went home. 24 After this time his wife Elizabeth conceived, and she went into seclusion for five months, saying, 25 "So has the Lord done for me at a time when he has seen fit to take away my disgrace before others."

Once again we are confronted by the question of the historical accuracy and reliability of the story. Some suggest that Luke just made up the story. While he did craft it, he didn't write only a novel; he drew on already existing stories in circulation and on Old Testament parallels of similar events.

King Herod ruled when Zechariah receives his revelation. Luke is trying to connect faith events with Jewish historical events. He will do the same in Chapter 2, when he links the birth of

Jesus with Roman historical events. Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, are described as righteous people, even though they were childless – usually interpreted by the people as a curse from God on those who had sinned. Luke’s description of John’s parents is parallel with the description of the parents of Samuel, who is also described as the angel described John, a Nazirite who would not drink wine or strong drink. The other and most striking parallel Luke makes is with Abraham and Sarah, both up in years and childless.

Zechariah is of the priestly class. That’s important because Luke is showing a continuity between Israel in the pre-temple-destruction days and the believers in Jesus. John, the herald of the Messiah, belonged to the temple priestly cast.

Because Zechariah was of the priestly class, he was eligible to offer incense in the temple. He was chosen by lot to perform this task. It was his lucky day. Once a priest was chosen for that privilege, he became ineligible to be included in any further casting of lots. So for Zechariah this was literally a once in a lifetime chance.

In telling the story of the birth announcement of John to Baptist to Zechariah and later in the announcement to Mary of the birth of Jesus, Luke follows exactly the five point pattern found in birth announcements in the Old Testament, for instance the announcement to Abraham of the birth of Isaac, and in the story of the announcement to Hannah of the birth of Samuel.

During his service of offering incense, to his shock (1) the recipient is troubled), the Angel Gabriel, appears to him and tells him not to be afraid (2) the recipient is told not to fear). He is given the message that Elizabeth will have a son (3) the announcement is made). Among the things the angel says is that the child will be filled with the Holy Spirit before his birth. That could not have been understood by Zechariah as the Holy Spirit as the Persons of the Trinity. It is the same Holy Spirit which came to the prophets, sometimes expressed as the “word of the Lord” which came to them. Zechariah expresses his doubt at that, because of the couple’s advanced age (4) the recipient objects). And the angel tells him that his child is destined for great things, and that his doubting will be punished by being unable to speak (5) two signs are offered). Mary’s similar response to the angel (1:34) is not similarly punished. Why? [Who knows?]

When Zechariah is delayed in coming out, the people begin to wonder. And when he comes out but cannot speak, the people realize he had seen a vision. There’s always a sign given after an annunciation of a birth. In this case there are two signs promised: John will be great and Zechariah will be mute. Zachariah’s inability to speak is the sign by which the people know that the annunciation is for real.

#### 1:26-38 - Announcement of the birth of Jesus.

26 In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee called Nazareth, 27 to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David, and the virgin’s name was Mary. 28 And coming to her, he said, “Hail, favored one! The Lord is with you.” 29 But she was greatly troubled at what was said and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. 30 Then the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31 Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus. 32 He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father, 33 and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” 34 But Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?” 35 And the angel said to her in reply, “The holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God. 36 And behold, Elizabeth, your relative, has also conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her who was called barren; 37 for nothing will be impossible for God.” 38 Mary said,

“Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her.

The issue for Luke’s community is the Christological question: who is Jesus? If believers had only Mark’s Gospel, one might suppose that Jesus became the Son of God at his baptism. That may have been the thought when Mark wrote. But later reflection suggested that Jesus was made Son of God in his resurrection (see Romans 1:3-4). Both Luke and Matthew reflect an even more mature understanding of who Jesus is in their infancy narratives. They both believe that Jesus was the Son of God from his conception. John, of course, doesn’t bother with an infancy narrative to demonstrate that fact; he writes: “In the beginning was the Word and . . . the Word was God.” Neither Matthew nor Luke posit a pre-existence of the Person of Jesus, whereas John does.

Luke’s narration of the announcement of Jesus’ birth follows the same five-point pattern of the announcement of John’s birth and of the Old Testament narratives. But the announcement of the birth of Jesus shows Jesus is already superior to John. The angel told Zachariah that John will be great before the Lord; Jesus will be the great Son of the Most High. John will prepare a people; Jesus will rule the people. John’s role is temporary; Jesus’ kingdom will never end. John is to be a prophet; Jesus is more than a prophet, the Son of God. John will be filled with the Holy Spirit; Jesus will be the Holy One of God by the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit. These are all subtle differences with profound meaning: Jesus is superior to John.

The big difference between the announcing of John’s birth and that of Jesus is profound. In the case of John, God removes the obstacle to human conception. In the case of Jesus, there is no obstacle to be removed; there is no human conception. The conception of Jesus is totally the work of God; this is a totally new creation by God. The conception of John takes place in prestigious Jerusalem; the conception of Jesus takes place in a location from which nothing is expected. The prophetic Spirit filled John; the Spirit which came upon Mary was the Spirit of creation from Genesis. The earth was void and without form when that Spirit appeared; just so Mary’s womb was void until through the Spirit God filled it with a child who was His Son. John’s parents yearned for a child; since Mary has not lived with her husband, there is no yearning or expectation of a child – it is a surprise of creation. John’s conception was God’s granting the parents’ request; Jesus’ conception is God’s initiative going beyond anything a human being ever thought of.

Paul distinguishes in Romans 1:3-4 between the Davidic descent of Jesus in his birth and his recognition as the Son of God in his resurrection. Luke moves the revelation that Jesus is the Son of God from the resurrection, as Paul would have it, and from Jesus’ baptism, as Mark would have it, to the conception of Jesus in Mary’s womb. The baptism of Jesus and his resurrection only made known to a wider audience what was true from the beginning.

In verse 38 Mary’s statement identifies more than her acceptance of what the angel has told her. If we look at what follows in Luke’s Gospel, Mary’s statement identifies her relationship to Jesus as more than the one who gave him birth. On the supposition that Luke penned the bulk of his gospel prior to writing the infancy narrative, we find that he has already indicated who this handmaid of the Lord is. In 8:19-21 Luke writes: Then his mother and brothers came to him but were unable to join him because of the crowd. He was told, “Your mother and your brothers are

standing outside and they wish to see you.” He said to them in reply, “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and act on it.”

Mary’s response to the angel, “Behold I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word,” identifies her as one who heard the word of God and acted on it.

Mark’s version of the story sounds to some as sort of a diminishment of the role of Jesus’ mother and brothers in favor of those who are his disciples. For Luke, Mary is not only his mother, but also his first disciple.

## Births and canticles - Luke 1:39-2:52

### 1:39-45 - Mary visits Elizabeth

39 During those days Mary set out and traveled to the hill country in haste to a town of Judah, 40 where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. 41 When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the infant leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth, filled with the holy Spirit, 42 cried out in a loud voice and said, "Most blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. 43 And how does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? 44 For at the moment the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for joy. 45 Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled."

Sometimes this episode is used to demonstrate Mary's charity toward her aged relative. That's not Luke's point, however; if it were, why would he have Mary leave Elizabeth before she gave birth to John? Rather, Luke is bringing together the two women whose giving birth is a clear sign of God's goodness and mercy to them and his faithfulness to God's promises.

Some commentators regard Elizabeth's greeting to Mary as a canticle; they do the same with the "Glory to God in the highest" of the angels at the birth of Christ. When Luke describes the infant in Elizabeth's womb leaping, it is reminiscent of Esau and Jacob leaping in the womb of their mother, Rebekah. John's leaping in his mother's womb is his recognition that the infant in Mary's womb is his Lord, again emphasizing that John is great, but Jesus is greater. This recognition is confirmed by Elizabeth's words, "How does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?"

### 1:46-56 - Mary's canticle

46 And Mary said:

"My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord;

47 my spirit rejoices in God my savior.

48 For he has looked upon his handmaid's lowliness;  
behold, from now on will all ages call me blessed.

49 The Mighty One has done great things for me,  
and holy is his name.

50 His mercy is from age to age  
to those who fear him.

51 He has shown might with his arm,  
dispersed the arrogant of mind and heart.

52 He has thrown down the rulers from their thrones  
but lifted up the lowly.

53 The hungry he has filled with good things;  
the rich he has sent away empty.

54 He has helped Israel his servant,  
remembering his mercy,

55 according to his promise to our fathers,  
to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

56 Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.

What are we to make of Mary's canticle (the Magnificat)? It is pretty well confirmed that Luke inserted an already existing Jewish-Christian hymn in his narrative. The hymn was

composed reminiscent of Hannah's prayer in I Samuel, chapter 2, and prayed by a "remnant" community in the area of Jerusalem, who believed in Jesus and who were excluded from the main body of the Jewish synagogue. They were the *anawim*, the poor remnant of Israel who could hope in no one but God. The opposite of the *anawim* were not those who had money, but the proud and the self-sufficient who relied so much on their wealth that they recognized no need for God. Luke saw that the hymns of this group fit easily into the mouth of Mary – and later of Zechariah – who was herself a member of the *anawim* because of her lowliness, although not a member of the Jerusalem area community.

Mary's canticle uses these words for God: holy, mighty and merciful. These are attributes which the *anawim* recognized in God. These words are applied to the personal experience of the composer of the canticle, and applied by Luke to Mary. The latter part of the canticle is professed in the past tense, what God has already done in history: shown might in his arm; dispersed the arrogant; thrown down rulers; lifted up the lowly; filled the hungry with good things; sent the rich away empty. For the Jewish-Christian community, this was probably a remembrance of God's past deeds, although some see it as a statement of what will happen, and which has already begun to happen in the conception of Jesus.

And then Luke adds a transitional verse (56) which says that Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then went home. She will not be with Elizabeth when John is born.

#### 1:57-66 - The birth of John

57 When the time arrived for Elizabeth to have her child she gave birth to a son. 58 Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy toward her, and they rejoiced with her. 59 When they came on the eighth day to circumcise the child, they were going to call him Zechariah after his father, 60 but his mother said in reply, "No. He will be called John." 61 But they answered her, "There is no one among your relatives who has this name." 62 So they made signs, asking his father what he wished him to be called. 63 He asked for a tablet and wrote, "John is his name," and all were amazed. 64 Immediately his mouth was opened, his tongue freed, and he spoke blessing God. 65 Then fear came upon all their neighbors, and all these matters were discussed throughout the hill country of Judea. 66 All who heard these things took them to heart, saying, "What, then, will this child be?" For surely the hand of the Lord was with him.

Things were abuzz in the town where Zachariah and Elizabeth lived. Elizabeth had secluded herself from the public until Mary came, and presumably continued to do so while Mary was visiting. So the neighbors were amazed when Elizabeth's child was born and the birth became a public event. When the neighbors learned of the birth they rejoiced with Elizabeth.

The scene switches immediately to eight days later when the child is to be circumcised and the question of the name for the child comes up. The relatives wanted to name the boy after his father. Elizabeth says that won't happen; the boy will be named John. (How did she know this, since Zachariah had not been able to speak?) The neighbors object, so they "made signs" (Does that mean that Zachariah was deaf as well as mute?) to ask Zachariah what the boy should be called. Still unable to speak, he asked for a tablet and wrote that the boy's name would be John. Immediately Zachariah's ability to speak returned, and his first words were in praise of God. The neighbors were amazed and wondered what the child would be. And the whole neighborhood was abuzz with telling these events.

## 1:67-79 - Zachariah's canticle

67 Then Zechariah his father, filled with the holy Spirit, prophesied, saying:  
68 "Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel,  
for he has visited and brought redemption to his people.  
69 He has raised up a horn for our salvation  
within the house of David his servant,  
70 even as he promised through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old:  
71 salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us,  
72 to show mercy to our fathers  
and to be mindful of his holy covenant  
73 and of the oath he swore to Abraham our father,  
and to grant us that, 74 rescued from the hand of enemies,  
without fear we might worship him 75 in holiness and righteousness  
before him all our days.  
76 And you, child, will be called prophet of the Most High,  
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,  
77 to give his people knowledge of salvation  
through the forgiveness of their sins,  
78 because of the tender mercy of our God  
by which the daybreak from on high will visit us  
79 to shine on those who sit in darkness and death's shadow,  
to guide our feet into the path of peace."  
80 The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the desert until the day of his manifestation to Israel.

Luke again borrows from the literature of the Jewish-Christian community in and around Jerusalem, whose members thought of themselves as the *anawim*, the poor remnant of Israel. The second chapter of Acts, especially verses 42 to 47, gives a picture of this group. The canticle in the Jewish-Christian community would have been celebrating the salvation already come in Jesus, but Luke adds a couple of lines (verses 76 and 77) which make the canticle look like a prophecy of future events.

In verse 80, Luke gives a summary of John's life in order to move him off the stage and put the focus on Jesus. John will appear again in chapter three, but there he plays a supportive role to the main character in Luke's entire narrative, Jesus.

## 2:1-7 - The birth of Jesus

1 In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that the whole world should be enrolled. 2 This was the first enrollment, when Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3 So all went to be enrolled, each to his own town. 4 And Joseph too went up from Galilee from the town of Nazareth to Judea, to the city of David that is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, 5 to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. 6 While they were there, the time came for her to have her child, 7 and she gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

Luke begins this story by identifying the Roman civil authorities who held office at the time of Jesus' birth. There are a lot of problems with the accuracy of his descriptions, because some of those whom Luke says were contemporaries of each other didn't actually hold the stated

offices at the same time. The amount of ink which has been spilt over trying to defend the historical accuracy of Luke's narrative is immense. It's easier just to say he made a mistake in his calculations. But an accurate presentation of Roman history was not his point. As with the annunciation of the birth of John, where Luke wanted to link up his narrative of faith with the Jewish historical data, so here he is linking up faith with Roman history.

Luke may have gotten his history a little mixed up, but he used his knowledge of history to reveal something about Jesus. Luke was right about Augustus being the emperor when Jesus was born. That was important for Luke's message about Jesus. Augustus had brought peace to the Roman Empire, albeit by means of militarily disposing of his foes. In Roman writings, Augustus is called "savior of the whole world." The inscription on the altar erected to Augustus in Rome is inscribed: The birthday of the god has marked the beginning of the good news for the world. Luke doesn't deny this; but he challenges it's validity by showing that Jesus is the one who is the savior of the world, and the one who brings real peace. Luke's counter proclamation about Jesus is not the erecting of an altar with an inscription, but a choir of angels proclaiming peace to those favored by God.

One may hate to upset the traditional interpretations given to parts of the gospel narrative, but there is evidence that Luke meant something entirely different from the traditional interpretations. Here are a few examples.

The *manger* is usually interpreted as a sign of the poverty of the Holy Family; and representative of the mean-spirited inn keeper who would not provide them with lodgings. Luke mentions the manger three times in his narrative, so it must have been important to what he was trying to tell his audience. He was probably thinking of Isaiah 1:3: "The ox knows its owner; and the donkey knows the manger of its lord; but Israel has not known me; my people has not understood me." Mary laid the baby in the *manger*; the angel tells the shepherds that the sign for them will be the baby lying in a *manger*; and the shepherds did indeed find the baby lying in a *manger*. With the arrival of the shepherds God's people have begun to recognize their Lord.

The *swaddling clothes* have likewise usually been thought to be connected with the poverty of Jesus' birth. However, Luke may have been thinking of Solomon, the wealthiest of the kings of Judah, who writes in Wisdom 7:4-5: "I was carefully swaddled and nursed, for no king has any other way to begin at birth." Once again, Luke is pointing to the royalty of the newborn.

In the traditional image of *shepherds*, they have been cloaked in the supposed gentleness of their sheep. Luke's interest was not nearly so romantic; shepherds were generally regarded as thieves, and therefore outside the law. In Luke's presentation the shepherds are clearly linked with Bethlehem, the birthplace of David the shepherd. In John 7:42 people say, "Has not the Scripture said that the Messiah is descended from David and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David was?" The scripture they were thinking of is probably Micah 5:1, which Matthew uses to show how Jesus' birth is the fulfillment of prophecy. Luke seems to be *shifting the understanding of the rest of the prophecy of Micah from Jerusalem to Bethlehem*. For instance: Micah has people flowing into Jerusalem; Luke has the census causing people to flow into Bethlehem. Micah writes about "the time when she who is in travail has brought forth;" Luke writes "The time came for her to have her child."

There are other parallels between Luke's narrative and what is found in the Prophet Micah 5:1-4.

## 2:8-14 - Annunciation to the shepherds

8 Now there were shepherds in that region living in the fields and keeping the night watch over their flock. 9 The angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were struck with great fear. 10 The angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. 11 For today in the city of David a savior has been born for you who is Messiah and Lord. 12 And this will be a sign for you: you will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.” 13 And suddenly there was a multitude of the heavenly host with the angel, praising God and saying:  
14 “Glory to God in the highest  
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

This proclamation by the angels follows closely, but not exactly, the announcements Luke has already recorded. It begins with praise of God, a “do not be afraid,” and contains an announcement and a sign which will show that the announcement is true. There is no “How will this happen,” because the birth has already happened. The background in Luke’s mind was probably Isaiah 9:5, “To us a *child is born*; to us a son is given.” Also in Luke’s mind may have been Isaiah 52:7: How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the one bringing *good news*, announcing *peace*, bearing *good news*, announcing *salvation*, saying to Zion, “*Your God is King.*”

To quote scripture scholar Raymond Brown, “Luke is telling us that the angels of heaven recognized at the beginning of Jesus’ life what the disciples came to know only at the end, namely, the presence of the Messiah King who comes in the name of the Lord.” (at Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem)

## 2:15-20 - Shepherds go to Bethlehem (astonishment)

15 When the angels went away from them to heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go, then, to Bethlehem to see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” 16 So they went in haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the infant lying in the manger. 17 When they saw this, they made known the message that had been told them about this child. 18 All who heard it were amazed by what had been told them by the shepherds. 19 And Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart. 20 Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told to them.

The shepherds report what they had seen and heard. And all were amazed when they heard the story. Mary kept these things, “reflecting on them in her heart.” Luke has already told his audience that after the birth and circumcision and naming of John the Baptist, “All were astonished” and “All who heard these things took them to heart.” In the birth of Jesus, only Mary “reflected on them in her heart.” Perhaps this is reflective of what Jesus will say in 8:13 about those who receive the seed like rocky ground and are joyful for awhile, but then fall away, whereas Mary, “kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart.” Luke is identifying Mary as the one who hears the word of God and keeps it (11:28).

Luke quickly gets the shepherds out of the scene, as Matthew did with the Magi, because both evangelists know that when Jesus begins his public ministry, none of the events surrounding his birth will be remembered. The proclamation of the good news of faith will be left until later, by the apostles.

## 21 - Jesus is circumcised and named

21 When eight days were completed for his circumcision, he was named Jesus, the name given him by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

The child's circumcision and naming marks him as a member of God's chosen people. Luke thereby highlights the continuity of God's fidelity to his people, even as he begins his narration of the on-going of that covenant which will come to include others besides the chosen people.

## 2:22-40 - Presentation, Simeon and Anna

22 When the days were completed for their purification according to the law of Moses, they took him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord, 23 just as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every male that opens the womb shall be consecrated to the Lord," 24 and to offer the sacrifice of "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons," in accordance with the dictate in the law of the Lord.

25 Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon. This man was righteous and devout, awaiting the consolation of Israel, and the holy Spirit was upon him. 26 It had been revealed to him by the holy Spirit that he should not see death before he had seen the Messiah of the Lord. 27 He came in the Spirit into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus to perform the custom of the law in regard to him, 28 he took him into his arms and blessed God, saying:

29 "Now, Master, you may let your servant go  
in peace, according to your word,  
30 for my eyes have seen your salvation,  
31 which you prepared in sight of all the peoples,  
32 a light for revelation to the Gentiles,  
and glory for your people Israel."

33 The child's father and mother were amazed at what was said about him; 34 and Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, "Behold, this child is destined for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be contradicted 35 (and you yourself a sword will pierce) so that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed." 36 There was also a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived seven years with her husband after her marriage, 37 and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple, but worshiped night and day with fasting and prayer. 38 And coming forward at that very time, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were awaiting the redemption of Jerusalem.

39 When they had fulfilled all the prescriptions of the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. 40 The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

There are two Old Testament practices described and combined here: the purification of the mother after giving birth (Leviticus 12:6), and the presentation of the firstborn to the Lord (Exodus 13:11-13). Luke seems a bit murky on just what the latter meant, but he doesn't care about getting that accurate; he just wants to get the parents to the temple in Jerusalem. The firstborn was presented for service to the Lord in remembrance of the first Passover, when the angel spared the firstborn of the Israelites. By the First Century, the custom was that the firstborn consecrated to the Lord was "ransomed" by the offering of five shekels, or for the poor, two birds. Then the child was then taken home. As he did previously, Luke models his narrative after Samuel (I Samuel 1), but Samuel was not "ransomed" and taken home; he stayed in the temple.

What's Luke's purpose in this narrative? Jesus' parents are fulfilling the Law, and with Simeon and Anna, Luke is showing that the prophets also acclaim Jesus. Thus, Jesus is revealed

by both *the Law and the prophets* in the *temple* – a compendium of Israel’s faith. And once again Luke is showing the relative importance of John and Jesus. John’s birth was celebrated by Zachariah who prophesied, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, that John would be great. Here Luke has *two* prophets, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, attest to the greatness of Jesus. Once again, John is great, but Jesus is greater.

Simeon’s canticle and his words to Jesus’ parents present the major theme which Luke will carry out in Acts: “the fall and the rise of many” – the fall of much of the Jewish community which will not accept Jesus as the messiah, and the rise of the Gentile community which will accept him. The inmost thoughts of many will be revealed in the hostility of the Jewish authorities toward Jesus. In 12:1-2, Luke will see this fulfilled when Jesus says about the hostile attitude of the Pharisees, “Nothing is covered up that will not be revealed; nothing is hidden that will not be made known.” Therefore for Luke, the sword which will pierce Mary’s heart is the sword of division which she will witness in reference to the rejection or acceptance of her son.

Anna, the prophetess, is linked with Simeon, the prophet, not accidentally. In Acts 2:17, Luke will write that Peter quoted the prophet Joel as saying, “In the last days I shall pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and daughters will prophesy.” Although no word of Anna is recorded by Luke, her widowhood is described in terms which reflect the instructions for widowhood given in the writings of the early Christian community, especially by Paul.

Luke terminates the immediate scene of Simeon and Anna with verse 39, indicating that Mary and Joseph and the child returned home to Galilee. He terminates the infancy narrative with verse 40, indicating that the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him – terms similar to the narration following the circumcision of John the Baptist.

## 2:41-52 - The young Jesus in the temple

41 Each year his parents went to Jerusalem for the feast of Passover, 42 and when he was twelve years old, they went up according to festival custom. 43 After they had completed its days, as they were returning, the boy Jesus remained behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. 44 Thinking that he was in the caravan, they journeyed for a day and looked for him among their relatives and acquaintances, 45 but not finding him, they returned to Jerusalem to look for him. 46 After three days they found him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions, 47 and all who heard him were astounded at his understanding and his answers. 48 When his parents saw him, they were astonished, and his mother said to him, “Son, why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been looking for you with great anxiety.” 49 And he said to them, “Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” 50 But they did not understand what he said to them. 51 He went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them; and his mother kept all these things in her heart. 52 And Jesus advanced [in] wisdom and age and favor before God and man.

So where did this story come from? Matthew’s infancy narrative ends with the return of the parents and child to Nazareth. Luke’s narrative concluded nicely with the same point in 2:40. The inclusion of this story is best understood as an insertion by Luke as he was writing his final draft of his gospel. There was something else he wanted his readers to know about Jesus.

For Luke, the infancy narratives are a revelation of Christology, that is, a revelation of who Jesus is. Apocryphal gospels about the childhood and young adulthood of Jesus may have circulated prior to Luke’s writing of his gospel. They portrayed Jesus as something of a magician. For Luke, this story of the young Jesus in the temple is a further revelation of who Jesus is, by

having *Jesus himself* declare who he is. Who he is has already been announced by angels, by Elizabeth, by Simeon and Anna. Now Jesus himself announces who he is. It is therefore a revelation of Jesus' self-consciousness of having God as his Father.

Even the geographical information has significance for Luke. In both the gospel and in Acts, Luke gives us a theology-by-geography. From chapters nine to nineteen in Luke's Gospel Jesus journeys from Galilee to Jerusalem, the center of the Jewish world. In Acts, Jesus – through his disciples, most notably through Paul, – journeys from Jerusalem to Rome, the center of the Roman world. So here, the simple narration of Jesus (and his parents) going from Galilee to Jerusalem and back again is part of Luke's theology-by-geography. In the remainder of his Gospel, Jesus will again journey from Galilee to Jerusalem for Passover time.

The underlying theme of this story is that Jesus must be available for doing his Father's will rather than doing what his natural family might expect of him. A sort of parallel can be found in John's Gospel in the story about the wedding at Cana. Mary's suggestion that Jesus should do something about the lack of wine is countered by Jesus who says, "My hour has not yet come."

This story looks forward to the resurrection by the use of phrases such as: "after three days," "why have you been seeking?" which connects with the angel at the tomb who asks, "Why do you seek the living among the dead." Luke uses the phrase "to be lost" as equivalent to "to be dead," and "to be found" as equivalent to "to come back to life." The father of the prodigal son replies to his other son, "Your brother was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found." There is also the parallel of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus who were anxious because of all that had happened, and then their finding that Jesus was with them all the while.

Mary came to the temple searching for *her* son, and Jesus' reply to her indicates that first of all he is *God's* son.

### Preparations for Jesus' ministry - 3:1-4:13

After the introduction of John the Baptist as an infant (1:57-80), he reappears now as an adult. Then the adult Jesus is introduced in three scenes which show him to be 1) God's beloved Son and agent of the Holy Spirit, 2) the culmination of God's plan for creation, and 3) the faithful Son who conquers the power of evil.

3:1-20 - The ministry of John the Baptist [Mark 1:2-11; Matthew 3:1-17; John 1:19-28]

1 In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene, 2 during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the desert. 3 He went throughout [the] whole region of the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, 4 as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah:

"A voice of one crying out in the desert:

'Prepare the way of the Lord,

make straight his paths.

5 Every valley shall be filled

and every mountain and hill shall be made low.

The winding roads shall be made straight,

and the rough ways made smooth,

6 and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

7 He said to the crowds who came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? 8 Produce good fruits as evidence of your repentance; and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God can raise up children to Abraham from these stones. 9 Even now the ax lies at the root of the trees. Therefore every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."

10 And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" 11 He said to them in reply, "Whoever has two tunics should share with the person who has none. And whoever has food should do likewise." 12 Even tax collectors came to be baptized and they said to him, "Teacher, what should we do?" 13 He answered them, "Stop collecting more than what is prescribed." 14 Soldiers also asked him, "And what is it that we should do?" He told them, "Do not practice extortion, do not falsely accuse anyone, and be satisfied with your wages."

15 Now the people were filled with expectation, and all were asking in their hearts whether John might be the Messiah. 16 John answered them all, saying, "I am baptizing you with water, but one mightier than I is coming. I am not worthy to loosen the thongs of his sandals. He will baptize you with the holy Spirit and fire. 17 His winnowing fan is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." 18 Exhorting them in many other ways, he preached good news to the people. 19 Now Herod the tetrarch, who had been censured by him because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and because of all the evil deeds Herod had committed, 20 added still another to these by [also] putting John in prison.

Luke begins by situating John's ministry in the history of both the civil authorities of the Roman Empire and the religious leaders of Israel. There is some confusion about his naming two high priests, because there was only one at a time. Caiaphas was the high priest, but his father-in-law, Annas, was his predecessor, and apparently still had a lot of influence.

John appeared in the wilderness baptizing as a sign of repentance. His preaching centered on the belief that deeds, not words, counted in the eyes of God. (†) He gave specific instructions to three groups who came for baptism: to the crowds he said share your food and clothing with those who have none; to the tax collectors he said collect only what is prescribed; to the soldiers

he said do not extort, do not falsely accuse and be satisfied with your pay. These soldiers could hardly have been Roman; they probably were the Jewish soldiers of Herod Antipas, who were as despised by the people as were the Romans.

Here's some information about tax collectors. There was a chief tax collector in each town or district. He bid for the opportunity to tax his fellow citizens, and the Romans gave the job to the highest bidder. The other tax collectors approached the chief tax collector in the same way – bidding for the right to collect taxes. And what was taxed? There was a one percent income tax, import/export taxes, crop taxes (one-fifth of the yield of grain and a tax on wine), property tax, and something called an emergency tax and others. Tax collectors had to pay the chief tax collector the amount stipulated in his bidding for the right to collect taxes, and the chief tax collector had to pay the Romans the amount stipulated in his bidding for the job. The tax collectors made their own living by charging their fellow citizens more than they had to pay the higher-ups.

In 19:1-10 Luke will tell the story of Zacchaeus, a chief tax collector. When Jesus tells him that he wants to come to stay in his house, Zacchaeus tells him, “If I have extorted anything from anyone I shall repay it four times over.” Well, he probably had extorted a lot from all the lower level tax collectors in town.

When people started thinking John might be the messiah, he bluntly told them no; he was sent to prepare the way of the messiah. John points to one mightier than himself who will baptize with the holy Spirit and fire. When Luke writes the Acts of the Apostles this prophecy is fulfilled on Pentecost.

### 3:21-38 - Jesus' baptism and genealogy [Mark 1:9-11; Matthew 1:2-17, 3:13-17]

21 After all the people had been baptized and Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, heaven was opened 22 and the holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.”

23 When Jesus began his ministry he was about thirty years of age. He was the son, as was thought, of Joseph, the son of Heli, 24 the son of Matthat, the son of Levi, the son of Melchi, the son of Jannai, the son of Joseph, 25 the son of Mattathias, the son of Amos, the son of Nahum, the son of Esli, the son of Naggai, 26 the son of Maath, the son of Mattathias, the son of Semein, the son of Josech, the son of Joda, 27 the son of Joanan, the son of Rhesa, the son of Zerubbabel, the son of Shealtiel, the son of Neri, 28 the son of Melchi, the son of Addi, the son of Cosam, the son of Elmadam, the son of Er, 29 the son of Joshua, the son of Eliezer, the son of Jorim, the son of Matthat, the son of Levi, 30 the son of Simeon, the son of Judah, the son of Joseph, the son of Jonam, the son of Eliakim, 31 the son of Melea, the son of Menna, the son of Mattatha, the son of Nathan, the son of David, 32 the son of Jesse, the son of Obed, the son of Boaz, the son of Sala, the son of Nahshon, 33 the son of Amminadab, the son of Admin, the son of Arni, the son of Hezron, the son of Perez, the son of Judah, 34 the son of Jacob, the son of Isaac, the son of Abraham, the son of Terah, the son of Nahor, 35 the son of Serug, the son of Reu, the son of Peleg, the son of Eber, the son of Shelah, 36 the son of Cainan, the son of Arphaxad, the son of Shem, the son of Noah, the son of Lamech, 37 the son of Methuselah, the son of Enoch, the son of Jared, the son of Mahalaleel, the son of Cainan, 38 the son of Enos, the son of Seth, the son of Adam, the son of God.

We have to presume that Jesus was baptized by John, even though in the previous verse Luke tells us that Herod had John put in prison; Luke must be drawing on Mark's narration. In Luke the entire baptism scene is recorded in just two verses. After Jesus was baptized, he was praying. The Holy Spirit descended in the physical form of a dove, and the voice from heaven declared *to Jesus* who is in prayer, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.”

Luke immediately adds the genealogy of Jesus, much different from Matthew's genealogy. The major difference is that Matthew, writing for his predominantly Jewish community, uses his genealogy to trace Jesus' ancestry back through David to Abraham. Luke wants to be more universal than Matthew, so he traces Jesus' ancestry back to Adam. Luke's point is that Jesus comes from the Jewish race, but is messiah for more than the Jewish people; Jesus is messiah for the whole human race, and the fulfillment of God's plan since the beginning of creation.

Here's a note from Franciscan theology. Some theologians have argued that Jesus came as a result of humankind's sin. He was sent as a savior. Would he have become human had humans not sinned? Possibly, even probably. But in fact he came as a savior because of humankind's sin. Franciscans hold the opinion that the incarnation is too great a gift to have been occasioned by sin. But having been destined to come as the culminating event of the human race, because of sin he had to come also as a savior. In expiation for humankind's sin, did God the Father demand the ultimate sacrifice of His Son by death on the cross? No. Adam's sin was one of disobedience. Jesus expiated for that sin by his obedience to his Father. That made him enemies, who killed him.

#### 4:1-13 - Testing of Jesus [Matthew 4:1-11; Mark 1:12-13]

1 Filled with the holy Spirit, Jesus returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the desert 2 for forty days, to be tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and when they were over he was hungry. 3 The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread." 4 Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'" 5 Then he took him up and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a single instant. 6 The devil said to him, "I shall give to you all this power and their glory; for it has been handed over to me, and I may give it to whomever I wish. 7 All this will be yours, if you worship me." 8 Jesus said to him in reply, "It is written:

'You shall worship the Lord, your God,  
and him alone shall you serve.'"

9 Then he led him to Jerusalem, made him stand on the parapet of the temple, and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, 10 for it is written:

'He will command his angels concerning you,  
to guard you,'

11 and:

'With their hands they will support you,  
lest you dash your foot against a stone.'"

12 Jesus said to him in reply, "It also says, 'You shall not put the Lord, your God, to the test.'" 13 When the devil had finished every temptation, he departed from him for a time.

The three temptations offered to Jesus by the devil are temptations to pleasure, possessions and glory. In refuting the devil's temptation to turn a stone into bread (pleasure), Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 8:3: It is not by bread alone that people live, but from all that comes forth from the mouth of the Lord. All of Deuteronomy 8:1-6 is a testimony to God's love.

Jesus refutes the temptation to gain all the kingdoms of the earth (possessions) with a quotation from Deuteronomy 6:13: The Lord, your God, shall you fear; him shall you serve.

And Jesus refutes the temptation to glory by quoting Deuteronomy 6:16: You shall not put the Lord, your God, to the test.

The quotations from Deuteronomy are all part of Moses' address to the people after they have been liberated from Egyptian slavery and have defeated the kings who ruled in the promised land. All the quotations are basically from a victory speech of Moses.

We've already seen Luke's infancy narrative, and his preparation for Jesus' ministry. We will divide the rest of Luke's Gospel into four parts: 1) the Galilean ministry, 2) the journey to Jerusalem, 3) the Jerusalem ministry, and 4) the passion, death and resurrection narratives.

### **Jesus' Galilean Ministry - 4:14-9:50**

Luke's theology-by-geography begins in Galilee, where Jesus was raised and where he began his ministry. He will eventually travel to Jerusalem in fulfillment of Luke's theology that Jesus is the good news brought to the center of the Jewish world. In Acts of the Apostles, Luke will bring the good news to Rome, the center of the political world, in the person of Paul. Luke's theology is that the good news is meant for the whole of humankind.

While his theology is wonderful, his geography is not so good. At least twice he refers to the crowds' reaction to Jesus deeds and words, and designates them as "all of Judea," when Jesus is in Galilee. Since Luke was unfamiliar with the Palestine of Jesus' time, he is probably using "Judea" to mean all of the Holy Land, including Galilee, not just the southern part of the country which would be Judea.

#### 4:14-30 - Beginning at home [Mark 6:1-6; Matthew 13:54-58]

14 Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news of him spread throughout the whole region.

15 He taught in their synagogues and was praised by all.

16 He came to Nazareth, where he had grown up, and went according to his custom into the synagogue on the Sabbath day. He stood up to read 17 and was handed a scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He unrolled the scroll and found the passage where it was written:

18 "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me

to bring glad tidings to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives

and recovery of sight to the blind,

to let the oppressed go free,

19 and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord."

20 Rolling up the scroll, he handed it back to the attendant and sat down, and the eyes of all in the synagogue looked intently at him. 21 He said to them, "Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing." 22 And all spoke highly of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They also asked, "Isn't this the son of Joseph?" 23 He said to them, "Surely you will quote me this proverb, 'Physician, cure yourself,' and say, 'Do here in your native place the things that we heard were done in Capernaum.'" 24 And he said, "Amen, I say to you, no prophet is accepted in his own native place. 25 Indeed, I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah when the sky was closed for three and a half years and a severe famine spread over the entire land. 26 [m]It was to none of these that Elijah was sent, but only to a widow in Zarephath in the land of Sidon. 27 Again, there were many lepers in Israel during the time of Elisha the prophet; yet not one of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian." 28 When the people in the synagogue heard this, they were all filled with fury. 29 They rose up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town had been built, to hurl him down headlong. 30 But he passed through the midst of them and went away.

Both Mark and Matthew place this return to Nazareth later in their gospels, after having narrated many of Jesus' teachings and works of power. Luke places this at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. Luke clearly had Mark's Gospel in front of him, because in his own narration he has Jesus saying, "Surely you will say, 'Do here in your native place the things we heard were done in Capernaum.'" Well, up to this point in his gospel Luke has not indicated that Jesus ever visited Capernaum, nor has he narrated any works of power Jesus has done.

Luke's description of Jesus' first visit home since he began his public ministry portrays him as the prophet. Jesus reads from the scroll of Isaiah, and declares that that prophecy is fulfilled in his reading of it. Jesus identifies himself as a prophet. Luke narrates that Jesus drew the distinction between a prophet's poor reception in his own home town and the way others positively receive him. This seems to have annoyed his townsfolk. They went from speaking highly of him and being amazed at his words (4:22) to being angry at him and trying to kill him (4:28-29). It's as if they were jealous that he had done great things elsewhere, but not at home. They seemed to be saying, "Don't just preach to us; do something spectacular here, too." The townsfolk saw him grow up in town; they just took him for granted. In order to be accepted at home, they wanted him to do something spectacular. (‡)

This is a rather constant theme in Luke's narrative. Jesus is not confined to interest in his hometown, nor to the Jewish people, but he is interested in everybody. This is often referred to as Luke's "universalism." (‡)

#### 4:31-44 - First signs [Mark 1:21-31; Matthew 8:14-17]

31 Jesus then went down to Capernaum, a town of Galilee. He taught them on the sabbath, 32 and they were astonished at his teaching because he spoke with authority. 33 In the synagogue there was a man with the spirit of an unclean demon, and he cried out in a loud voice, 34 "Ha! What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!" 35 Jesus rebuked him and said, "Be quiet! Come out of him!" Then the demon threw the man down in front of them and came out of him without doing him any harm. 36 They were all amazed and said to one another, "What is there about his word? For with authority and power he commands the unclean spirits, and they come out." 37 And news of him spread everywhere in the surrounding region.

38 After he left the synagogue, he entered the house of Simon. Simon's mother-in-law was afflicted with a severe fever, and they interceded with him about her. 39 He stood over her, rebuked the fever, and it left her. She got up immediately and waited on them.

40 At sunset, all who had people sick with various diseases brought them to him. He laid his hands on each of them and cured them. 41 And demons also came out from many, shouting, "You are the Son of God." But he rebuked them and did not allow them to speak because they knew that he was the Messiah.

42 At daybreak, Jesus left and went to a deserted place. The crowds went looking for him, and when they came to him, they tried to prevent him from leaving them. 43 But he said to them, "To the other towns also I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God, because for this purpose I have been sent." 44 And he was preaching in the synagogues of Judea.

These signs take place in Capernaum, and Luke follows Mark in showing Jesus as teacher, exorcist, healer and proclaimer of God's kingdom.

Jesus' teaching in the synagogue is received with astonishment because he taught as one having authority. His casting out of a demon was also greeted by the crowd with amazement at the power of Jesus' word. He cures Simon's (Peter's) mother-in-law, and at sunset heals all who came to him. Again it is obvious that Luke is following Mark's narration. Mark has these stories after

the call of the first disciples. Here in Luke, Simon's (Peter's) mother-in-law is mentioned before Simon (Peter) has been introduced to the reader.

Jesus then leaves town at daybreak. Mark says that it was his disciples who sought him out in order to get him to come back to town. Luke says it was the crowds; they wanted to keep him. But he tells them that he has been sent to preach much more universally than just in the town which he has adopted as his new home, and in which he was so fondly received. (‡)

Luke's concluding verse is sort of strange. All that has been described has taken place in Galilee. But Luke ends by saying that Jesus was "preaching in the synagogues of Judea." But in the next verse Jesus is again in Galilee.

#### 5:1-11 - Jesus calls some disciples [Mark 1:14-20; Matthew 4:18-22; (John 21:1-11)]

1 While the crowd was pressing in on Jesus and listening to the word of God, he was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret. 2 He saw two boats there alongside the lake; the fishermen had disembarked and were washing their nets. 3 Getting into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, he asked him to put out a short distance from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. 4 After he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into deep water and lower your nets for a catch." 5 Simon said in reply, "Master, we have worked hard all night and have caught nothing, but at your command I will lower the nets." 6 When they had done this, they caught a great number of fish and their nets were tearing. 7 They signaled to their partners in the other boat to come to help them. They came and filled both boats so that they were in danger of sinking. 8 When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at the knees of Jesus and said, "Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man." 9 For astonishment at the catch of fish they had made seized him and all those with him, 10 and likewise James and John, the sons of Zebedee, who were partners of Simon. Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men." 11 When they brought their boats to the shore, they left everything and followed him.

Peter is portrayed as the central character and the spokesperson for the group. Mark presents James and John, and their father, Zebedee, as "competitors" of Peter and Andrew in the fishing business. Luke has James and John as Peter's partners. Peter first objects to going fishing again, because they have been at it all night, but he acquiesces to Jesus' direction. Luke presents this as perhaps a reflection of Mary's initial objection to the angel but then saying, "Be it done to me according to your word."

After the mammoth catch of fish, Peter tells Jesus to depart from him because he is a sinner. While Mary was the first disciple, this is the first of the sinners whom Jesus came to call, and this one he calls to follow him as a disciple. And all three of the fishermen leave everything to follow Jesus. (One wonders what happened to all those fish they left behind.)

#### 5:12-16 - The Leper [Mark 1:40-45; Matthew 8:2-4]

12 Now there was a man full of leprosy in one of the towns where he was; and when he saw Jesus, he fell prostrate, pleaded with him, and said, "Lord, if you wish, you can make me clean." 13 Jesus stretched out his hand, touched him, and said, "I do will it. Be made clean." And the leprosy left him immediately. 14 Then he ordered him not to tell anyone, but "Go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses prescribed; that will be proof for them." 15 The report about him spread all the more, and great crowds assembled to listen to him and to be cured of their ailments, 16 but he would withdraw to deserted places to pray.

In “one of the towns where he was” Jesus encountered a man “filled with leprosy,” who approached Jesus with the confidence that if Jesus wanted to, he could heal him. Jesus touched him (not a good thing to do because that would make Jesus unclean as the leper was unclean, and that would exclude both of them from interaction with society.) But it didn’t happen that way; the man was cured and sent off to show the priests that he had been made clean. This instruction of Jesus that the man should observe what was written in the Law may be Luke’s way of continuing his theme that Jesus comes from and is respectful of the Jewish religion.

This story ends with the notice that Jesus would withdraw to deserted places to pray. In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus often goes away to pray.

#### 5:17-26 - Another healing and controversy [Mark 2:1-12; Matthew 9:1-8]

17 One day as Jesus was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting there who had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and Jerusalem, and the power of the Lord was with him for healing. 18 And some men brought on a stretcher a man who was paralyzed; they were trying to bring him in and set [him] in his presence. 19 But not finding a way to bring him in because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and lowered him on the stretcher through the tiles into the middle in front of Jesus. 20 When he saw their faith, he said, “As for you, your sins are forgiven.” 21 Then the scribes and Pharisees began to ask themselves, “Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who but God alone can forgive sins?” 22 Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them in reply, “What are you thinking in your hearts? 23 Which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Rise and walk’? 24 But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—he said to the man who was paralyzed, “I say to you, rise, pick up your stretcher, and go home.” 25 He stood up immediately before them, picked up what he had been lying on, and went home, glorifying God. 26 Then astonishment seized them all and they glorified God, and, struck with awe, they said, “We have seen incredible things today.”

Luke follows Mark very closely here. The paralyzed man is brought to Jesus by friends; the crowds around Jesus prevent them from getting near Jesus, so they let him down through the roof. Jesus says, “Your sins are forgiven.” That ruffles the feathers of the teachers of the Law and of the Pharisees who have come from “every village in Galilee and Judea and Jerusalem.” That’s pretty amazing that they all came to “one of the towns where Jesus was.” And this is the first time they appear in Luke’s Gospel. They object to Jesus saying the man’s sins are forgiven, and Jesus heals the man to show that he does have the power to forgive sins. Luke says that astonished them all and they glorified God. (Even the Pharisees and teachers of the Law?)

In Acts of the Apostles, Luke writes favorably about several Pharisees, even that Paul claimed to be a Pharisee, and that he believed in the resurrection as all Pharisees did. In the sixty-some years between what Luke is describing in Acts, and his experience of Pharisees in those intervening sixty-some years, his opinion about them deteriorated. The negative light in which Luke describes the Pharisees in his Gospel may be an indication that among his own community there were Pharisees who had come to believe in Jesus, but who insisted on the observance of the Mosaic Law for Gentile Christians. Matthew had the same problem with his community.

#### 5:27-32 - Call of Levi and more controversy [Mark 2:13-17; Matthew 9:9-13]

27 After this he went out and saw a tax collector named Levi sitting at the customs post. He said to him, “Follow me.” 28 And leaving everything behind, he got up and followed him. 29 Then Levi gave a great banquet for him in his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were at table with them. 30 The Pharisees and their

scribes complained to his disciples, saying, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?” 31 Jesus said to them in reply, “Those who are healthy do not need a physician, but the sick do. 32 I have not come to call the righteous to repentance but sinners.”

The moral of this story might be the saying: you can judge a man by the friends he keeps. And that’s exactly what the Pharisees and their scribes did. They had no use for tax collectors and sinners, but that was the group with which Jesus hung around. Usually people are thought to hang around with people whom they liked and who liked them. So the Pharisees and their scribes decided that Jesus liked the tax collectors and sinners. Well, he just might have preferred their company to that of the Pharisees and their scribes, and he explained why. It wasn’t because the tax collectors and sinners had something to offer him, but because he had something to offer them. Jesus was the physician, and the tax collectors and the sinners were those who were sick. Jesus was calling people to repentance; the (self-)righteous weren’t interested in what Jesus was offering, because they thought they had no need of repentance. (†)

The presence of Pharisees at this dinner Levi gave is surprising. Some commentators have suggested that this is Luke’s picture of his own community. Some of its members may be chagrined that the community includes some “undesirables” who are not observant of the Jewish purity and ritual laws.

So now Jesus has called a sinner, as Peter described himself, and a tax collector. So when he was called a friend of tax collectors and sinners, he’d have to plead guilty.

#### 5:33-39 - The question of fasting and more controversy [Mark 2:18-22; Matthew 9:14-17]

33 And they said to him, “The disciples of John fast often and offer prayers, and the disciples of the Pharisees do the same; but yours eat and drink.” 34 Jesus answered them, “Can you make the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? 35 But the days will come, and when the bridegroom is taken away from them, then they will fast in those days.” 36 And he also told them a parable. “No one tears a piece from a new cloak to patch an old one. Otherwise, he will tear the new and the piece from it will not match the old cloak. 37 Likewise, no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the new wine will burst the skins, and it will be spilled, and the skins will be ruined. 38 Rather, new wine must be poured into fresh wineskins. 39 [And] no one who has been drinking old wine desires new, for he says, ‘The old is good.’”

Both Mark and Luke narrate that Levi gave a banquet at his house, and both evangelists make the same points. The change is that it is not the disciples of John and the Pharisees who ask Jesus why his disciples don’t fast; it’s just the Pharisees and their scribes.

To repeat the comments on Mark 2:18-22: Jesus’ reference to himself as the “bridegroom” had to have been understood by his audience as a messianic claim. During this time, there is no fasting. But later the disciples might go back to the practice. But the message given here is that Jesus is inaugurating something entirely new. The old practices of piety cannot hold this new revelation of God.

Jesus gives two examples of what the newness of his presence represents. You don’t sew a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, or the next time you wash it, the new piece will shrink and tear away from the old garment which has already shrunk. And you don’t put new fermenting wine into old wineskins, because the on-going fermentation will destroy the skins, and both the skins and the wine will be lost.

The point here is not that Jesus is rejecting the old law. If people do things right, both the patch and the garment will be left intact, and the wine and the wineskin will both survive.

A personal reflection: In 1967 I taught a sophomore religion class in Milwaukee. When we got to this passage in Mark's gospel, I explained to the class about the patch and the new wine. I asked if they could give me a parable in modern terms which would express the same message. A sophomore boy named Kim raised his hand and said, "You don't put a Ford Thunderbird engine in a Model T, because it will shake the shit out of the chassis." He got it!

Luke adds a verse to Mark's narration (5:39): No one who has been drinking old wine desires new, for he says, "The old is good." This is said by way of irony, and an explanation why the Pharisees and their scribes reject Jesus and his teaching; they are used to following the old routine, and so of course they don't want to have anything to do with something new. The saying might also have been some consolation to the Jewish members of Luke's community. (‡)

#### 6:1-11 - More controversies about the Sabbath [Mark 2:23-3:6; Matthew 2:1-8]

1 While he was going through a field of grain on a sabbath, his disciples were picking the heads of grain, rubbing them in their hands, and eating them. 2 Some Pharisees said, "Why are you doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?" 3 Jesus said to them in reply, "Have you not read what David did when he and those [who were] with him were hungry? 4 [How] he went into the house of God, took the bread of offering, which only the priests could lawfully eat, ate of it, and shared it with his companions." 5 Then he said to them, "The Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath."

6 On another Sabbath he went into the synagogue and taught, and there was a man there whose right hand was withered. 7 The scribes and the Pharisees watched him closely to see if he would cure on the Sabbath so that they might discover a reason to accuse him. 8 But he realized their intentions and said to the man with the withered hand, "Come up and stand before us." And he rose and stood there. 9 Then Jesus said to them, "I ask you, is it lawful to do good on the Sabbath rather than to do evil, to save life rather than to destroy it?" 10 Looking around at them all, he then said to him, "Stretch out your hand." He did so and his hand was restored. 11 But they became enraged and discussed together what they might do to Jesus.

Still following Mark, Luke presents the same two stories, but he cleans them up to make them more politically correct. The first story about the plucking heads of grain is pretty much unchanged from Mark. Mark says it was the Pharisees who questioned the plucking of grain on the Sabbath, Luke reduces it to "some" Pharisees. The matter involved, not the Law, but the Pharisees' commentary on the Law. The Law prescribed rest on the Sabbath. The later writings didn't determine what "rest" might mean; they elaborated on what "work" was, and they included harvesting as something which was work, so one could not do that on the Sabbath. Mark got the name of the high priest at David's time wrong, and Luke simply omits the name.

Luke really cleans up Mark's second Sabbath controversy, by omitting all those very human details about Jesus' words and frame of mind. In Mark, Jesus asks if it is lawful on the Sabbath to save a life or to *kill*; Luke's version is a bit softer: to save a life or to *destroy it*. [Actually the translation in the New American Bible Revised has the passage in Luke's way, but the Greek uses the word "kill."] Luke's description of Jesus is as follows, with the words of Mark which Luke omits are in brackets: Looking around at them [with *anger* and *grieved* at their hardness of heart]. Mark says that the Pharisees and the Herodeans plotted to kill Jesus; Luke writes that they were enraged and discussed what they might do with Jesus.

For imagining the scene, go back to page 18.

### 6:12-16 - The call of the apostles [Mark 3:13-19; Matthew 10:1-4]

12 In those days he departed to the mountain to pray, and he spent the night in prayer to God. 13 When day came, he called his disciples to himself, and from them he chose Twelve, whom he also named apostles: 14 Simon, whom he named Peter, and his brother Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, 15 Matthew, Thomas, James the son of Alphaeus, Simon who was called a Zealot, 16 and Judas the son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus often prays before some important event. Here he prays prior to selecting his intimate band from the group of his disciples. They were "to be sent;" that's what "apostle" means: one who is sent. Luke names the apostles, as do Mark and Matthew. For some information about each of them, see pages 23 to 25.

### 6:17-19 - The multitude [Mark 3:7-10; Matthew 4:23-25]

17 And he came down with them and stood on a stretch of level ground. A great crowd of his disciples and a large number of the people from all Judea and Jerusalem and the coastal region of Tyre and Sidon 18 came to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and even those who were tormented by unclean spirits were cured. 19 Everyone in the crowd sought to touch him because power came forth from him and healed them all.

Jesus has just chosen from among his disciples twelve to be his apostles; besides these two groups, there is a multitude of people following him. In the next section, Jesus will address all three groups. Just because some have been chosen to be apostles, or some have followed as disciples, does not exempt them from continuing to listen to the teaching of Jesus. In a sense, apostles and disciples are also part of the multitude which Jesus addresses. (‡)

### 6:20-49 - The sermon on the plain [Matthew 5:1-7:27]

20 And raising his eyes toward his disciples he said:

"Blessed are you who are poor,  
for the kingdom of God is yours.

21 Blessed are you who are now hungry,  
for you will be satisfied.

Blessed are you who are now weeping,  
for you will laugh.

22 Blessed are you when people hate you,  
and when they exclude and insult you,  
and denounce your name as evil  
on account of the Son of Man.

23 Rejoice and leap for joy on that day! Behold, your reward will be great in heaven. For their ancestors treated the prophets in the same way.

24 But woe to you who are rich,  
for you have received your consolation.

25 But woe to you who are filled now,  
for you will be hungry.

Woe to you who laugh now,  
for you will grieve and weep.

26 Woe to you when all speak well of you,  
for their ancestors treated the false prophets in this way.

27 “But to you who hear I say, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, 28 bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. 29 To the person who strikes you on one cheek, offer the other one as well, and from the person who takes your cloak, do not withhold even your tunic. 30 Give to everyone who asks of you, and from the one who takes what is yours do not demand it back. 31 Do to others as you would have them do to you. 32 For if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. 33 And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do the same. 34 If you lend money to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit [is] that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, and get back the same amount. 35 But rather, love your enemies and do good to them, and lend expecting nothing back; then your reward will be great and you will be children of the Most High, for he himself is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. 36 Be merciful, just as [also] your Father is merciful.

37 “Stop judging and you will not be judged. Stop condemning and you will not be condemned. Forgive and you will be forgiven. 38 Give and gifts will be given to you; a good measure, packed together, shaken down, and overflowing, will be poured into your lap. For the measure with which you measure will in return be measured out to you.” 39 And he told them a parable, “Can a blind person guide a blind person? Will not both fall into a pit? 40 No disciple is superior to the teacher; but when fully trained, every disciple will be like his teacher. 41 Why do you notice the splinter in your brother’s eye, but do not perceive the wooden beam in your own? 42 How can you say to your brother, ‘Brother, let me remove that splinter in your eye,’ when you do not even notice the wooden beam in your own eye? You hypocrite! Remove the wooden beam from your eye first; then you will see clearly to remove the splinter in your brother’s eye.

43 “A good tree does not bear rotten fruit, nor does a rotten tree bear good fruit. 44 For every tree is known by its own fruit. For people do not pick figs from thornbushes, nor do they gather grapes from brambles. 45 A good person out of the store of goodness in his heart produces good, but an evil person out of a store of evil produces evil; for from the fullness of the heart the mouth speaks.

46 “Why do you call me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ but not do what I command? 47 I will show you what someone is like who comes to me, listens to my words, and acts on them. 48 That one is like a person building a house, who dug deeply and laid the foundation on rock; when the flood came, the river burst against that house but could not shake it because it had been well built. 49 But the one who listens and does not act is like a person who built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the river burst against it, it collapsed at once and was completely destroyed.”

Much of Jesus’ teaching in Luke’s Gospel should be understood as addressed to prospective members of the believing community, and to those who were already members of Luke’s community. Some members of that community were in need of some “attitudinal adjustment.” But everything Jesus says cannot be addressed to every member of the community. For instance, Jesus addresses the rich, but not all were rich; certainly the Twelve were not. But some members were rich. It is probably good to listen to Jesus’ words as addressed to the members of Luke’s community . . . and to our own communities. (‡)

Luke’s community was dominantly Gentile, so those parts of Matthew’s sermon on the mount which addressed his difficulties with the scribes and Pharisees and the Jewish members of his own community and omitted.

The sermon begins with four beatitudes and four woes. The beatitudes are not as spiritualized as Matthew’s, but they are addressed directly to Luke’s audience.

Matthew	Luke's Blessed's	Luke's Woes
Blessed are <i>the poor in spirit</i> .	Blessed are <i>you</i> who are poor.	Woe to <i>you</i> who are rich now.
Blessed are <i>they who hunger and thirst for righteousness</i> .	Blessed are <i>you</i> who are now hungry.	Woe to <i>you</i> who are filled now.
Blessed are <i>they who mourn</i> .	Blessed are <i>you</i> who are weeping now.	Woe to <i>you</i> who laugh now.
Blessed are <i>they who are persecuted</i> .	Blessed are <i>you</i> when people hate you, and when they exclude and insult you, and denounce your name as evil on account of the Son of Man.	Woe to <i>you</i> when all speak well of you.

For Luke, possessions and the comfort they can bring, while not an absolute obstacle to membership in the kingdom, are nonetheless a hindrance to that membership. In the beginning of Acts of the Apostles, Luke describes the first community of believers (Acts 2:42-47). He is writing his gospel and Acts about fifty or sixty years after the events he's describing in those writings, and he's addressing some of the issues in his own community by holding up the ideal Christian community he describes in Acts. "All who believed were together and they held all things in common; they would sell their property and possessions and divide them among all according to each one's need." (Acts 2:44-45) As far as Luke was concerned wealth and possessions were things to be used for the benefit of others.

Jesus continues his "sermon on the plain." In all of the gospels, this sermon is probably the most radical and most demanding of Jesus' teachings. He starts out with "Love your enemies." Now, there's a shocker! (‡) That's followed up with instruction on what that love of enemies is. He's not talking about the feeling of affection. He means, "Do good to those who hate you; bless those who curse you; pray for those who persecute you." Can he possibly be serious? (‡)

Jesus continues to address the matter of possessions and wealth, almost a preoccupation for Luke. Some others who might be regarded as enemies are those who strike one on the cheek and one who would take your cloak. Not necessarily enemies are those who ask something of you, and those who would steal from you.

Luke's Jesus next takes up the question of reciprocity. To understand the revolution which Jesus is inaugurating, we might profitably go back to Genesis. There was a fellow named Lamech who said to his wives, "I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for bruising me. If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech seventy-seven times." (Genesis 4:23-24) That was mitigated in Exodus 21:24, when it was commanded that retaliation had to be more proportional: "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth," was quite an improvement over Lamech. Jesus lays down the golden rule: Do to others what you would have them do to you. There is no more reciprocity for injuries. Why? Because "then you will be children of the Most High, for he himself is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful just as your Father is merciful." (‡) Jesus teaches that even the golden rule is insufficient for his followers; *God's* goodness is the norm to be imitated, not simply what we would like done to us.

Of splinters and beams: Perhaps there were little annoyances among the members of Luke's community, especially concerning the observance of the dictates of the traditions of the

elders. Some may have wanted others to do as they themselves did in reference to those traditions. Perhaps they got on each others' nerves either by their insistence on observing those traditions or on the lack of necessity to observe them. The observance or non-observance were like splinters; they were matters of personal preference. The badgering of each other was like the beams, because that seriously divided the community.

The really radical pronouncement of Jesus is that his followers are to treat others, not only as they would wish to be treated, but as God treats people; equally as radical is his teaching that God will use the way we treat others as the norm by which God will judge us. (†) It doesn't really count that Jesus' followers think his teaching is wonderful; what matters is that his followers live what he teaches.(†) Jesus said, "Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' but do not do what I command?" Doing is building one's house on rock; listening only, without doing, is building without a firm foundation. That building will collapse.

### 7:1-10 - Healing the centurion's slave [Matthew 8:5-13; John 4:46-54]

1 When he had finished all his words to the people, he entered Capernaum. 2 A centurion there had a slave who was ill and about to die, and he was valuable to him. 3 When he heard about Jesus, he sent elders of the Jews to him, asking him to come and save the life of his slave. 4 They approached Jesus and strongly urged him to come, saying, "He deserves to have you do this for him, 5 for he loves our nation and he built the synagogue for us." 6 And Jesus went with them, but when he was only a short distance from the house, the centurion sent friends to tell him, "Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you enter under my roof. 7 Therefore, I did not consider myself worthy to come to you; but say the word and let my servant be healed. 8 For I too am a person subject to authority, with soldiers subject to me. And I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes; and to another, 'Come here,' and he comes; and to my slave, 'Do this,' and he does it." 9 When Jesus heard this he was amazed at him and, turning, said to the crowd following him, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith." 10 When the messengers returned to the house, they found the slave in good health.

The centurion is a Gentile. Jesus' offer to go into his house would make Jesus ritually unclean. The centurion sends a second delegation to Jesus to say that he knows that Jesus doesn't have to come into his house in order to cure his slave, but that Jesus can do so from a distance. This may further demonstrate the centurion's reputation for being good to the Jewish people. 2 Kings 5:1-14 comes to mind: the Gentile Naaman comes to Elisha the Jew to be healed. Luke again pictures Jesus as a prophet. You may remember that in Chapter 4, after reading from the scroll of Isaiah in the synagogue, Jesus said that the reading was fulfilled in the peoples hearing of it. Jesus thereby identified himself as a prophet.

The centurion really comes off in Luke's narrative as a nice guy and more. Jesus testifies to the "more:" Such faith he has not found in all of Israel.

### 7:11-17 - The widow of Naim [found only in Luke]

11 Soon afterward he journeyed to a city called Naim, and his disciples and a large crowd accompanied him. 12 As he drew near to the gate of the city, a man who had died was being carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. A large crowd from the city was with her. 13 When the Lord saw her, he was moved with pity for her and said to her, "Do not weep." 14 He stepped forward and touched the coffin; at this the bearers halted, and he said, "Young man, I tell you, arise!" 15 The dead man sat up and began to speak, and Jesus gave him to his mother. 16 Fear seized them all, and they glorified God, exclaiming, "A great prophet has arisen in our midst," and "God has visited his people." 17 This report about him spread through the whole of Judea and in all the surrounding region.

This is a story we have not heard reported before in the gospels. Let's start by imagining the scene and what would have occurred before the funeral procession reached Jesus.

The woman and her husband lived in town, but her husband worked a small plot of land as a garden or small farm outside of town. She noticed that he was developing a dry cough, which kept getting worse. It finally confined him to bed, and then he died. She and her son buried him, and the son took over working the garden-farm. As the son, too, began to develop a dry cough, his mother began to worry. And the worst happened; the son also died.

According to custom, the son was being buried on the day he died. And according to custom, his death left his mother destitute. Not only could she not work the garden-farm, she could not even own it because she is a woman.

And then the funeral procession met the stranger and his gang coming into town. If they were looking for a fight, it was the wrong time, because so many of the townsfolk were with the procession. But they didn't look like they wanted a fight. The obvious leader of the gang moved through the crowd and walked up to the stretcher. He said to the mother, "Do not weep." And before anyone could argue with him about the appropriateness of the widow's tears, he touched the stretcher. The bearers stopped still. Now what? Jesus said to the young man, "I tell you, arise!" And he sat up and began to talk! And Jesus gave him to his mother.

We can imagine the excitement in town, and the festivities which followed as the group of townsfolk and the crowd with Jesus became instant friends.

So much for our imaginings. What did Luke have in mind when he narrated this story? He probably had in mind the story from 1 Kings 17:17-24, where Elijah the prophet provided for the widow of Zarephath and her son, bringing her son back to life. (Read the whole story in 1 Kings, all of Chapter 17. It, too, is a touching story.) Luke is again highlighting Jesus' role as the prophet. Luke reports that seized by fear, the crowd glorified God, and said, "A great prophet has arisen in our midst," and "God has visited his people."

Once again, Luke says that the story spread about "in all Judea." But Jesus is still in Galilee.

By telling the stories of the centurion's slave and the widow's son, Luke makes one of his major points: Jesus has come to call the outcasts, the neglected, to his kingdom. He ministers to a Gentile and to a woman. (‡)

#### 7:18-35 - Jesus and John [Mark 1:2; Matthew 11:2-19]

18 The disciples of John told him about all these things. John summoned two of his disciples 19 and sent them to the Lord to ask, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?" 20 When the men came to him, they said, "John the Baptist has sent us to you to ask, 'Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?'" 21 At that time he cured many of their diseases, sufferings, and evil spirits; he also granted sight to many who were blind. 22 And he said to them in reply, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have the good news proclaimed to them. 23 And blessed is the one who takes no offense at me."

24 When the messengers of John had left, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John. "What did you go out to the desert to see—a reed swayed by the wind? 25 Then what did you go out to see? Someone dressed in fine garments? Those who dress luxuriously and live sumptuously are found in royal palaces. 26 Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. 27 This is the one about whom scripture says:

‘Behold, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, he will prepare your way before you.’

28 I tell you, among those born of women, no one is greater than John; yet the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.” 29 (All the people who listened, including the tax collectors, and who were baptized with the baptism of John, acknowledged the righteousness of God; 30 but the Pharisees and scholars of the law, who were not baptized by him, rejected the plan of God for themselves.)

31 “Then to what shall I compare the people of this generation? What are they like? 32 They are like children who sit in the marketplace and call to one another, ‘We played the flute for you, but you did not dance. We sang a dirge, but you did not weep.’

33 For John the Baptist came neither eating food nor drinking wine, and you said, ‘He is possessed by a demon.’ 34 The Son of Man came eating and drinking and you said, ‘Look, he is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.’ 35 But wisdom is vindicated by all her children.”

Back in 3:20 Luke told us that Herod had John put in prison. From his prison cell he sends disciples to Jesus to ask if he is the one who is to come, or must he wait for another. Luke interrupts the dialogue between the disciples of John and Jesus to recapitulate several of the things he has just narrated about Jesus’ activity. Then Jesus says, “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have the good news proclaimed to them. And blessed is the one who takes no offense at me.” It’s almost as if Jesus is modeling what he said back in 6:46, where he said it was by one’s deeds that one must be judged, not by words alone. (†) So here he asks John’s disciples to judge by what they have seen and heard of Jesus’ deeds.

When Jesus says, “Blessed is the one who takes no offense at me,” he means that he is perhaps not the kind of powerful and triumphant messiah people were expecting, but he is nonetheless the messiah who can be recognized by his deeds.

After John’s disciples leave, Jesus speaks about John. In his earlier description of John, Luke didn’t mention his clothing as Matthew had done. But here Jesus brings in the matter of clothing and says that those who wear fine clothes are the wealthy who are to be found in palaces, perhaps contrasting John with some wealthy members of Luke’s community.

In speaking to the crowds about John, Jesus uses passages from the prophets Malachi and Isaiah to identify who John is: the messenger who will prepare the way. In saying that, as great as John is, the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater, Jesus is pronouncing the inauguration of something new and better than the old Law.

Jesus then gets a couple of licks in about this current generation. They are like a bunch of petulant kids who stubbornly want their own way, so that no matter what comes their way (John or Jesus) they refuse to be satisfied. John came as an aesthetic, Jesus eating and drinking. People objected to both of them. Jesus contrasts those kids to Wisdom’s children. The meaning becomes quite clear if the passage is read aloud with emphasis on the word “her.” The other kids are brats. But Wisdom is justified, by contrast, in *her* children.

7:36-50 - The sinful woman [Unique to Luke, but snippets found in Mark 14:3; Matthew 26:7]

36 A Pharisee invited him to dine with him, and he entered the Pharisee’s house and reclined at table. 37 Now there was a sinful woman in the city who learned that he was at table in the house of the Pharisee. Bringing an alabaster flask of ointment, 38 she stood behind him at his feet weeping and began to bathe his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them, and anointed them with the ointment. 39 When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this he said to himself, “If this man were a prophet, he would know who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, that she is a sinner.” 40 Jesus said to him in reply, “Simon, I have something to say to you.”

“Tell me, teacher,” he said. 41 “Two people were in debt to a certain creditor; one owed five hundred days’ wages and the other owed fifty. 42 Since they were unable to repay the debt, he forgave it for both. Which of them will love him more?” 43 Simon said in reply, “The one, I suppose, whose larger debt was forgiven.” He said to him, “You have judged rightly.” 44 Then he turned to the woman and said to Simon, “Do you see this woman? When I entered your house, you did not give me water for my feet, but she has bathed them with her tears and wiped them with her hair. 45 You did not give me a kiss, but she has not ceased kissing my feet since the time I entered. 46 You did not anoint my head with oil, but she anointed my feet with ointment. 47 So I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven; hence, she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.” 48 He said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.” 49 The others at table said to themselves, “Who is this who even forgives sins?” 50 But he said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

A Pharisee named Simon invited Jesus to dinner. No reason for the invitation is given. But because of his failure to show the signs of respect for an honored guest, it must not have been because Simon saw Jesus as a prophet of God. If he had, he would have provided the washing of his feet, a kiss, an anointing of his head with oil. The woman provides all these ministrations; for her Jesus must have been considered an honored guest.

But the Pharisee objects to the woman’s contact with Jesus. He tells himself that if Jesus really were a prophet, he would be able to read a person’s heart and mind, and he would know what kind of a woman she was, and he would not have allowed her to touch him. Even though he said this to himself, Jesus read his heart and mind. So he tells a mini-parable about the relation between small and large debts being forgiven. The Pharisee gets the point of the parable, but not the application Jesus is making to the present situation. Jesus explains the meaning to Simon. “Her many sins have been forgiven, hence she has shown great love.” Only then does Jesus say to the woman, “Your sins are forgiven.” The other Pharisees at table objected to that, of course.

Once again, in his portrayal of the Pharisees in the story, Luke may have had in mind the members of his own community who were rigorists about observing the traditions of the elders.

### 8:1-3 - The women [Unique to Luke]

1 Afterward he journeyed from one town and village to another, preaching and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. Accompanying him were the Twelve 2 and some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities, Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, 3 Joanna, the wife of Herod’s steward Chuza, Susanna, and many others who provided for them out of their resources.

These three verses contain very important Lucan themes. The first one is the presence of women. Luke is partial to including women in his narratives. From here on, when reading Luke’s descriptions of the disciples, one must imagine that women are included in that group. Mary Magdalen and Joanna are explicitly mentioned in two other places in Luke’s Gospel. It was not unusual in Jesus’ time that wealthy women would support the local rabbi. But it was unheard of that women would travel with a teacher. The second Lucan theme shown here is his attitude toward possessions: they are meant to be used in support of others.

### 8:4-15 - The parable of the sower [Mark 4:1-20; Matthew 13:1-23]

4 When a large crowd gathered, with people from one town after another journeying to him, he spoke in a parable. 5 “A sower went out to sow his seed. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path and was trampled, and the birds of the sky ate it up. 6 Some seed fell on rocky ground, and when it grew, it withered for lack of moisture. 7

Some seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew with it and choked it. 8 And some seed fell on good soil, and when it grew, it produced fruit a hundredfold.” After saying this, he called out, “Whoever has ears to hear ought to hear.”

9 Then his disciples asked him what the meaning of this parable might be. 10 He answered, “Knowledge of the mysteries of the kingdom of God has been granted to you; but to the rest, they are made known through parables so that ‘they may look but not see, and hear but not understand.’

11 “This is the meaning of the parable. The seed is the word of God. 12 Those on the path are the ones who have heard, but the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts that they may not believe and be saved. 13 Those on rocky ground are the ones who, when they hear, receive the word with joy, but they have no root; they believe only for a time and fall away in time of trial. 14 As for the seed that fell among thorns, they are the ones who have heard, but as they go along, they are choked by the anxieties and riches and pleasures of life, and they fail to produce mature fruit. 15 But as for the seed that fell on rich soil, they are the ones who, when they have heard the word, embrace it with a generous and good heart, and bear fruit through perseverance.

Planting seeds in Jesus’ time was done like this: the sower would scatter seeds broadly, and then would plow the land to fold the seeds under in the good ground. So it is not surprising that some of the seed fell in places which did not get plowed. Luke follows Mark closely in this section.

Typical of Luke, he softens things. In Mark and Matthew the disciples ask Jesus why he speaks in parables. In Luke they ask only for an explanation of the parable. With slight changes from Mark and slight differences from Matthew, Luke’s Jesus explains the parable of the sower in approximately the same way that the other two evangelists narrate. The seed is the word of God. Those on the path are the ones from whom the devil takes the seed. The rocky ground allows no depth for the roots, and so they flourish for awhile, then wither. Those among thorns are the ones who are anxious about the riches and pleasures of life. This last group is described differently by Luke than by Mark or Matthew. For Luke the frustrating element preventing fruit from growing is the “good life.” Finally the seed which fell on the ground which was then plowed are those who receive the seed with a generous and good heart and produce fruit.

#### 8:16-18 - Parable of the lamp [Mark 4:21-25; Matthew 10:26]

16 “No one who lights a lamp conceals it with a vessel or sets it under a bed; rather, he places it on a lampstand so that those who enter may see the light. 17 For there is nothing hidden that will not become visible, and nothing secret that will not be known and come to light. 18 Take care, then, how you hear. To anyone who has, more will be given, and from the one who has not, even what he seems to have will be taken away.”

The lamp is meant to be seen and to give light. It’s not to be kept hidden. And Jesus adds that nothing which is hidden will remain hidden, but all will come to the light. This is almost a reflection of the early passage from Luke when Mary is told that a sword will pierce her heart so that the thoughts of many may be manifest.

Jesus’ admonition is “Take care, then, how you hear.” Coming as it does after the parable of the sower and seed, perhaps this means that a disciple must hear, not only with his or her ears, but by acting on the Word. (‡) And failure to act will be like the seed which fell along the path and was taken away by the devil. “To anyone who has, more will be given, and from the one who has not, even what he seems to have will be taken away.” So if one hears and acts on what is heard, more will be given, but if one hears only, he or she may seem to have, but that, too, will disappear. It’s a matter of “Use it, or lose it.”

## 8:19-21 - Jesus' family [Mark 3:31-35; Matthew 12:46-50]

19 Then his mother and his brothers came to him but were unable to join him because of the crowd. 20 He was told, "Your mother and your brothers are standing outside and they wish to see you." 21 He said to them in reply, "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and act on it."

Almost right out of Mark, Luke only softens the edges again. But the point is the same. Doing the will of God, not just hearing it, gains a person membership in the family of Jesus. (‡)

## 8:22-25 - Calming of the sea (authority over nature) [Mark 4:35-41; Matthew 8:18, 23-27]

22 One day he got into a boat with his disciples and said to them, "Let us cross to the other side of the lake." So they set sail, 23 and while they were sailing he fell asleep. A squall blew over the lake, and they were taking in water and were in danger. 24 They came and woke him saying, "Master, master, we are perishing!" He awakened, rebuked the wind and the waves, and they subsided and there was a calm. 25 Then he asked them, "Where is your faith?" But they were filled with awe and amazed and said to one another, "Who then is this, who commands even the winds and the sea, and they obey him?"

This and the next three miracles are found in Mark in the same order that Luke gives them. Mark's portrayals are more detailed and down-to-earth. Again, Luke is more genteel.

## 8:26-39 - Healing the demoniac (authority over the devil) [Mark 5:1-20; Matthew 8:28-34]

26 Then they sailed to the territory of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. 27 When he came ashore a man from the town who was possessed by demons met him. For a long time he had not worn clothes; he did not live in a house, but lived among the tombs. 28 When he saw Jesus, he cried out and fell down before him; in a loud voice he shouted, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me!" 29 For he had ordered the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (It had taken hold of him many times, and he used to be bound with chains and shackles as a restraint, but he would break his bonds and be driven by the demon into deserted places.) 30 Then Jesus asked him, "What is your name?" He replied, "Legion," because many demons had entered him. 31 And they pleaded with him not to order them to depart to the abyss.

32 A herd of many swine was feeding there on the hillside, and they pleaded with him to allow them to enter those swine; and he let them. 33 The demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned. 34 When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran away and reported the incident in the town and throughout the countryside. 35 People came out to see what had happened and, when they approached Jesus, they discovered the man from whom the demons had come out sitting at his feet. He was clothed and in his right mind, and they were seized with fear. 36 Those who witnessed it told them how the possessed man had been saved. 37 The entire population of the region of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them because they were seized with great fear. So he got into a boat and returned. 38 The man from whom the demons had come out begged to remain with him, but he sent him away, saying, 39 "Return home and recount what God has done for you." The man went off and proclaimed throughout the whole town what Jesus had done for him.

It is important to note that this event, narrated by three evangelists, takes place in Gentile territory. Matthew's is the shortest narration; the length in Mark and Luke is unusual. Some suggest that the reason for the length and the detail is that the source is an eye-witness – some suggest Peter. Luke's is, of course, the most polished, and even compulsive, presentation.

Although it has nothing to do with praying, living and preaching the gospel, we can appreciate Luke's passion for order in the way he makes explicit what could have been deduced from Mark's narration, namely the contrasts within the story.

Outside the city (8:27) . . . . . inside the city (8:39)  
 Living in the tombs (8:27) . . . . . living in a house (8:27, 39)  
 Unclothed (8:27) . . . . . clothed (8:35)  
 Demented (8:27) . . . . . of sound mind (8:35)  
 Living in the desert (8:29) . . . . . living in a house (8:39)

These contrasts show the transfer from destructive isolation to nurturing human community, which Luke identifies as “being saved” (8:36) by Jesus, Son of the Most High God (8:28). This may be an example of the “orderly account” Luke promised in 1:3.

Pigs in the Gentile country would not be unexpected, but pigs were also a symbol of the Romans who occupied the land. The insignia of the Roman legion which occupied the territory during Luke’s lifetime was the wild boar, a pig.

For the Hebrew scriptures, to be deprived of one’s clothes was to be without an identity; this happened to slaves, prostitutes, demented people and damned people. When the man was clothed and in his right mind, his identity had been restored.

8:40-56 - Jairus’ daughter/woman with hemorrhage (authority over sickness and death)  
 [Mark 5:21-43; Matthew 9:18-26]

40 When Jesus returned, the crowd welcomed him, for they were all waiting for him. 41 And a man named Jairus, an official of the synagogue, came forward. He fell at the feet of Jesus and begged him to come to his house, 42 because he had an only daughter, about twelve years old, and she was dying. As he went, the crowds almost crushed him. 43 And a woman afflicted with hemorrhages for twelve years, who [had spent her whole livelihood on doctors and] was unable to be cured by anyone, 44 came up behind him and touched the tassel on his cloak. Immediately her bleeding stopped. 45 Jesus then asked, “Who touched me?” While all were denying it, Peter said, “Master, the crowds are pushing and pressing in upon you.” 46 But Jesus said, “Someone has touched me; for I know that power has gone out from me.” 47 When the woman realized that she had not escaped notice, she came forward trembling. Falling down before him, she explained in the presence of all the people why she had touched him and how she had been healed immediately. 48 He said to her, “Daughter, your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

49 While he was still speaking, someone from the synagogue official’s house arrived and said, “Your daughter is dead; do not trouble the teacher any longer.” 50 On hearing this, Jesus answered him, “Do not be afraid; just have faith and she will be saved.” 51 When he arrived at the house he allowed no one to enter with him except Peter and John and James, and the child’s father and mother. 52 All were weeping and mourning for her, when he said, “Do not weep any longer, for she is not dead, but sleeping.” 53 And they ridiculed him, because they knew that she was dead. 54 But he took her by the hand and called to her, “Child, arise!” 55 Her breath returned and she immediately arose. He then directed that she should be given something to eat. 56 Her parents were astounded, and he instructed them to tell no one what had happened.

The story of Jairus and his daughter starts out, but then is interrupted by the story of the woman with the hemorrhage. Jairus, a leader of the local synagogue, comes to Jesus and falls at Jesus’ feet, always a sign in Luke of someone recognizing authority. We learn that the girl is twelve years old, and therefore of marriageable age, and that she is Jairus’ only daughter.

Then, following Mark, Luke inserts the story of the woman with the hemorrhage. The woman has been afflicted for twelve years, and had spent all her money on doctors to no avail. The flow of blood made her ritually unclean; she should not even have been in the crowd surrounding Jesus. But she reached out and touched Jesus, thereby making him ritually unclean.

(‡) Both the woman and Jesus knew that something had happened. The woman knew she was healed, and Jesus knew that power had gone out from him. After a bit of verbal skirmish between Jesus and Peter, the woman comes forward and declares herself. Jesus' response, "Daughter, your faith has saved you. Go in peace" is the same in all three synoptics.

Back to the story of Jairus and his daughter. Jairus and Jesus on the way to Jairus' house are told not to trouble the teacher further, because the girl has died. Jesus says, "Do not be afraid; only have faith and the girl will be saved." When they get to the house, all the expected weeping and mourning is going on, but Jesus says to stop it because the girl is asleep and not dead. They laugh at Jesus. But Jesus proceeds to take the girl's parents, Peter and James and John to the place where the dead girl is lying. Jesus takes her hand. He touched a corpse; again something which would make him ritually unclean. But instead, the girl comes back to life. The parents are astounded, but Jesus tells them to keep quiet about the event.

Ever since 8:22, Luke has given a glorious picture of Jesus' authority and power. He has polished Mark's narratives of the same stories, making them somewhat less interesting, but emphasizing Jesus' power rather than some of the details found in Mark. Next Jesus will send out the Twelve, giving them the same kind of power.

9:1-6 - The apostles are sent [Mark 6:7-13; Matthew 10:1, 5-15]

1 He summoned the Twelve and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, 2 and he sent them to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal [the sick]. 3 He said to them, "Take nothing for the journey, neither walking stick, nor sack, nor food, nor money, and let no one take a second tunic. 4 Whatever house you enter, stay there and leave from there. 5 And as for those who do not welcome you, when you leave that town, shake the dust from your feet in testimony against them." 6 Then they set out and went from village to village proclaiming the good news and curing diseases everywhere.

After Jesus sent his apostles out on their mission, what did *he* do? And what exactly did the apostles preach as they proclaimed the kingdom of God? They were given power to heal and to cast out demons. And they were told to travel light. And if they were rejected, they were to shake off the dust of that town and move on. And they went from village to village proclaiming the good news and curing illnesses.

9:7-9 - Herod wonders [Mark 6:14-29; Matthew 14:1-12]

7 Herod the tetrarch heard about all that was happening, and he was greatly perplexed because some were saying, "John has been raised from the dead"; 8 others were saying, "Elijah has appeared"; still others, "One of the ancient prophets has arisen." 9 But Herod said, "John I beheaded. Who then is this about whom I hear such things?" And he kept trying to see him.

Still following Mark, Luke includes this bit. For the rest of chapter nine, he will be establishing further Jesus' identity. He begins with Herod's wondering about Jesus. It would seem that Herod had heard about the activity of the apostles, and that is what made him wonder. Some were saying that Jesus was Elijah who had returned; others said it was one of the prophets

of old. In the following stories, Luke is satisfying Herod's curiosity about who Jesus is, and at the same time revealing to his audience the same message.

By the introduction of a comparison between John and Jesus in Herod's mind, Luke introduces the theme of the cross as part of who Jesus is.

9:10-17 - The apostles return/feeding 5,000 [Mark 6:30-44, 8:1-10; Matthew 14:13-21, 15:32-39; John 6:1-15]

10 When the apostles returned, they explained to him what they had done. He took them and withdrew in private to a town called Bethsaida. 11 The crowds, meanwhile, learned of this and followed him. He received them and spoke to them about the kingdom of God, and he healed those who needed to be cured. 12 As the day was drawing to a close, the Twelve approached him and said, "Dismiss the crowd so that they can go to the surrounding villages and farms and find lodging and provisions; for we are in a deserted place here." 13 He said to them, "Give them some food yourselves." They replied, "Five loaves and two fish are all we have, unless we ourselves go and buy food for all these people." 14 Now the men there numbered about five thousand. Then he said to his disciples, "Have them sit down in groups of [about] fifty." 15 They did so and made them all sit down. 16 Then taking the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up to heaven, he said the blessing over them, broke them, and gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd. 17 They all ate and were satisfied. And when the leftover fragments were picked up, they filled twelve wicker baskets.

When the apostles returned, Jesus took them to a town called Bethsaida, which poses a problem when the apostles say that the people can't be provided for in "this deserted place." Once again Luke's geography isn't all that good. But then, he might never have lived in Palestine.

The crowds followed Jesus and the apostles, and Jesus preached to them and cured illnesses. And when it came to be late, the problem arose about feeding them. All the feeding stories in the gospels recall to mind the Exodus experience of Moses feeding the people in the desert, and they clearly look forward to the Eucharist at the Last Supper.

Luke's focus is on Jesus and on the disciples whom Jesus tells to distribute the bread. Jesus and his apostles are cast in the role of table-servers. As he is preparing the Twelve for leadership in the community – which will be borne out in Acts – he is demonstrating that the leadership in which they are to be engaged is that of service. (‡)

9:18-21 - Peter's faith [Mark 8:27-30; Matthew 16:13-20]

18 Once when Jesus was praying in solitude, and the disciples were with him, he asked them, "Who do the crowds say that I am?" 19 They said in reply, "John the Baptist; others, Elijah; still others, 'One of the ancient prophets has arisen.'" 20 Then he said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter said in reply, "The Messiah of God." 21 He rebuked them and directed them not to tell this to anyone.

Still providing an answer to Herod's wondering about who Jesus is, Luke presents Peter's profession of faith. Jesus initiated the conversation after he had been praying (always an indication in Luke that something important is about to happen). After asking what other people were saying about him, Jesus asks the disciples directly about their opinion. Peter, always the spokesperson, says, "The Messiah of God."

Jesus enjoins silence on the apostles; they are to tell no one that he is “the Messiah of God,” because that would lead to a misunderstanding about who Jesus is. Jesus will take care of that problem in the next verse.

#### 9:22 - First prediction of the Passion [Mark 8:31; Matthew 16:31]

22 He said, “The Son of Man must suffer greatly and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed and on the third day be raised.”

And yet again providing an answer to Herod’s wondering. The messiah will have to suffer. Jesus names the elders, the chief priests and the scribes, members of the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem, as those who will reject him, and lead to his being killed.

#### 9:23-27 - The plight of the disciples [Mark 8:34-9:1; Matthew 16:24-28]

23 Then he said to all, “If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. 24 For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. 25 What profit is there for one to gain the whole world yet lose or forfeit himself? 26 Whoever is ashamed of me and of my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels. 27 Truly I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God.”

Luke adds the word “daily” to the admonition Jesus makes about taking up one’s cross. Mark and Matthew don’t use that word. The use of “daily” changes the outlook. Mark and Matthew could be understood to be speaking only about the fast approaching of the passion and death of Jesus. Luke’s addition of the word “daily” suggests that discipleship is a thing ongoing indefinitely. Taking up the cross daily and following the master will become a way of life. (†)

What about Jesus statement, “Truly I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God.”? Well, Luke does not link this saying to the parousia, as Matthew does, nor to the coming of the Son of Man “in power” as Mark does. For Luke, “some of those standing here” are Peter, James and John, who will see it in the transfiguration of Jesus, which Luke describes next.

#### 9:28-36 - Transfiguration [Mark 9:2-8; Matthew 17:1-8]

28 About eight days after he said this, he took Peter, John, and James and went up the mountain to pray. 29 While he was praying his face changed in appearance and his clothing became dazzling white. 30 And behold, two men were conversing with him, Moses and Elijah, 31 who appeared in glory and spoke of his exodus that he was going to accomplish in Jerusalem. 32 Peter and his companions had been overcome by sleep, but becoming fully awake, they saw his glory and the two men standing with him. 33 As they were about to part from him, Peter said to Jesus, “Master, it is good that we are here; let us make three tents, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” But he did not know what he was saying. 34 While he was still speaking, a cloud came and cast a shadow over them, and they became frightened when they entered the cloud. 35 Then from the cloud came a voice that said, “This is my chosen Son; listen to him.” 36 After the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. They fell silent and did not at that time tell anyone what they had seen.

This episode, also, is a response to Herod's wondering who this Jesus is, back in 9:7-9.

Luke begins this narration by writing, "About eight days after he had said this," – namely, that some would not see death until they see the kingdom of God – "he took Peter, John and James and went up the mountain to pray." He's praying again, so something important is going to happen. Remember, at his baptism Jesus was praying and the voice came from heaven designating him as the Beloved Son. As Jesus is praying here, his appearance begins to change, and he is conversing with Moses and Elijah, who are talking with him about his "exodus which he was going to accomplish in Jerusalem."

Peter, James and John had fallen asleep, but they awoke to see Jesus talking with Moses and Elijah. Ever impetuous Peter immediately grasps (incorrectly) the meaning of what he sees, and so he wants to build three tents on the spot to show that his friend Jesus is as great as the Law-giver and the prophet. The voice from the cloud corrects Peter's misinterpretation of the event. A cloud comes over them all, Moses and Elijah begin to leave, and a voice from the cloud says, "This is my chosen Son; listen to him."

To grasp the full import of what this voice said, one must hear it twice, each time with the emphasis on a different word. First hear the emphasis on "him" rather than Moses or Elijah. Jesus surpasses, but does not supplant Moses and Elijah in glory and importance. The prophet and the Law-giver were, after all, in conversation with Jesus.

Then hear the sentence a second time with the emphasis on "listen." In the following ten chapters Jesus will be teaching a great deal. Disciples are called to listen intently to what Jesus says, that is to obey what he says. The Greek word for "obey" is *hypacoue*, which is made up of the word "*acoue*" which means "to listen," and the prefix "*hyp-*" from which comes our English word "hyper." So to listen intently to what Jesus says means to obey his teaching. (†)

When Jesus gets to Jerusalem in ten chapters, he will continue teaching in the temple area. At the end of that teaching section in Jerusalem, just before the beginning of the passion narrative, Luke will tell us: "During the day, Jesus was teaching in the temple area, but at night he would leave and stay at the place called the Mount of Olives. And all the people would get up early each morning to *listen* to him in the temple area."

#### 9:37-43 - The possessed boy [Mark 9:30-32; Matthew 17:14-18]

37 On the next day, when they came down from the mountain, a large crowd met him. 38 There was a man in the crowd who cried out, "Teacher, I beg you, look at my son; he is my only child. 39 For a spirit seizes him and he suddenly screams and it convulses him until he foams at the mouth; it releases him only with difficulty, wearing him out. 40 I begged your disciples to cast it out but they could not." 41 Jesus said in reply, "O faithless and perverse generation, how long will I be with you and endure you? Bring your son here." 42 As he was coming forward, the demon threw him to the ground in a convulsion; but Jesus rebuked the unclean spirit, healed the boy, and returned him to his father. 43 And all were astonished by the majesty of God.

In order to get the point of this narrative, one must remember that Jesus had sent his apostles out to preach and cure and cast out demons (9:1-6). And they were successful. Now the disciples cannot cast out the demon from the possessed boy. Mark's telling of this story ends with the disciples asking why they could not cast out the demon, to which Jesus replies that this kind can be cast out only by prayer. Perhaps the apostle's earlier success in casting out demons led them to rely on their own power and authority instead of on Jesus'. It's sort of like: "Yeah,

you can do these things, but never forget by whose power and authority you do them.” Here Luke quotes Jesus as saying, “O faithless and perverse generation, how long will I be with you and endure you?” Jesus is referring to his apostles.

9:44-45 - Second prediction of the passion [Mark 9:30-32; Matthew 17:22-23]

While they were all amazed at his every deed, he said to his disciples, 44 “Pay attention to what I am telling you. The Son of Man is to be handed over to men.” 45 But they did not understand this saying; its meaning was hidden from them so that they should not understand it, and they were afraid to ask him about this saying.

Jesus’ second prediction of his passion is not grasped by the apostles. They won’t even discuss what it might mean. However, they willingly discussed which of them was the greatest.

9:46-48 - Who is the greatest? [Matthew 10:40; John 13:20]

46 An argument arose among the disciples about which of them was the greatest. 47 Jesus realized the intention of their hearts and took a child and placed it by his side 48 and said to them, “Whoever receives this child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me. For the one who is least among all of you is the one who is the greatest.”

Although undoubtedly loved by their parents, children had no rights, privileges or status in the First Century. Disciples are to be like children. Christianity is not a competitive sport; rivalry is an attitude destructive of Christian discipleship. (‡)

9:49-50 - The other exorcist [Mark 9:38-40]

49 Then John said in reply, “Master, we saw someone casting out demons in your name and we tried to prevent him because he does not follow in our company.” 50 Jesus said to him, “Do not prevent him, for whoever is not against you is for you.”

Nor is Christianity an exclusive club. Equally destructive of Christian discipleship is intolerance of outsiders. (‡)

If Luke’s Gospel were a musical score for a string trio, Mark playing the cello parts, Matthew the viola parts, and Luke the violin parts, the narration of Jesus’ Galilean ministry provided music for all three musicians. In the journey to Jerusalem, the cello and viola are heard only occasionally; the score is written principally for a solo virtuoso violin.

There are some places where Luke finds an accompanying narrative in Mark and/or Matthew; these will be noted in the brackets after each section. When the brackets indicate that both Matthew and Mark have a similar story, it is probably because Luke had at hand a copy of Mark’s Gospel, and a copy of the Q-source, which was also used by Matthew. If only Mark’s name appears in the brackets, there was probably no comparable story or saying in Q. Similar stories appearing only in Luke and Matthew, but not in Mark, indicate that Q was the source for both Luke and Matthew. Luke and Matthew had no direct contact with or dependence on each other.

## The Journey to Jerusalem

When Luke writes that Jesus resolutely determined to go to Jerusalem, he indicates that Jesus is going to fulfill God's will no matter what. It is implied that Jesus knows what awaits him in Jerusalem. Luke writes that "on the way," he entered a Samaritan village. Three times in Acts Luke calls Christianity "the Way," and three times he interjects into this journey to Jerusalem that Jesus was "on the way" there. Some see this as three separate but connected instructions about "the Way."

### First Instruction on "the Way" - 9:51-13:21

#### 9:51-56 - Samaritan inhospitality

51 When the days for his being taken up were fulfilled, he resolutely determined to journey to Jerusalem, 52 and he sent messengers ahead of him. On the way they entered a Samaritan village to prepare for his reception there, 53 but they would not welcome him because the destination of his journey was Jerusalem. 54 When the disciples James and John saw this they asked, "Lord, do you want us to call down fire from heaven to consume them?" 55 Jesus turned and rebuked them, 56 and they journeyed to another village.

Jesus' Galilean ministry began by his being rejected by his own hometown people (4:16-30). The journey section begins with his being rejected by the Samaritan town, because he was headed for Jerusalem. (Might this be a metaphor for people's unwillingness to associate with Jesus because he, and perhaps they, will have to suffer and die?) (‡) For James and John the Samaritan rejection is insulting; and they ask if Jesus would like them to call down fire on the town. (Might this be a metaphor for the "sons of thunder" wishing to mess up the town?) Jesus forbids retaliation for the Samaritans' rejection. (‡)

#### 9:57-62 - Three would-be followers [Matthew 8:18-22]

57 As they were proceeding on their journey someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." 58 Jesus answered him, "Foxes have dens and birds of the sky have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to rest his head." 59 And to another he said, "Follow me." But he replied, "[Lord,] let me go first and bury my father." 60 But he answered him, "Let the dead bury their dead. But you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." 61 And another said, "I will follow you, Lord, but first let me say farewell to my family at home." 62 [To him] Jesus said, "No one who sets a hand to the plow and looks to what was left behind is fit for the kingdom of God."

Jesus "on the way" encounters three would-be followers. The first says he will follow, but Jesus warns him that the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head – he's on the way. The second Jesus invites to follow, but he invokes the very serious duty contained in the commandment to honor father and mother, namely to bury them. There is no indication that the father has died at this point; the man wants to wait until that duty is taken care of. The third wants to say good-bye to his family. The New American Bible Revised has changed Jesus' response: No one who sets a hand to the plow and looks to what was left behind is fit for the kingdom of God.

The phrase "fit for the kingdom of God" does not mean a lack of fitness in a moral sense. The Greek word refers to aptitude, not moral fitness.

## 10:1-12 - The sending of the disciples

1 After this the Lord appointed seventy[-two] others whom he sent ahead of him in pairs to every town and place he intended to visit. 2 He said to them, "The harvest is abundant but the laborers are few; so ask the master of the harvest to send out laborers for his harvest. 3 Go on your way; behold, I am sending you like lambs among wolves. 4 Carry no money bag, no sack, no sandals; and greet no one along the way. 5 Into whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this household.' 6 If a peaceful person lives there, your peace will rest on him; but if not, it will return to you. 7 Stay in the same house and eat and drink what is offered to you, for the laborer deserves his payment. Do not move about from one house to another. 8 Whatever town you enter and they welcome you, eat what is set before you, 9 cure the sick in it and say to them, 'The kingdom of God is at hand for you.' 10 Whatever town you enter and they do not receive you, go out into the streets and say, 11 'The dust of your town that clings to our feet, even that we shake off against you.' Yet know this: the kingdom of God is at hand. 12 I tell you, it will be more tolerable for Sodom on that day than for that town.

Luke has already written about the sending of the Twelve (9:1-6). Here he sends the seventy-two disciples ahead of him to every place he intended to visit. (Or is it seventy? Ancient manuscripts disagree. [Who knows?]) After telling them that the harvest is great, but the laborers are few, he gives them instructions for their journey and their task. First of all, he doesn't tell them to get out there and work because the harvest is so great; he tells them to pray that the master of the harvest send laborers. He uses the metaphor of "harvest," but he doesn't tell us of what that harvest consists; what's being harvested?

Jesus says that he is sending them out like lambs among wolves. What if the harvest is the wolves? What if the harvest is so great because there's so much "wolfing" going on? Jesus is presumably still in the territory of the Samaritans who have rejected him and his followers. He's sending his disciples out as the natural prey to the wolves whom they're expected to harvest. So what's to keep them from being preyed upon? They should have nothing that the wolves might want: no money bag, no sack, no sandals. (‡)

Living poverty gives preachers credibility. It tells people that they're not in it for what we can get out of it. Socrates said that people believed him because he was poor. Mahatma Gandhi was believable because he was poor.

Greet no one long the way. The Greek word for "greet" is sometimes translated "salute." It includes the notion of friendship or allegiance. The disciples are to have no allegiance to one person over another, which could involve them in disputes. (‡)

How does one harvest wolves? By the offer of peace. The disciples' greeting upon entering a house is to be "Peace," the opposite of "wolfing." If they are received by a peaceable person, fine; if not they will lose nothing by offering peace. "Your peace will return to you."

Wherever they are welcomed, they should stay in that house, eating and drinking whatever they are offered; they are not to move about from one house to another as if they were celebrities, nor in search of better or different fare than they were offered in the first place they stayed. This may have had special meaning for Luke's community, made up of both Gentiles and Jews, some of whom wanted to follow the dietary laws contained in the traditions of the elders, as well as impose those dietary restrictions on the Gentile members.

The disciples are to announce that the kingdom of God is at hand. If a town does not receive them, they are to go out of town and shake the dust of the town off their feet, but still they are to announce, even to that town, that the kingdom of God is at hand. But things will be tough for that town for not receiving the disciples. Sodom will be better off than that town.

#### 10:13-16 - Woes [Matthew 11:20-24]

13 “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty deeds done in your midst had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would long ago have repented, sitting in sackcloth and ashes. 14 But it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon at the judgment than for you. 15 And as for you, Capernaum, ‘Will you be exalted to heaven? You will go down to the netherworld.’ 16 Whoever listens to you listens to me. Whoever rejects you rejects me. And whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me.”

Actually, Chorazin has not been mentioned in any of the gospels, except in a passage from Matthew which is a parallel to this one here in Luke. Both evangelists got it from the source called “Q.” So we don’t know why it is cursed by Jesus. Bethsaida we’ve heard about and, of course, Capernaum. The towns are cursed because they did not repent at the preaching of Jesus. Jesus immediately makes a connection between receiving or rejecting him, and receiving or rejecting the disciples, and receiving or rejecting any of them is receiving or rejecting God.

#### 10:17-20 - The return of the disciples

17 The seventy[-two] returned rejoicing, and said, “Lord, even the demons are subject to us because of your name.” 18 Jesus said, “I have observed Satan fall like lightning from the sky. 19 Behold, I have given you the power ‘to tread upon serpents’ and scorpions and upon the full force of the enemy and nothing will harm you. 20 Nevertheless, do not rejoice because the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice because your names are written in heaven.”

The disciples’ excitement is caused by the fact that they experienced what Jesus said they would experience: devils were subject to them when they used Jesus’ name. Jesus acknowledges that he has seen Satan defeated. And he promises that the disciples will not be harmed by snakes or scorpions, or any other kind of evil. But the real reason for rejoicing is that “your names are written in heaven.” That means receiving the revelation Jesus speaks of next.

#### 10:21-22 - Praise to the Father for revealing [Matthew 11:25-27]

21 At that very moment he rejoiced [in] the holy Spirit and said, “I give you praise, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for although you have hidden these things from the wise and the learned you have revealed them to the childlike. Yes, Father, such has been your gracious will. 22 All things have been handed over to me by my Father. No one knows who the Son is except the Father, and who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son wishes to reveal him.”

Jesus praises the Father for revealing the mysteries to the childlike. No one knows the Father but the Son and those to whom the Son reveals him. That’s having one’s name written in heaven.

## 10:23-24 - Privileges of discipleship

23 Turning to the disciples in private he said, “Blessed are the eyes that see what you see. 24 For I say to you, many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.”

Perhaps still enunciating what it means to have their names written in heaven, Jesus says that the disciples eyes are blessed because they are seeing what prophets and kings desired to see.

## 10:25-28 - The scholar of the law asks a question [Mark 12:28-34; Matthew 22:32-40]

25 There was a scholar of the law who stood up to test him and said, “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” 26 Jesus said to him, “What is written in the law? How do you read it?” 27 He said in reply, “You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your being, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.” 28 He replied to him, “You have answered correctly; do this and you will live.”

Luke tells us plainly that the scholar’s intent in asking his question was to test Jesus. He asked what he should do in order to inherit eternal life. Jesus responds with a question, asking the scholar what the law says. The scholar answers correctly, and Jesus commends him on his answer. But Jesus adds, “*Do* this and you will live.” (†)

## 10:29-37 - The good Samaritan

29 But because he wished to justify himself, he said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” 30 Jesus replied, “A man fell victim to robbers as he went down from Jerusalem to Jericho. They stripped and beat him and went off leaving him half-dead. 31 A priest happened to be going down that road, but when he saw him, he passed by on the opposite side. 32 Likewise a Levite came to the place, and when he saw him, he passed by on the opposite side. 33 But a Samaritan traveler who came upon him was moved with compassion at the sight. 34 He approached the victim, poured oil and wine over his wounds and bandaged them. Then he lifted him up on his own animal, took him to an inn and cared for him. 35 The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper with the instruction, ‘Take care of him. If you spend more than what I have given you, I shall repay you on my way back.’ 36 Which of these three, in your opinion, was neighbor to the robbers’ victim?” 37 He answered, “The one who treated him with mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

Again, Luke gives us the intention of the legal scholar: he wanted to justify himself, so he posed the theoretical question “Who is my neighbor?” That was a question debated by the scholars of the law, and generally it was held that anyone who was a member of God’s chosen people might be considered one’s neighbor, but others beyond that would probably not be considered such. So Jesus tells the story of the good Samaritan. Samaritans were not regarded as really belonging to God’s chosen people.

The man was robbed, beaten and left for dead. The priest and the Levite didn’t go near what seems to be a corpse, lest they become ritually unclean, and therefore couldn’t take part in the worship in the temple. For them religiosity was more important than true religion. The Samaritan wasn’t concerned about ritual niceties, but showed compassion for the man. By telling the story and asking the scholar of the law which person showed himself neighbor to the one who had been left for dead, Jesus brought the question out of the realm of theory into real life. Again the scholar gave the right answer, and again Jesus said, “Go and *do* the same.” (†)

The moral of the story: knowing the right answer doesn't really matter unless it is accompanied with doing the right thing.

### 10:38-42 - Martha and Mary

38 As they continued their journey he entered a village where a woman whose name was Martha welcomed him. 39 She had a sister named Mary [who] sat beside the Lord at his feet listening to him speak. 40 Martha, burdened with much serving, came to him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me by myself to do the serving? Tell her to help me." 41 The Lord said to her in reply, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and worried about many things. 42 There is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part and it will not be taken from her."

Although Martha and Mary are mentioned in John's Gospel, this story is unique to Luke. There are at least two points Luke wants to make in this story. First, it is important to listen to the master; second, a woman can be a disciple. This last point is made by the fact that Mary is sitting at the feet of Jesus and listening to him. In First Century Palestine, it would have been unthinkable that a woman would assume the position of a disciple.

Martha is obviously concerned with the details of hospitality; Mary is involved in the essence of hospitality: to pay attention to one's guest. So she has chosen the better part. (↓)

### 11:1-4 - About praying: the Lord's prayer [Matthew 6:9-15]

1 He was praying in a certain place, and when he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray just as John taught his disciples." 2 He said to them, "When you pray, say:  
Father, hallowed be your name,  
your kingdom come.  
3 Give us each day our daily bread  
4 and forgive us our sins  
for we ourselves forgive everyone in debt to us,  
and do not subject us to the final test."

The three sections about praying are introduced by the disciples' request that Jesus teach them how to pray as John taught his disciples. Jesus' disciples have seen Jesus pray several times. They want to know how to do the same. So Jesus gives them "the Lord's prayer."

Luke's version is shorter than Matthew's. He omits the "thy will be done," and the "deliver us from evil." For some reason scholars think Luke's version is the older of the two.

The word for "father" is the very familial term which should be understood as "Dad" or "Daddy." "Hallowed be your name" is not a human praise of God, but a recognition that God's name is holy. "Your kingdom come" is the same wording as in Matthew. The kingdom has already come in Jesus, but it is not yet fulfilled or completed. Kingdom means wherever God reigns, rules or has influence, so this is a petition that God's influence in our world will increase.

The "daily bread" is a real problem. The word which both Matthew and Luke use is found nowhere in Greek literature except in this passage in Matthew and Luke. It can be translated as "daily," or "future," or "necessary." In light of the fact that Jesus has given his disciples the instruction to "travel light," the petition might best be understood as "give us day-by-day the bread we need."

The petition to “forgive us our sins” as we have *already* forgiven, not that we *will forgive*, those who are in *debt* to us uses two different words: sins and debts. And the “do not lead us into the testing” is repeated in 22:40 and 46, where Jesus tells his sleepy apostles in the garden to pray that they “not enter into the testing.”

#### 11:5-8 - About praying: persistence in praying

5 And he said to them, “Suppose one of you has a friend to whom he goes at midnight and says, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread, 6 for a friend of mine has arrived at my house from a journey and I have nothing to offer him,’ 7 and he says in reply from within, ‘Do not bother me; the door has already been locked and my children and I are already in bed. I cannot get up to give you anything.’ 8 I tell you, if he does not get up to give him the loaves because of their friendship, he will get up to give him whatever he needs because of his persistence.

Even a human neighbor might be willing to drag himself out of bed if the neighbor kept up the knocking. It was no small thing for a householder to get out of bed in the one-room home he shared with wife and children. They all slept bunched together in one bed. Getting up to give something to a neighbor would disturb the whole family. The question Jesus implies is, “Can God be less generous than one’s human neighbor?”

#### 11:9-13 - About praying: answers to prayer [Matthew 7:7-11]

9 “And I tell you, ask and you will receive; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. 10 For everyone who asks, receives; and the one who seeks, finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened. 11 What father among you would hand his son a snake when he asks for a fish? 12 Or hand him a scorpion when he asks for an egg? 13 If you then, who are wicked, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the Father in heaven give the holy Spirit to those who ask him?”

While imitating Matthew in this story of God’s goodness compared with the goodness of an earthly father (they both got the story from the Q-source), Luke changes the last line. “How much more will the Father in heaven give the holy Spirit to those who ask him?” Matthew writes, “give good things to those who ask him.”

#### 11:14-26 - Devils [Mark 3:20-27; Matthew 12:22-30]

14 He was driving out a demon [that was] mute, and when the demon had gone out, the mute person spoke and the crowds were amazed. 15 Some of them said, “By the power of Beelzebul, the prince of demons, he drives out demons.” 16 Others, to test him, asked him for a sign from heaven. 17 But he knew their thoughts and said to them, “Every kingdom divided against itself will be laid waste and house will fall against house. 18 And if Satan is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand? For you say that it is by Beelzebul that I drive out demons. 19 If I, then, drive out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your own people drive them out? Therefore they will be your judges. 20 But if it is by the finger of God that [I] drive out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. 21 When a strong man fully armed guards his palace, his possessions are safe. 22 But when one stronger than he attacks and overcomes him, he takes away the armor on which he relied and distributes the spoils. 23 Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.

24 “When an unclean spirit goes out of someone, it roams through arid regions searching for rest but, finding none, it says, ‘I shall return to my home from which I came.’ 25 But upon returning, it finds it swept clean and put in order. 26 Then it goes and brings back seven other spirits more wicked than itself who move in and dwell there, and the last condition of that person is worse than the first.”

Luke tells us that Jesus was casting out demons. Among the crowd following Jesus were “some of them,” Luke doesn’t tell us who, who claimed that devils obeyed Jesus because he was their boss, Beelzebul. The rest of the exchange between Jesus and his accusers can be read in several ways. If one imagines a stern response from Jesus, the scene becomes tense. If one imagines that Jesus just “flips them off” with a light-hearted response, the scene can become humorous. In either case Jesus makes the argument that it doesn’t make sense to think that Jesus casts out devils by the power of the prince of devils. No house could possibly stand if that house were divided against itself, and any kingdom divided against itself would be laid waste. It’s sort of a “Give me a break, guys” argument.

Jesus carries out his analogy further by talking about a strong man guarding his house (the devil) will be all right until one stronger than he (Jesus) comes along. Way back in 3:15 John the Baptist pointed out that Jesus was the “stronger one.”

The concluding of the Beelzebul discussion is confusing. Earlier Jesus had declared that the disciples should not stop the person outside of their group who was performing wonders in Jesus’ name. At that time he said, “Whoever is not against you is for you.” (9:50) This time he says, “Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.” In the previous statement Jesus is not involved in controversy with anyone; he’s encouraging his disciples not to start a controversy where there is none. In this present instance, Jesus is involved in controversy. And he has already indicated that he is the stronger one, and if people don’t get on his side, they will be scattered, because ultimately Jesus is going to triumph, and the rest will be scattered.

Jesus continues the demon stories by saying that when an unclean spirit is driven out, it wanders about until it finally says that it will go back to where it came from. And it finds the house all cleaned up. The devil goes and gets seven more devils worse than himself and they move in. And the last state of that person is worse than the first. The point seems to be that “swept clean and put in order” is not enough. It’s got to be occupied by Jesus. And Jesus has to be invited in. (‡)

#### 11:27-28 - True blessedness

27 While he was speaking, a woman from the crowd called out and said to him, “Blessed is the womb that carried you and the breasts at which you nursed.” 28 He replied, “Rather, blessed are those who hear the word of God and observe it.”

A woman in the crowd calls out, “Blessed is the womb which carried you and the breasts at which you nursed.” Jesus responds, “Rather blessed are those who hear the word of God and observe it.” Personal appreciation and praise of Jesus – or his mother – is not enough. Luke’s Jesus has been consistent; what’s needed is to hear the word of God and observe it. (‡)

#### 11:29-32 - Demand for a sign [Matthew 12:38-42]

29 While still more people gathered in the crowd, he said to them, “This generation is an evil generation; it seeks a sign, but no sign will be given it, except the sign of Jonah. 30 Just as Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites, so will the Son of Man be to this generation. 31 At the judgment the queen of the south will rise with the men of this generation and she will condemn them, because she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon,

and there is something greater than Solomon here. 32 At the judgment the men of Nineveh will arise with this generation and condemn it, because at the preaching of Jonah they repented, and there is something greater than Jonah here.

People want a sign. Jesus says that demanding a sign indicates that this is an evil generation. What makes this generation evil is not that they want to see signs so they can make a credible judgement about things, but because all they want is to *see* signs. That's the problem with this evil generation. They do not want to *respond* to the signs that are offered by hearing the word of God and observing it. (‡)

Luke's Jesus holds up the sign of Jonah, as does Matthew's Jesus. But Luke makes an entirely different point. Matthew uses the three days in the belly of a whale as a sign of Jesus burial in the tomb. Luke uses the fact that the Ninevites repented at Jonah's preaching. And Jesus adds the bit about the Queen of the South coming to hear Solomon. And Jesus' conclusion is that the Ninevites and the Queen of the South will condemn this generation because someone here is greater than Jonah or Solomon, and people are not converting nor listening to his wisdom.

They want to see signs and wonders, but the wonder would be if they would be led to believe in Jesus because of the signs they see. (‡)

#### 11:33-36 - A lamp and light [Mark 4:21; Matthew 5:15, 6:22-23; Luke 8:16-18]

33 "No one who lights a lamp hides it away or places it [under a bushel basket], but on a lampstand so that those who enter might see the light. 34 The lamp of the body is your eye. When your eye is sound, then your whole body is filled with light, but when it is bad, then your body is in darkness. 35 Take care, then, that the light in you not become darkness. 36 If your whole body is full of light, and no part of it is in darkness, then it will be as full of light as a lamp illuminating you with its brightness."

This probably ought to be understood in connection with the last section. As early as the Sixteenth Century there was an English proverb which went: "There are none so blind as those who will not see." In the Eighteenth Century an American added: "The most deluded people are those who choose to ignore what they already know." That's the problem Jesus' words address. In his metaphor, the eye is not the receptor of light; it's the producer of light for the whole body. So if the eye is bad, people are not going to see what's before them. And what makes the eye bad? A moral fault of not wanting to see.

#### 11:37-54 - Pharisees and scholars of the law [Mark 7:2-5; Matthew 23:1-36]

37 After he had spoken, a Pharisee invited him to dine at his home. He entered and reclined at table to eat. 38 The Pharisee was amazed to see that he did not observe the prescribed washing before the meal. 39 The Lord said to him, "Oh you Pharisees! Although you cleanse the outside of the cup and the dish, inside you are filled with plunder and evil. 40 You fools! Did not the maker of the outside also make the inside? 41 But as to what is within, give alms, and behold, everything will be clean for you. 42 Woe to you Pharisees! You pay tithes of mint and of rue and of every garden herb, but you pay no attention to judgment and to love for God. These you should have done, without overlooking the others. 43 Woe to you Pharisees! You love the seat of honor in synagogues and greetings in marketplaces. 44 Woe to you! You are like unseen graves over which people unknowingly walk."

45 Then one of the scholars of the law said to him in reply, "Teacher, by saying this you are insulting us too." 46 And he said, "Woe also to you scholars of the law! You impose on people burdens hard to carry, but you yourselves do not lift one finger to touch them. 47 Woe to you! You build the memorials of the prophets whom your

ancestors killed. 48 Consequently, you bear witness and give consent to the deeds of your ancestors, for they killed them and you do the building. 49 Therefore, the wisdom of God said, 'I will send to them prophets and apostles; some of them they will kill and persecute' 50 in order that this generation might be charged with the blood of all the prophets shed since the foundation of the world, 51 from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah who died between the altar and the temple building. Yes, I tell you, this generation will be charged with their blood! 52 Woe to you, scholars of the law! You have taken away the key of knowledge. You yourselves did not enter and you stopped those trying to enter." 53 When he left, the scribes and Pharisees began to act with hostility toward him and to interrogate him about many things, 54 for they were plotting to catch him at something he might say.

Jesus is invited to dinner in the home of a Pharisee. Jesus did not do the prescribed washing prior to the meal, and the Pharisee was amazed. The rituals surrounding a family meal were in imitation of what was prescribed for sacrifices in the temple, turning the family meal into a religious experience, not only a familial or social one. This was a praiseworthy thing to do. Jesus seems to be saying that the Pharisees ought not neglect the weightier things of the law, and get hung up on the ritual observances; rather they should seek cleanliness by the giving of alms. Such generosity comes from "inside the bowl" and purifies one, while ritual observances are the "outside of the bowl" and don't mean much except for appearances. (Remember Luke's preoccupation with his belief that wealth is meant for helping other.) (‡)

Jesus continues with his "woes" to the Pharisees. They are fastidious about some of the little things found in the traditions of the elders, but they "pay no attention to judgement and love for God." And they love the seats in front in the synagogue and like to be greeted with a note of respect in the markets. Jesus rejects and condemns this idea of what leadership is. (‡) The Pharisees are like hidden graves over which people walk unknowingly, which means that people would not deliberately walk over graves because of the decay which they contain. But people don't see the decay which is in the Pharisees. A further meaning is that they are like *hidden* graves. If people knew them to be what they are, they would not go near them.

Then one of the scholars of the law spoke up and said that Jesus was insulting them, too. So Jesus says it's not by accident that they think he is insulting them. And Jesus says that he insults them because with their casuistry they bind legal burdens and place them on others while not lifting a finger to carry those burdens.

Then Jesus hits them again. He reminds them that they build monuments to the prophets of old whom their ancestors killed, thus linking themselves with those ancestors who did the killing. One commentator on this passage astutely made the comparison to the United State's building of a monument to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. When that prophet was alive he was prophetic to the point of dividing the country. But now we have a monument in the nation's capitol to the one whom our ancestors killed. Perhaps a further message is that the scholars of the law honor only dead prophets, not living ones, like Jesus.

Jesus says that this generation will be charged with the blood of all the prophets since Abel up to this day, because this generation is recapitulating what has happened all throughout history.

And further he accuses the scholars of the law of holding the key to knowledge, but not entering into that treasure, and preventing others from entering. Perhaps this means that the lawyers are fussing over small matters, which really don't matter that much, except for one's personal sense of piety, but they are not exposing others or themselves to the really important pieces of knowledge such as love for God.

Of course these words of Jesus didn't go down very well with the Pharisees and the scholars of the Law. They resolved to investigate everything Jesus might say, in the hope of catching him saying something which could allow them to do away with him.

#### 12:1 - Leaven of the Pharisees [Mark 8:15; Matthew 16:5-12]

<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, so many people were crowding together that they were trampling one another underfoot. He began to speak, first to his disciples, "Beware of the leaven—that is, the hypocrisy—of the Pharisees.

To his disciples Jesus says, "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, that is, their hypocrisy." In light of the foregoing controversies with the Pharisees, it also means their opposition to Jesus.

Leaven is something which becomes hidden when mixed with the rest of the dough, but it is the active ingredient which turns the dough into edible bread. Hypocrisy is like that. It is hidden, and tries to remain hidden, but it influences everything else. The hypocrisy of the Pharisees influences everything else about them. They appear pious, but they are full of hidden malice toward Jesus.

#### 12:2-9 - God's protection [Matthew 10:26-33]

<sup>2</sup> "There is nothing concealed that will not be revealed, nor secret that will not be known. <sup>3</sup> Therefore whatever you have said in the darkness will be heard in the light, and what you have whispered behind closed doors will be proclaimed on the housetops. <sup>4</sup> I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body but after that can do no more. <sup>5</sup> I shall show you whom to fear. Be afraid of the one who after killing has the power to cast into Gehenna; yes, I tell you, be afraid of that one. <sup>6</sup> Are not five sparrows sold for two small coins? Yet not one of them has escaped the notice of God. <sup>7</sup> Even the hairs of your head have all been counted. Do not be afraid. You are worth more than many sparrows. <sup>8</sup> I tell you, everyone who acknowledges me before others the Son of Man will acknowledge before the angels of God. <sup>9</sup> But whoever denies me before others will be denied before the angels of God.

The first part of this saying of Jesus harkens back to Simeon's prophecy that the sword shall pierce Mary's heart that the thoughts of many may be revealed. The rest of the section seems to be an exhortation to get one's priorities straight. Don't fear those who can harm you only in this world; fear God who can send you to hell. However, remember how caring your Father is; he even cares for the sparrows, and you are worth much more than a sparrow. Then Jesus gives another admonition: deny him before others, and he will deny you before God; acknowledge him, and he will acknowledge you.

Following up on the hidden function of leaven, Jesus says that everything which is hidden will be revealed. The exhortation is to a life of integrity in which nothing is hidden. (†)

#### 12:10-12 - The Holy Spirit [Mark 3:28-29; Matthew 12:31-32]

<sup>10</sup> "Everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but the one who blasphemes against the holy Spirit will not be forgiven. <sup>11</sup> When they take you before synagogues and before rulers and authorities, do not worry about how or what your defense will be or about what you are to say. <sup>12</sup> For the holy Spirit will teach you at that moment what you should say."

The “unforgivable sin” is not unforgivable because God won’t forgive, but because one who “blasphemes the Holy Spirit” – that is, calls the Spirit evil – cannot approach the God who would be willing to forgive. People can move toward only what is good, or what they think is good or good for them, not toward what they consider bad or bad for them.

The admonition not to worry ahead of time about what one will say in response to being persecuted because the Holy Spirit will give what one is to say, presumes that one has been open to being directed by the Holy Spirit throughout one’s life. It may come down to the habit of praying throughout one’s life will prepare one for speaking. (‡)

#### 12:13-21 - Don’t depend on possessions

13 Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to share the inheritance with me.” 14 He replied to him, “Friend, who appointed me as your judge and arbitrator?” 15 Then he said to the crowd, “Take care to guard against all greed, for though one may be rich, one’s life does not consist of possessions.”

16 Then he told them a parable. “There was a rich man whose land produced a bountiful harvest. 17 He asked himself, ‘What shall I do, for I do not have space to store my harvest?’ 18 And he said, ‘This is what I shall do: I shall tear down my barns and build larger ones. There I shall store all my grain and other goods 19 and I shall say to myself, “Now as for you, you have so many good things stored up for many years, rest, eat, drink, be merry!”’ 20 But God said to him, ‘You fool, this night your life will be demanded of you; and the things you have prepared, to whom will they belong?’ 21 Thus will it be for the one who stores up treasure for himself but is not rich in what matters to God.”

Apparently there were quite a few wealthy people in Luke’s community, and some who didn’t have much. Luke regards wealth and possessions as only a means to provide for others. Only Luke narrates this saying and the following parable.

Jesus refuses to be the arbiter between the brothers over a dispute about splitting their inheritance. Then he warns the crowd in the parable about the rich barn-builder, which most directly reflects Luke’s notion of possessions: “Take care to guard against all greed, for though one may be rich, one’s life does not consist of possessions.” Strong interest in material things is irreconcilable with sincere interest in what matters to God. And what matters to God? That people should take care of each other. In modern parlance, Luke could be said to be concerned about the just distribution of the world’s goods. (‡)

#### 12:22-34 - Depend, rather, on God’s goodness [Matthew 6:25-34]

22 He said to [his] disciples, “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life and what you will eat, or about your body and what you will wear. 23 For life is more than food and the body more than clothing. 24 Notice the ravens: they do not sow or reap; they have neither storehouse nor barn, yet God feeds them. How much more important are you than birds! 25 Can any of you by worrying add a moment to your life-span? 26 If even the smallest things are beyond your control, why are you anxious about the rest? 27 Notice how the flowers grow. They do not toil or spin. But I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of them. 28 If God so clothes the grass in the field that grows today and is thrown into the oven tomorrow, will he not much more provide for you, O you of little faith? 29 As for you, do not seek what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not worry anymore. 30 All the nations of the world seek for these things, and your Father knows that you need them. 31 Instead, seek his kingdom, and these other things will be given you besides. 32 Do not be afraid any longer, little flock, for your Father is pleased to give you the kingdom. 33 Sell your belongings and give alms. Provide money

bags for yourselves that do not wear out, an inexhaustible treasure in heaven that no thief can reach nor moth destroy. 34 For where your treasure is, there also will your heart be.

The parable of the barn-builder was told to the crowd. Then Jesus turned to his disciples and told them not to be anxious about their life or what they are to eat, or their bodies or what they are to wear, because life, which comes from God, is more than food, and the body, which comes from God, is more than clothing. This is the third time Jesus says not to be anxious. In 12:4 he said not to be anxious about your life; in 12:11 he said not to be anxious about what you are to say. And besides, worrying doesn't accomplish anything.

As to concern about food, notice the ravens (a bit like 12:6 when he talks about sparrows). They don't sow or reap or gather into barns. Yet, God feeds them. As to clothing, notice the flowers of the field. They do not toil or spin. Yet, even Solomon wasn't as handsomely arrayed as the flowers. So stop worrying. Your Father knows you need these things. So seek God's kingdom, that is, God's reign, rule and influence, and the rest will be given to you.

Jesus gives Luke's favorite exhortation: "sell your possessions and give alms." Then you will have treasure in heaven. And "where your treasure is, there also your heart will be."

Are we to conclude from all this that one should not be prudent about providing sustenance for oneself and one's family? Probably not. It's anxiety which he rules out, not prudence. In verse 42 Jesus commends the prudent servant for efficiently taking care of things.

#### 12:35-48 - Vigilant and faithful servants [Matthew 24:45-51]

35 "Gird your loins and light your lamps 36 and be like servants who await their master's return from a wedding, ready to open immediately when he comes and knocks. 37 Blessed are those servants whom the master finds vigilant on his arrival. Amen, I say to you, he will gird himself, have them recline at table, and proceed to wait on them. 38 And should he come in the second or third watch and find them prepared in this way, blessed are those servants. 39 Be sure of this: if the master of the house had known the hour when the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. 40 You also must be prepared, for at an hour you do not expect, the Son of Man will come."

41 Then Peter said, "Lord, is this parable meant for us or for everyone?" 42 And the Lord replied, "Who, then, is the faithful and prudent steward whom the master will put in charge of his servants to distribute [the] food allowance at the proper time? 43 Blessed is that servant whom his master on arrival finds doing so. 44 Truly, I say to you, he will put him in charge of all his property. 45 But if that servant says to himself, 'My master is delayed in coming,' and begins to beat the menservants and the maidservants, to eat and drink and get drunk, 46 then that servant's master will come on an unexpected day and at an unknown hour and will punish him severely and assign him a place with the unfaithful. 47 That servant who knew his master's will but did not make preparations nor act in accord with his will shall be beaten severely; 48 and the servant who was ignorant of his master's will but acted in a way deserving of a severe beating shall be beaten only lightly. Much will be required of the person entrusted with much, and still more will be demanded of the person entrusted with more.

In our electrified environment, it can be difficult for us to realize how indispensable a lighted lamp would have been; it would be the only source of light after the sun had gone down. Jesus admonishes his disciples to be ready with their lamps lit, ready to welcome the master when he returns from a wedding. Luke's rendition of how pleased the master would be to find the servants thus faithful and vigilant must be hyperbole as far as the parable goes. But the master who serves is not hyperbole in the life of Jesus and the disciples. In 22:27 Jesus will say, "I am

among you as one who serves.” But that hyperbole in the parable might be necessary to convey how pleased God – or Jesus – is to find God’s servants prepared to welcome him.

The next parable of Jesus expresses the same need to be ready for the return of the Son of Man. The master of the house, if he knew when a thief was coming, would certainly be prepared.

Peter asks if this parable is meant for the apostles or for everyone. Jesus never did answer that question, but launches on a brief discourse on the faithful and prudent servant. Since the description of the faithful and prudent servant shows the servant taking care of the rest of the household, Jesus’ instructions in this and the rest of this section may apply more specifically, but not exclusively, to the apostles and the leaders of the community than to the whole community of believers. The message is: leaders in the community are to serve. (†)

The sayings about the servants whom the master will beat indicates that there is a difference between those leaders in the community who know what the master wants and those who don’t know their master’s wishes. In either case, unfaithful and neglectful leaders in the community will be punished.

#### 12:49-53 - Jesus, a cause of division [Matthew 10:34-35]

49 “I have come to set the earth on fire, and how I wish it were already blazing! 50 There is a baptism with which I must be baptized, and how great is my anguish until it is accomplished! 51 Do you think that I have come to establish peace on the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. 52 From now on a household of five will be divided, three against two and two against three; 53 a father will be divided against his son and a son against his father, a mother against her daughter and a daughter against her mother, a mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law.”

The fire Jesus came to cast is his enthusiasm for proclaiming the kingdom. Jesus’ proclamation of the kingdom will meet with both acceptance and rejection. That will divide even families. Jesus says he has a baptism he must undergo, and he is distressed until it is accomplished.

#### 12:54-56 - Signs of the times [Matthew 16:2-3]

54 He also said to the crowds, “When you see [a] cloud rising in the west you say immediately that it is going to rain—and so it does; 55 and when you notice that the wind is blowing from the south you say that it is going to be hot—and so it is. 56 You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and the sky; why do you not know how to interpret the present time?”

Addressing the crowds, Jesus chided them for being able to recognize the signs which predict the weather, but not recognizing the signs of the time of Jesus appearance in their midst.

#### 12:57-59 - Settle with opponents [Matthew 5:25-26]

57 “Why do you not judge for yourselves what is right? 58 If you are to go with your opponent before a magistrate, make an effort to settle the matter on the way; otherwise your opponent will turn you over to the judge, and the judge hand you over to the constable, and the constable throw you into prison. 59 I say to you, you will not be released until you have paid the last penny.”

That first statement of Jesus needs to be read with the emphasis on the word “yourself.” Don’t look to someone else to settle difference between you and your opponent. Settle your differences *yourself*. Don’t put off reconciling with opponents. Do it now! (‡)

### 13:1-9 - A call to repentance

1 At that time some people who were present there told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with the blood of their sacrifices. 2 He said to them in reply, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were greater sinners than all other Galileans? 3 By no means! But I tell you, if you do not repent, you will all perish as they did! 4 Or those eighteen people who were killed when the tower at Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than everyone else who lived in Jerusalem? 5 By no means! But I tell you, if you do not repent, you will all perish as they did!”

6 And he told them this parable: “There once was a person who had a fig tree planted in his orchard, and when he came in search of fruit on it but found none, 7 he said to the gardener, ‘For three years now I have come in search of fruit on this fig tree but have found none. [So] cut it down. Why should it exhaust the soil?’ 8 He said to him in reply, ‘Sir, leave it for this year also, and I shall cultivate the ground around it and fertilize it; 9 it may bear fruit in the future. If not you can cut it down.’”

This is sort of Luke’s “stick and carrot” prodding his community toward repentance. Luke says that some people told Jesus about the Galileans whom Pilate killed while they were offering sacrifice. There is no record of such an event anywhere but here in Luke’s Gospel. Nor is there any other record of a tower at Siloam falling on eighteen people. Luke is not trying to present his readers with history. He uses these two examples to invite others to repentance. It is a tradition in some of the Hebrew Scriptures to think that disasters, as well as other misfortunes, were God’s punishment on sinners. Jesus doesn’t accept that particular theology. Those people who suffered from Pilate or from the falling tower were not worse than anyone else. But the message is that everyone should repent, because everyone has sinned, even if they have not yet perished like the people Jesus is talking about. But it’s a stick to prod people toward repentance.

Then Luke turns narratives from Mark 11:13 and Matthew 21:19, where Jesus curses the barren fig tree, into a parable. While the previous saying calls for repentance and a warning, the parable of the fig tree offers an image of God’s patience with sinners, and God’s willingness to work with sinners to move them toward repentance. It’s the carrot inviting people to move toward repentance.

### 13:10-17 - Cure on the Sabbath and controversy

10 He was teaching in a synagogue on the Sabbath. 11 And a woman was there who for eighteen years had been crippled by a spirit; she was bent over, completely incapable of standing erect. 12 When Jesus saw her, he called to her and said, “Woman, you are set free of your infirmity.” 13 He laid his hands on her, and she at once stood up straight and glorified God. 14 But the leader of the synagogue, indignant that Jesus had cured on the Sabbath, said to the crowd in reply, “There are six days when work should be done. Come on those days to be cured, not on the Sabbath day.” 15 The Lord said to him in reply, “Hypocrites! Does not each one of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his ass from the manger and lead it out for watering? 16 This daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has bound for eighteen years now, ought she not to have been set free on the Sabbath day from this bondage?” 17 When he said this, all his adversaries were humiliated; and the whole crowd rejoiced at all the splendid deeds done by him.

This might be a not-so-subtle indication of Luke's concern for women as well as for men. Here he cures a woman on the Sabbath; in 14:1-6 he cures a man on the Sabbath.

In healing the woman on the Sabbath, the ruler of the synagogue sees Jesus working on the Sabbath, and therefore violating the Sabbath law of rest. Jesus reframes the question. The work Jesus did in healing the woman is untying her from the bonds or fetters of her demonic captivity, something permitted in regard to animals on the Sabbath, so how much more for this "daughter of Abraham?" The crowd loved it. The synagogue official doesn't confront Jesus directly for healing on the Sabbath; he takes his frustration out on the crowd which brought someone to be healed on the Sabbath.

13:18-21 - Two parables [Mark 4:30-32; Matthew 13:31-33]

18 Then he said, "What is the kingdom of God like? To what can I compare it? 19 It is like a mustard seed that a person took and planted in the garden. When it was fully grown, it became a large bush and 'the birds of the sky dwelt in its branches.'"

20 Again he said, "To what shall I compare the kingdom of God? 21 It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed [in] with three measures of wheat flour until the whole batch of dough was leavened."

*The New American Bible, Revised* translates the first word of this section as "Then." The Greek word given there means "Therefore." These two parables are possibly a commentary on the story of the woman healed on the Sabbath. Jesus gives two parables to describe the kingdom of God, that is, where God rules, reigns and has influence: the mustard seed and the leaven. Like the mustard seed, it's small beginnings will grow immensely in order to be of service to others. Luke's Jesus has spoken of leaven several times. In all instances it is something hidden but transformative. The leaven of the Pharisees is hypocrisy; it is hidden but affects everything they do. The leaven of the kingdom is equally hidden, but also transformative. Both parables suggest that the kingdom of God is not territorial, but dynamically active. If they are meant as a commentary on the story of the healing of the woman who has been bound low for eighteen years, perhaps the meaning is that this hidden but transformative kingdom at the service of others is already at work in Jesus.

## Second Instruction on “the Way” - 13:22-17:10

In 13:22, Luke again interjects (as he did in 9:52) that Jesus is “on the way” to Jerusalem, which again recalls to our minds that in the Acts of the Apostles Luke calls belief in Jesus “the Way.” This begins the second instruction on “the Way” of those who believe in Jesus.

### 13:22-30 - Entering into and exclusion from the kingdom [Matthew 7:13-14]

22 He passed through towns and villages, teaching as he went and making his way to Jerusalem. 23 Someone asked him, “Lord, will only a few people be saved?” He answered them, 24 “Strive to enter through the narrow door, for many, I tell you, will attempt to enter but will not be strong enough. 25 After the master of the house has arisen and locked the door, then will you stand outside knocking and saying, ‘Lord, open the door for us.’ He will say to you in reply, ‘I do not know where you are from.’ 26 And you will say, ‘We ate and drank in your company and you taught in our streets.’ 27 Then he will say to you, ‘I do not know where [you] are from. Depart from me, all you evildoers!’ 28 And there will be wailing and grinding of teeth when you see Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God and you yourselves cast out. 29 And people will come from the east and the west and from the north and the south and will recline at table in the kingdom of God. 30 For behold, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.”

Luke does not identify the one who asked if only a few will be saved. But the question gives Luke a chance to express Jesus’ views on the matter. One may wonder what was going on in Luke’s community that may have prompted this question and answer. Perhaps Luke experienced some frustration with members of the community who shared meals with the rest, and who listened to Jesus’ teaching like the rest, but who did not *do* what those teachings indicated. (‡)

Perhaps the image of the narrow door represents gaining entry individually by *doing* what Jesus teaches, and not simply remaining in the bunch which eats and listens, but doesn’t do. (‡) After the master has locked the door, and the others knock on it and say “We ate and drank with you and you preached in our streets,” the master will say, “I don’t know you.” But others from the east and the west, from the north and the south will be admitted. Jesus concludes, “Some are last (Gentiles?) who will be first, and some are first (Jews?) who will be last.”

### 13:31-33 - Herod’s desire to kill Jesus

31 At that time some Pharisees came to him and said, “Go away, leave this area because Herod wants to kill you.” 32 He replied, “Go and tell that fox, ‘Behold, I cast out demons and I perform healings today and tomorrow, and on the third day I accomplish my purpose. 33 Yet I must continue on my way today, tomorrow, and the following day, for it is impossible that a prophet should die outside of Jerusalem.’

The Pharisees warn Jesus to move on, because Herod wants to kill him. One has to wonder about the motivation of those Pharisees. They most definitely wanted Jesus out of the area, but was it for his own good that they wanted him to go. On the other hand, all the Pharisees were not opposed to Jesus. They differed greatly among themselves on the interpretation of the Law. Some might actually have liked Jesus. He certainly got invited to dine with them several times. But most often the meal ends in some kind of controversy. Could it be that a Pharisee who

was friendly toward Jesus invited him, and then some of his other Pharisee guests turned the conversation into controversy?

(Doesn't that complicate things? It's so much easier just to write off a whole group of people, instead of recognizing that there are good people among bad groups, and bad people among good groups.) (‡)

Jesus says that they can tell Herod, "that fox," that he will keep doing what he's been doing – exorcisms and healings – for three days, and then he will continue to Jerusalem, because "it is impossible that a prophet should die outside of Jerusalem." "On the third day I *accomplish* my purpose" had to resonate with the Christians as indicating Jesus three days in the tomb prior to his resurrection. Back in 12:50 Jesus said he was distressed until his baptism is *accomplished*. Luke uses the same word in both places.

### 13:34-35 - Lament over Jerusalem [Matthew 23:37-39]

34 "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how many times I yearned to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you were unwilling! 35 Behold, your house will be abandoned. [But] I tell you, you will not see me until [the time comes when] you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

By the time Luke wrote this, Jerusalem had already been destroyed. Jesus' love for Jerusalem was rebuffed, both by the leaders of the people and by the Roman occupiers.

### 14:1-6 - Another Sabbath healing

1 On a Sabbath he went to dine at the home of one of the leading Pharisees, and the people there were observing him carefully. 2 In front of him there was a man suffering from dropsy. 3 Jesus spoke to the scholars of the law and Pharisees in reply, asking, "Is it lawful to cure on the Sabbath or not?" 4 But they kept silent; so he took the man and, after he had healed him, dismissed him. 5 Then he said to them, "Who among you, if your son or ox[c] falls into a cistern, would not immediately pull him out on the Sabbath day?" 6 But they were unable to answer his question.

Back in 13:10-17 Jesus cured a woman on the Sabbath, and the Pharisee objected; now he cures a man, this time at a dinner given by a leading Pharisee, and this time Jesus asks if it is all right to do a Sabbath cure before he performs it. Other guests were Pharisees and scholars of the Law. This kind of gathering for a meal was often used by scholars of the Law to discuss points of Law; the eating and drinking were secondary to the discussion which took place. How a man with dropsy came to be there we are not told. He wasn't part of the group gathered for discussion; Jesus dismissed him right after the cure. One could imagine he was a plant by the leading Pharisee to trap Jesus, or at least to stimulate the table discussion.

Since it was a Sabbath day, Jesus introduces the topic for discussion at this meal by asking if it lawful to cure on the Sabbath or not. Ironically, those who had apparently convened for the sake of discussion remained silent. So Jesus cured the man. Then he took up the topic for discussion by asking the guests their opinion about the Law as regarding the Sabbath, and giving well known discussion points about what could and could not be done on the Sabbath. This time they not only remained silent; Luke tells us that they were unable to answer his question.

## 14:7-14 - Conduct at meals

7 He told a parable to those who had been invited, noticing how they were choosing the places of honor at the table. 8 “When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not recline at table in the place of honor. A more distinguished guest than you may have been invited by him, 9 and the host who invited both of you may approach you and say, ‘Give your place to this man,’ and then you would proceed with embarrassment to take the lowest place. 10 Rather, when you are invited, go and take the lowest place so that when the host comes to you he may say, ‘My friend, move up to a higher position.’ Then you will enjoy the esteem of your companions at the table. 11 For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.” 12 Then he said to the host who invited him, “When you hold a lunch or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or your wealthy neighbors, in case they may invite you back and you have repayment. 13 Rather, when you hold a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind; 14 blessed indeed will you be because of their inability to repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

Still at the meal to which he had been invited by the leading Pharisee, Jesus gives an admonition about such meals. If we remember the economically diverse membership in Luke’s community, we can see that the admonition is well placed. The first part of Jesus admonition is just simple etiquette and good manners: don’t take the first place because you might be asked to move lower in order to make room for a more honored guest; take the lowest place because you might be regarded as more important and asked to come up higher.

Then Jesus goes beyond etiquette and good manners and gives advice about the banquet in the kingdom of God on earth: invite people who cannot repay you! (‡) Your reward for inviting the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind to your earthly banquets will be given in the resurrection of the righteous at the heavenly banquet.

## 14:15-24 - The great feast [Matthew 22:2-10]

15 One of his fellow guests on hearing this said to him, “Blessed is the one who will dine in the kingdom of God.” 16 He replied to him, “A man gave a great dinner to which he invited many. 17 When the time for the dinner came, he dispatched his servant to say to those invited, ‘Come, everything is now ready.’ 18 But one by one, they all began to excuse themselves. The first said to him, ‘I have purchased a field and must go to examine it; I ask you, consider me excused.’ 19 And another said, ‘I have purchased five yoke of oxen and am on my way to evaluate them; I ask you, consider me excused.’ 20 And another said, ‘I have just married a woman, and therefore I cannot come.’ 21 The servant went and reported this to his master. Then the master of the house in a rage commanded his servant, ‘Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in here the poor and the crippled, the blind and the lame.’ 22 The servant reported, ‘Sir, your orders have been carried out and still there is room.’ 23 The master then ordered the servant, ‘Go out to the highways and hedgerows and make people come in that my home may be filled. 24 For, I tell you, none of those men who were invited will taste my dinner.’”

Jesus is still at table with Pharisees, having been invited by one of the leading Pharisees. One of his table mates expressed his appreciation for Jesus’ talk about the feast in the kingdom of God, which gave Jesus the opportunity to tell the parable of the great feast.

For Luke it’s a “certain man” who gave the feast; for Matthew it’s a king. Three invited guests gave excuses for not being able to attend the feast. Similar excuses can be found in Deuteronomy 20:5-7, where there are given three reasons why one would be excused from participating in a holy war. “I’ve married a wife” is the only excuse which is found exactly in

Deuteronomy. “Bought a field” is close to Deuteronomy’s “planted a vineyard.” “Bought five yoke of oxen” doesn’t appear in Deuteronomy, but it indicates great wealth, because they would have cost a small fortune.

The man’s servants are sent out twice to gather in others, but the feast is still not full. So the servants are sent out again, but some of them get killed. But their task was to bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame – the same groups whom Jesus told the Pharisees to invite to their banquets.

So what’s Luke’s point? The leaders of the people of Israel are the first to be invited (the Pharisees, not the whole people). Some refuse to enter the kingdom which Jesus brings. Then others are invited. Then the servants (the prophets) are killed by those refusing to come to the feast. And finally, the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame are “forced” to come in from the highways and byways; these are the Gentiles.

#### 14:25-33 - Discipleship [Matthew 10:37-38]

25 Great crowds were traveling with him, and he turned and addressed them, 26 “If any one comes to me without hating his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. 27 Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. 28 Which of you wishing to construct a tower does not first sit down and calculate the cost to see if there is enough for its completion? 29 Otherwise, after laying the foundation and finding himself unable to finish the work the onlookers should laugh at him 30 and say, ‘This one began to build but did not have the resources to finish.’ 31 Or what king marching into battle would not first sit down and decide whether with ten thousand troops he can successfully oppose another king advancing upon him with twenty thousand troops? 32 But if not, while he is still far away, he will send a delegation to ask for peace terms. 33 In the same way, everyone of you who does not renounce all his possessions cannot be my disciple.

Jesus has now left the Pharisee’s dinner, where he’s been since the beginning of chapter fourteen. He’s now with the great crowds who follow him as he makes his way to Jerusalem. They’re following him, all right, but have they calculated the cost of doing so? Discipleship must supercede every other attachment, even to family, even to one’s life. (‡)

#### 14:34-35 - Salt [Mark 9:50; Matthew 5:13]

34 “Salt is good, but if salt itself loses its taste, with what can its flavor be restored? 35 It is fit neither for the soil nor for the manure pile; it is thrown out. Whoever has ears to hear ought to hear.”

Calculate the cost of discipleship, commit to it, and follow through. To do so is to be salt which is good; it can flavor everything. But not to follow through makes salt lose its flavor, and then it is good for nothing.

#### 15:1-7 - Lost sheep [Matthew 9:10-13, 18:12-14]

1 The tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to listen to him, 2 but the Pharisees and scribes began to complain, saying, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” 3 So to them he addressed this parable. 4 “What man among you having a hundred sheep and losing one of them would not leave the ninety-nine in the desert and go after the lost one until he finds it? 5 And when he does find it, he sets it on his shoulders with great joy 6 and, upon

his arrival home, he calls together his friends and neighbors and says to them, 'Rejoice with me because I have found my lost sheep.' 7 I tell you, in just the same way there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need of repentance.

Luke's set-up for this story and the two that follow is the note that tax-collectors and sinners were drawing near to Jesus in order to hear him, thus fulfilling the last line in the previous chapter: "Whoever has ears to hear, ought to hear." So who hears? The outcasts. The Pharisees and scribes complained that Jesus welcomed the tax-collectors and sinners, and even ate with them. (Two verses ago he had just left his dining with the Pharisees.) Matthew tells us, as well as Luke in 5:30, that the Pharisees and scribes complained to Jesus' disciples; here Luke doesn't tell us to whom they complained. In any case, their complaint generated the story of the lost sheep.

The lost sheep is anyone who has "gone astray" according to the dictates of the Pharisees and their legal scholars. Yet that is the one the shepherd seeks out. And, Jesus says, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine (self)-righteous who think they have no need of repentance. (†)

Everyone who heard this parable would have thought the shepherd foolish for leaving the ninety-nine in the desert. God's "foolishness" in leaving the ninety-nine emphasizes God's desire that a sinner repent.

#### 15:8-10 - Lost coin

8 "Or what woman having ten coins and losing one would not light a lamp and sweep the house, searching carefully until she finds it? 9 And when she does find it, she calls together her friends and neighbors and says to them, 'Rejoice with me because I have found the coin that I lost.' 10 In just the same way, I tell you, there will be rejoicing among the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

After the story of a man who lost a sheep, Luke gives us a story of a woman who lost a coin. Her joy in finding the lost coin is the image Jesus presents of the angels of God rejoicing over one repentant sinner.

#### 15:11-32 - Lost son(s)

11 Then he said, "A man had two sons, 12 and the younger son said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of your estate that should come to me.' So the father divided the property between them. 13 After a few days, the younger son collected all his belongings and set off to a distant country where he squandered his inheritance on a life of dissipation. 14 When he had freely spent everything, a severe famine struck that country, and he found himself in dire need. 15 So he hired himself out to one of the local citizens who sent him to his farm to tend the swine. 16 And he longed to eat his fill of the pods on which the swine fed, but nobody gave him any. 17 Coming to his senses he thought, 'How many of my father's hired workers have more than enough food to eat, but here am I, dying from hunger. 18 I shall get up and go to my father and I shall say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. 19 I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as you would treat one of your hired workers."' 20 So he got up and went back to his father. While he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him, and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him. 21 His son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son.' 22 But his father ordered his servants, 'Quickly bring the finest robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23 Take the fattened calf and slaughter it. Then let us celebrate with a feast, 24 because this son of mine was dead, and has come to life

again; he was lost, and has been found.' Then the celebration began. 25 Now the older son had been out in the field and, on his way back, as he neared the house, he heard the sound of music and dancing. 26 He called one of the servants and asked what this might mean. 27 The servant said to him, 'Your brother has returned and your father has slaughtered the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' 28 He became angry, and when he refused to enter the house, his father came out and pleaded with him. 29 He said to his father in reply, 'Look, all these years I served you and not once did I disobey your orders; yet you never gave me even a young goat to feast on with my friends. 30 But when your son returns who swallowed up your property with prostitutes, for him you slaughter the fattened calf.' 31 He said to him, 'My son, you are here with me always; everything I have is yours. 32 But now we must celebrate and rejoice, because your brother was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.'"

This third story about the "joy over repentance" is perhaps the one most known in Luke's Gospel; and it's Luke's own composition. And this story, too, is addressed to the Pharisees' and scholars' of the Law who objected to Jesus' association with tax-collectors and sinners, and his eating meals with them.

The younger son, after having received his share of the father's inheritance, leaves for a far away place, obviously Gentile territory where pigs were raised. He lost all his money "without control," and ended up feeding the pigs. When he came to his senses, he decided to return home (repent?) and ask his father's forgiveness and to be taken back, not as part of the family, but as a hired hand. Clearly he had no thought that there was any reason why his father should reestablish him to his former place in the family. He rehearsed what he would say to his father and returned home.

While he was still a long way off, his father, who had obviously been looking anxiously for his son's return, ran to greet him. An old man running is itself an indication of how anxiously the father wanted to embrace his wayward son. Before the son could "make his confession," the father called for his reunion with the family by ordering clothes and jewelry and sandals and a festive meal, because his lost son had been found, his dead son was alive.

Up to this point Jesus has given the Pharisees and the scholars in the Law an image of God's desire to forgive. But then the older son appears; hopefully the Pharisees and the scholars in the Law would recognize their attitudes in those of the older son. They had, after all, been zealous for the keeping of the Law, while the tax collectors and sinners had not. But Jesus' story embraces them, too. The father offers the older son, who had made some unwarranted assumptions about his brother (prostitutes), an invitation to come into the feast. Could the Pharisees and the scholars of the Law see in this that God offers forgiveness even to the self-righteous if only they would repent? Luke doesn't tell us if the older son went into the feast, only that the invitation was given. While the father rejoiced in the return of his prodigal son (the tax collectors and sinners) and welcomed him home, did he risk losing the older son (the Pharisees and scholars in the Law) because of his resentment of his father's mercy? (‡)

#### 16:1-15 - Dishonest steward (Perhaps a bad title for this story)

1 Then he also said to his disciples, "A rich man had a steward who was reported to him for squandering his property. 2 He summoned him and said, 'What is this I hear about you? Prepare a full account of your stewardship, because you can no longer be my steward.' 3 The steward said to himself, 'What shall I do, now that my master is taking the position of steward away from me? I am not strong enough to dig and I am ashamed to beg. 4 I know what I shall do so that, when I am removed from the stewardship, they may welcome me into their homes.' 5 He called in

his master's debtors one by one. To the first he said, 'How much do you owe my master?' 6 [b]He replied, 'One hundred measures of olive oil.' He said to him, 'Here is your promissory note. Sit down and quickly write one for fifty.' 7 Then to another he said, 'And you, how much do you owe?' He replied, 'One hundred kors of wheat.' He said to him, 'Here is your promissory note; write one for eighty.' 8 And the master commended that dishonest steward for acting prudently.

"For the children of this world are more prudent in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. 9 I tell you, make friends for yourselves with dishonest wealth, so that when it fails, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings. 10 The person who is trustworthy in very small matters is also trustworthy in great ones; and the person who is dishonest in very small matters is also dishonest in great ones. 11 If, therefore, you are not trustworthy with dishonest wealth, who will trust you with true wealth? 12 If you are not trustworthy with what belongs to another, who will give you what is yours? 13 No servant can serve two masters. He will either hate one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon."

14 The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all these things and sneered at him. 15 And he said to them, "You justify yourselves in the sight of others, but God knows your hearts; for what is of human esteem is an abomination in the sight of God."

Jesus has been speaking with the Pharisees and the scholars of the Law; now he begins to speak to his disciples (Luke's community), but the Pharisees are listening (16:14). In Jesus' story, the steward is reported to his master for having squandered the master's property. For Luke, "squandering the master's property," of which his community members are only the stewards, is using it for any reason other than for doing good for others. As in the previous story, this one is about the mismanagement of possessions which now calls for a decision: use them for oneself, or for the benefit of others.

Having been called by the master to make an account of his stewardship, he converts. He calls in the debtors one-by-one, and reduces the amount which their agreement states is owed. If the steward had added an amount to the agreement which he wanted to skim of the top, perhaps he reduced the agreement by that amount. If nothing else, this guy is clever. If he had cheated the debtors originally by charging them exorbitantly, now he has them thinking he is a good guy looking out for them. As steward, he had the right to change the agreements. And even the master commended him for his prudence. Thus far, the parable is pretty straight forward.

The next section is a little more complicated. It's made up of several sayings of Jesus which Luke brings together here in order to comment on the parable of the steward. Jesus says that the children of this world are in fact more prudent in dealing with their own generation, than are the children of light, that is, the members of Luke's community. Like the steward, the children of this world know a crisis when they face one, and they know how to deal with it. Whereas, the children of light have a tough time recognizing the crisis they face and knowing how to deal with it. Their crisis? This is the end of the age; use the things the master has entrusted to you, your wealth, wisely. What does Luke think "wisely" means? Use it for the benefit of others.

To use wealth wisely in this way is to build eternal dwellings. Using wealth wisely, that is to benefit others, is the little thing which will gain for the disciples larger things. Even though these sayings of Jesus are garnered from different sources, the overall message which Luke gives to his community, and particularly to the wealthy members of his community, is in support of using wealth for the good of others. One cannot serve wealth as something to which one owes allegiance and at the same time serve God. God gives the wealth so one can benefit others.

A final shot by Luke at the Pharisees, and therefore at the wealthy members of Luke's community, is the statement that they sneered at Jesus. They loved money. And even though they

may look pious in the eyes of others, God knows what's in their hearts. And to God it doesn't really matter what they look like to others.

#### 16:16-18 - The time of fulfillment has begun

16 "The law and the prophets lasted until John; but from then on the kingdom of God is proclaimed, and everyone who enters does so with violence. 17 It is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for the smallest part of a letter of the law to become invalid.

18 "Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and the one who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery.

Jesus is still speaking to his disciples. He says that the coming of John the Baptist is a transitional event. His coming ends the time of promise; Jesus' coming begins the time of fulfillment. The past is not done away with; it is fulfilled and superceded. Jesus' teaching on divorce reverses the permission given by Moses, but it returns to the earlier teaching of the Law forbidding divorce, and therefore fulfills the Law.

#### 16:19-31 - The rich man and Lazarus [recalls Luke 6:20-25]

19 "There was a rich man who dressed in purple garments and fine linen and dined sumptuously each day. 20 And lying at his door was a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, 21 who would gladly have eaten his fill of the scraps that fell from the rich man's table. Dogs even used to come and lick his sores. 22 When the poor man died, he was carried away by angels to the bosom of Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried, 23 and from the netherworld, where he was in torment, he raised his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. 24 And he cried out, 'Father Abraham, have pity on me. Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am suffering torment in these flames.' 25 Abraham replied, 'My child, remember that you received what was good during your lifetime while Lazarus likewise received what was bad; but now he is comforted here, whereas you are tormented. 26 Moreover, between us and you a great chasm is established to prevent anyone from crossing who might wish to go from our side to yours or from your side to ours.' 27 He said, 'Then I beg you, father, send him to my father's house, 28 for I have five brothers, so that he may warn them, lest they too come to this place of torment.' 29 But Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the prophets. Let them listen to them.' 30 He said, 'Oh no, father Abraham, but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.' 31 Then Abraham said, 'If they will not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone should rise from the dead.'"

This parable is found only in Luke. We need to remember that within his community there were some who were rich, and some who were poor. Throughout Luke's gospel, Jesus has been encouraging alms-giving.

The terms in which Luke describes the rich man indicate opulence and overdone sumptuousness. This guy is really rich and loves being so! And Lazarus is poor, really poor. In English the gospel passage says he was lying at the door of the rich man. The Greek word for "lying" can also mean "dumped" or "dropped," raising the possibility that Lazarus was also crippled. While dogs might be for us nice pets, in First Century Judaism, dogs were unclean animals, and they're licking Lazarus' wounds. Luke paints vividly for his audience the extreme difference between the rich man and Lazarus.

Both men die. Lazarus goes to the bosom of Abraham (heaven); the rich man goes to the netherworld (hell), where he is tormented by the flames. He calls out, "Father Abraham." But

Luke has already told us in 3:8 that John the Baptist said it does no good to say that Abraham is our father; we must produce good fruits. The rich man says, “Have pity on me.” Only those who can read the Gospel in Greek can get the irony. “Pity” in Greek is *eleos*; alms-giving is *eleemosyne*. The words have the same root meaning. So Luke’s irony here is that the rich man now asks Abraham to give him what he had refused to give Lazarus.

The story proceeds with the conversation between Abraham and the rich man, with the rich man asking two favors. First, let Lazarus come and put a drop of water on the rich man’s tongue. Not possible, says Abraham; there is too great a gulf between them. Then he asks that Lazarus be sent to his five brothers to warn them to change their ways. But that request is refused, because the brothers already have everything they need in order to know how to live. The rich man argues that if someone would rise from the dead and speak to the brothers, they would listen. Abraham’s pronouncement directs the attention of Luke’s readers to Jesus: “If they won’t listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone should rise from the dead.”

#### 17:1-2 - Sin [Mark 9:42; Matthew 18:6-7]

1 He said to his disciples, “Things that cause sin will inevitably occur, but woe to the person through whom they occur. 2 It would be better for him if a millstone were put around his neck and he be thrown into the sea than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin.

This is the first of four warnings addressed to the disciples. After this one on sin, the other three follow immediately: forgiveness, faith, and the attitude of a servant.

Jesus warns that it would be better to have a millstone put around one’s neck and be thrown into the sea than to cause “one of these little ones” to sin. “Little ones” has been used elsewhere in the gospels to mean the disciples. It is suggested that it may apply especially to those who have only recently become members of the community. They especially must not be scandalized.

#### 17:3-4 - Forgiveness [Matthew 18:15]

3 Be on your guard! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. 4 And if he wrongs you seven times in one day and returns to you seven times saying, ‘I am sorry,’ you should forgive him.”

The second warning concerns a community member who has sinned. First, rebuke the sinner. And if he repents, forgive him. And if he offends seven times a day and asks for forgiveness, forgive him. (†)

#### 17:5-6 - Faith [Mark 11:23; Matthew 17:20]

5 And the apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith.” 6 The Lord replied, “If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you would say to [this] mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.

The apostles’ request that Jesus increase their faith is met with the assurance that if one

had faith as small as a mustard seed, that one could still command a tree to jump in the lake.

#### 17:7-10 - Attitude of a servant

7 “Who among you would say to your servant who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, ‘Come here immediately and take your place at table’? 8 Would he not rather say to him, ‘Prepare something for me to eat. Put on your apron and wait on me while I eat and drink. You may eat and drink when I am finished’? 9 Is he grateful to that servant because he did what was commanded? 10 So should it be with you. When you have done all you have been commanded, say, ‘We are unprofitable servants; we have done what we were obliged to do.’”

This saying is particular to Luke. Perhaps he’s thinking of those who serve the community as its leaders, but what he writes applies to all. The point is that even when one has served well, for instance by doing the three things given previously – avoiding giving scandal, forgiveness and faith – that one can put no claim on God for reward. But there is no need to put such a claim on God, because God has already given all that one needs to serve others. (†)

### **Third Instruction on “the Way” - 17:11-19:27**

#### 17:11 - Transitional verse

11 As he continued his journey to Jerusalem, he traveled through Samaria and Galilee.

#### 17:12-19 - Lepers

12 As he was entering a village, ten lepers met [him]. They stood at a distance from him 13 and raised their voice, saying, “Jesus, Master! Have pity on us!” 14 And when he saw them, he said, “Go show yourselves to the priests.” As they were going they were cleansed. 15 And one of them, realizing he had been healed, returned, glorifying God in a loud voice; 16 and he fell at the feet of Jesus and thanked him. He was a Samaritan. 17 Jesus said in reply, “Ten were cleansed, were they not? Where are the other nine? 18 Has none but this foreigner returned to give thanks to God?” 19 Then he said to him, “Stand up and go; your faith has saved you.”

As noted before, Luke’s theology is great, but his geography is not so good. Back in 9:52 Jesus and his followers were in Samaria heading for Jerusalem. They certainly would have been farther south by this time, but Luke’s geographically locating the cure here between Galilee and Samaria serves his theological purposes well.

Jesus’ command that the lepers go show themselves to the priests worked well for the nine who simply obeyed what Jesus said. One does not have to suppose they were ungrateful; they were just obedient. Recognizing Jesus as a co-religionist, they did what their religion and Jesus required.

The tenth one, a Samaritan, basically had no priest to whom to show himself. Samaritans worshiped in a temple in Mount Gerizim, not in the temple on Mount Sion. It was almost a different religion. So the Samaritan returned to the one to whom he credited his cure in order to give thanks. This is another example of Luke’s inclusiveness and his universalism.

## 17:20-37 - The day of the Son of Man [Mark 13:21; Matthew 24:23, 37-39]

20 Asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, he said in reply, “The coming of the kingdom of God cannot be observed, 21 and no one will announce, ‘Look, here it is,’ or, ‘There it is.’ For behold, the kingdom of God is among you.”

22 Then he said to his disciples, “The days will come when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, but you will not see it. 23 There will be those who will say to you, ‘Look, there he is,’ [or] ‘Look, here he is.’ Do not go off, do not run in pursuit. 24 For just as lightning flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other, so will the Son of Man be [in his day]. 25 But first he must suffer greatly and be rejected by this generation. 26 As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be in the days of the Son of Man; 27 they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage up to the day that Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all. 28 Similarly, as it was in the days of Lot: they were eating, drinking, buying, selling, planting, building; 29 on the day when Lot left Sodom, fire and brimstone rained from the sky to destroy them all. 30 So it will be on the day the Son of Man is revealed. 31 On that day, a person who is on the housetop and whose belongings are in the house must not go down to get them, and likewise a person in the field must not return to what was left behind. 32 Remember the wife of Lot. 33 Whoever seeks to preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses it will save it. 34 I tell you, on that night there will be two people in one bed; one will be taken, the other left. 35 And there will be two women grinding meal together; one will be taken, the other left.” [36 ] 37 They said to him in reply, “Where, Lord?” He said to them, “Where the body is, there also the vultures will gather.”

The Pharisees are the ones who ask when the kingdom of God would come. To them Jesus replies that the coming of the kingdom cannot be observed, and if people tell you they’re observing it and pointing it out, don’t listen to them. Jesus says that the kingdom of God is among you. There is no need for people to point it out; it’s present in the teaching and works of power that Jesus is doing. But it is not yet fully present. And clearly it has no discernable geographical boundaries. It’s wherever God reigns, rules or has influence.

Although the Pharisees asked about when the *kingdom of God* would come, Jesus now turns to his disciples with further instruction. The days are coming when the disciples will long to see “one of *the days of the Son of Man*, but you will not see it;” the end-time is not coming soon. Jesus repeats to his disciples what he had said to the Pharisees: don’t be fooled by those who say they know when the days of the Son of Man will come. When it comes it will be obvious, but first the Son of Man must suffer greatly and be rejected by this generation.

Jesus says some will be taken and others will be left. So who are the lucky ones? Those taken or those left behind? One commentator suggests that those who are taken are the ones who are blessed; those who are left behind are not going to enter the glory of the Son of Man. In the example Jesus uses for Noah, it was those who were “taken” into the ark who were saved. Those who were left perished. [Who knows?]

What are we to make of Jesus’ saying, “Whoever seeks to preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses it will save it?” Luke has given examples of what the *present life* is for many people: pleasures (eating and drinking), relationships (marrying and being given in marriage), possessions (buying, selling, planting, building, cloak in the field, belongings in the house). If people try to preserve that life, they will lose it; it will simply disappear when the Son of Man appears. However, when the Son of Man does appear, all those things will be left behind, and people’s *real* life will be saved.

“They said to him in reply, ‘Where, Lord?’” Presumably the “they” is the disciples. Their

question is about where the day of the Son of Man will take place. Jesus' response, "Where the body is, there also the vultures will gather." However gross the image might seem, the meaning is that disciples will gather wherever they can be nourished by the word.

### 18:1-8 - The persistent widow

1 Then he told them a parable about the necessity for them to pray always without becoming weary. He said, 2 "There was a judge in a certain town who neither feared God nor respected any human being. 3 And a widow in that town used to come to him and say, 'Render a just decision for me against my adversary.' 4 For a long time the judge was unwilling, but eventually he thought, 'While it is true that I neither fear God nor respect any human being, 5 because this widow keeps bothering me I shall deliver a just decision for her lest she finally come and strike me.'" 6 The Lord said, "Pay attention to what the dishonest judge says. 7 Will not God then secure the rights of his chosen ones who call out to him day and night? Will he be slow to answer them? 8 I tell you, he will see to it that justice is done for them speedily. But when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

This is a teaching on praying; the following story is also about praying. Luke doesn't leave the interpretation of this parable to anyone else; he writes at the outset, "Then he told them a parable about the necessity for them to pray always without becoming weary." The "becoming weary" means giving up on believing in Jesus, namely apostasy. There's the interpretation; then he gives the parable.

The judge in the parable is not a nice man. He does not fear God, nor does he respect people. And the widow, according to the dictates of the Law, had a special claim on justice. "Curse be he who prevents the justice due the sojourner, the fatherless and the widow (Deuteronomy 27:19)." And this widow kept coming to the judge over and over again. And the judge admitted that it was true that he neither feared God nor respected people. But the widow's persistence drove him to decide in her favor.

The argument Jesus makes is that if an unjust judge will yield to persistence, how much more will God answer persistent prayer. That might sound great in theory, but at first blush, it flies in the face of many people's experience. They keep on praying for something, but it doesn't happen. God doesn't always give me that for which I pray; but my praying may form in me the patience and strength I need in order to deal with whatever issue I am praying about.

Could that be what Jesus meant when he said, "But when the Son of Man comes will he find faith on earth?" Faith enough that one keeps praying; faith enough that one will allow one's prayer to change the one who is praying, even though it doesn't seem to change God. (‡)

### 18:9-14 - The Pharisee and the tax-collector: two kinds of praying

9 He then addressed this parable to those who were convinced of their own righteousness and despised everyone else. 10 "Two people went up to the temple area to pray; one was a Pharisee and the other was a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee took up his position and spoke this prayer to himself, 'O God, I thank you that I am not like the rest of humanity—greedy, dishonest, adulterous—or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week, and I pay tithes on my whole income.' 13 But the tax collector stood off at a distance and would not even raise his eyes to heaven but beat his breast and prayed, 'O God, be merciful to me a sinner.' 14 I tell you, the latter went home justified, not the former; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and the one who humbles himself will be exalted."

Once again, Luke indicates Jesus' intention in telling this story; he addressed it "to those who were convinced of their own righteousness and despised others."

The story is about a Pharisee and a tax collector who went up to the temple to pray. Luke has dealt throughout his gospel with the righteous; we have seen the righteous, the unrighteous and the self-righteous. In this parable the issue comes to a head. The Pharisee has in fact observed the Law religiously. According to the Law he is a righteous man. His problem is that he despises others less righteous than himself. The tax collector by reason of his profession is outside the Law; he is legally unrighteous. The legal righteousness of the Pharisee has brought on his self-righteousness. By contrast the tax collector claims no righteousness of his own or in the sight of the Law, but acknowledges that he is a sinner. Jesus says that he went home a righteous man.

The moral of Jesus' story is spelled out. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled; whoever humbles himself will be exalted. Righteousness is not a personal accomplishment; it is a gift from God. (‡)

18:15-17 - The children [Mark 10:13-16; Matthew 19:13-15]

15 People were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them, and when the disciples saw this, they rebuked them. 16 Jesus, however, called the children to himself and said, "Let the children come to me and do not prevent them; for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. 17 Amen, I say to you, whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it."

Luke has been going on his own with the narrative since 9:51, when he abandoned his following of Mark's narrative. Now he begins again to follow Mark.

I have found no exegete who explains how and why this story got into all three synoptic gospels. The how is quite easily explained: Mark wrote it first; Matthew and Luke copied Mark. The why is the question for which I have found no satisfactory answer. It's unlikely that the believing community remembered the story because it was somehow considered cute. Children in First Century Israel, and in the Roman Empire, were non-entities with no rights or responsibilities. At thirteen years old a boy became Bar Mitzvah, that is a "son of the Law" and was considered an adult member of the community and responsible for his own actions. Up to that point the parents bore the responsibility for whatever the child did.

Perhaps the reason the story was remembered is because on Pentecost, among those who were baptized was a pregnant woman. When the child was born the question would immediately arise about whether the child should be baptized or not, since the infant was incapable of believing in Jesus. During that discussion someone remembered this incident when Jesus welcomed the children. That provided the answer to the question about baptizing the newborn. Even the way the story is told in all three synoptic gospels suggests a baptismal theme. Prior to baptizing someone, the one who was doing the baptizing would ask if there were anything to "prevent" the person from being baptized. In Acts 8:36 the Ethiopian eunuch in conversation with Philip asks, "Look, there is water. What is to prevent my being baptized?"

All three evangelists draw out the further teaching of Jesus that the Kingdom of God belongs to those who receive it as little children, that is, as people who have no right to what is so graciously given by God. Perhaps this is meant as contrast to the Pharisee in the preceding story,

and the children represent all those others who are considered by others to be of no account in Luke's Gospel: the poor, the blind, the lame and the sinners.

18:18-30 - Riches [Mark 10:17-31; Matthew 19:16-30]

18 An official asked him this question, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" 19 Jesus answered him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. 20 You know the commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery; you shall not kill; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness; honor your father and your mother.'" 21 And he replied, "All of these I have observed from my youth." 22 When Jesus heard this he said to him, "There is still one thing left for you: sell all that you have and distribute it to the poor, and you will have a treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." 23 But when he heard this he became quite sad, for he was very rich.

24 Jesus looked at him [now sad] and said, "How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! 25 For it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God." 26 Those who heard this said, "Then who can be saved?" 27 And he said, "What is impossible for human beings is possible for God." 28 Then Peter said, "We have given up our possessions and followed you." 29 He said to them, "Amen, I say to you, there is no one who has given up house or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God 30 who will not receive [back] an overabundant return in this present age and eternal life in the age to come."

Even while following Mark's narrative, Luke's preoccupation with the wealthy members of his own community again comes to the fore. Luke makes a few changes or omissions in Mark's narrative in order to accommodate his own perspective. For instance, Luke does not include Mark's narration that Jesus looked at the rich man "and love him." Perhaps Luke was not all that fond of the wealthy members of his community.

The official approaches Jesus and calls him, "Good teacher," to which Jesus replies, "Why do you call me good. No one is good but God alone." Luke has just written about a Pharisee who thought himself to be good. But then he tells the official to keep the commandments, to which the official responds that he's already done that – sort of like the Pharisee in 18:9-14. So Jesus invites the man to even fuller conversion: sell all that you have and give to the poor so that you will have treasure in heaven. Luke adds "all" to Jesus' statement in Mark. This is interesting, because Luke will shortly write about Zacchaeus, who says he will give away *half* of his riches, and that's enough. Perhaps it's the spirit of sacrifice which is important, not the percentage. (‡)

But then Jesus adds the ultimate measure of conversion: come, follow me. And the man became quite sad, because he had many possessions. (‡) In Mark and Matthew the man went away sad; no such indication is given here in Luke. Perhaps the man stayed around and heard the further teaching about riches, including the hyperbole that it easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. To which people respond by asking who, then, can be saved. And Jesus assures them that it is impossible for humans, but not for God.

Peter, feeling pretty good about his situation, one supposes, and about what he heard Jesus say, notes that "we" – meaning the disciples – have given everything away. Jesus assures Peter that he will be rewarded in this life "abundantly" (which is less specific than the hundredfold of everything in Mark), and enter eternal life, too.

### 18:31-34 - Third prediction of the passion [Mark 10:32-34; Matthew 20:17-19]

31 Then he took the Twelve aside and said to them, "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem and everything written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled. 32 He will be handed over to the Gentiles and he will be mocked and insulted and spat upon; 33 and after they have scourged him they will kill him, but on the third day he will rise." 34 But they understood nothing of this; the word remained hidden from them and they failed to comprehend what he said.

After telling the apostles what *they* must give up in order to enter the kingdom of God, Jesus took them aside and told them what *he* was about to give up. They are on their way to Jerusalem where everything written about him in the prophets will be fulfilled, including that he will be abused and killed, after which he will rise. But the apostles didn't understand anything Jesus said.

### 18:35-43 - The blind beggar [Mark 10:46-52; Matthew 20:29-34]

35 Now as he approached Jericho a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging, 36 and hearing a crowd going by, he inquired what was happening. 37 They told him, "Jesus of Nazareth is passing by." 38 He shouted, "Jesus, Son of David, have pity on me!" 39 The people walking in front rebuked him, telling him to be silent, but he kept calling out all the more, "Son of David, have pity on me!" 40 Then Jesus stopped and ordered that he be brought to him; and when he came near, Jesus asked him, 41 "What do you want me to do for you?" He replied, "Lord, please let me see." 42 Jesus told him, "Have sight; your faith has saved you." 43 He immediately received his sight and followed him, giving glory to God. When they saw this, all the people gave praise to God.

Mark and Matthew situate this scene as Jesus is *leaving* Jericho; Luke has him *entering* Jericho, probably because he is going to tell the story of Zacchaeus next; it's a story unique to Luke and he situates it in Jericho.

Important elements in Luke's telling of the story which he has in common with Mark and Matthew are the crowd trying to shut the man up when he asks, "Have pity on me." He is blind and sitting beside the road and asks for pity; that word in Greek is *eleos*. It is the root word for alms. The crowd may have thought the beggar was asking Jesus for alms. Even Jesus asked what the beggar wanted him to do. "Please let me see," the beggar says. Jesus cures him. And the man followed Jesus.

### 19:1-10 -Zacchaeus, the tax collector

1 He came to Jericho and intended to pass through the town. 2 Now a man there named Zacchaeus, who was a chief tax collector and also a wealthy man, 3 was seeking to see who Jesus was; but he could not see him because of the crowd, for he was short in stature. 4 So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree in order to see Jesus, who was about to pass that way. 5 When he reached the place, Jesus looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down quickly, for today I must stay at your house." 6 And he came down quickly and received him with joy. 7 When they all saw this, they began to grumble, saying, "He has gone to stay at the house of a sinner." 8 But Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Behold, half of my possessions, Lord, I shall give to the poor, and if I have extorted anything from anyone I shall repay it four times over." 9 And Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house because this man too is a descendant of Abraham. 10 For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save what was lost."

Jesus had planned just to pass through Jericho. His encounter with Zacchaeus was not something Jesus had planned. Zacchaeus was the chief tax collector in Jericho, and a wealthy man. As we have seen, a chief tax collector paid the Romans and the Temple authorities what they levied against a town or district, and then collected from the citizens whatever he thought he could, which would include his “commission” and whatever else he could get from the people.

Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus. Even though the literal translation of the Greek could mean the Jesus was short of stature, and therefore could not be seen because of the crowd, here we assume that Zacchaeus was the short guy. He ran on ahead of the crowd and climbed a sycamore tree so he could see. Of course climbing a tree meant that he could also be seen. And he was . . . by Jesus. Perhaps that was an embarrassing moment for Zacchaeus. There was the city’s chief tax collector, already considered a pariah and a sinner, up there in a tree in the sight of everybody.

Jesus stopped and said, “Come down quickly, for today I must stay at your house.” Zacchaeus must have been shocked; and so were the people in the crowd, both for the same reason. Why would Jesus want to stay with a notorious sinner? But maybe they didn’t know him. The Greek text has Zacchaeus saying, not that he *will* give half his money to the poor, and that he *will* give back anything he has gotten fraudulently, but that he *is* doing so. On the other hand, he doesn’t say that he has been doing that, and Jesus says that it is *today* that salvation has come to his house. (Maybe Luke’s magnificent grasp of Greek grammar slipped a little.) In either case, Luke is demonstrating that salvation can come even to an excluded tax collector, and that is indeed why Jesus has come, “to seek and save what was lost.” (‡)

#### 19:11-27 - Profitable servants [Matthew 25:14-30]

11 While they were listening to him speak, he proceeded to tell a parable because he was near Jerusalem and they thought that the kingdom of God would appear there immediately. 12 So he said, “A nobleman went off to a distant country to obtain the kingship for himself and then to return. 13 He called ten of his servants and gave them ten gold coins[e] and told them, ‘Engage in trade with these until I return.’ 14 His fellow citizens, however, despised him and sent a delegation after him to announce, ‘We do not want this man to be our king.’ 15 But when he returned after obtaining the kingship, he had the servants called, to whom he had given the money, to learn what they had gained by trading. 16 The first came forward and said, ‘Sir, your gold coin has earned ten additional ones.’ 17 He replied, ‘Well done, good servant! You have been faithful in this very small matter; take charge of ten cities.’ 18 Then the second came and reported, ‘Your gold coin, sir, has earned five more.’ 19 And to this servant too he said, ‘You, take charge of five cities.’ 20 Then the other servant came and said, ‘Sir, here is your gold coin; I kept it stored away in a handkerchief, 21 for I was afraid of you, because you are a demanding person; you take up what you did not lay down and you harvest what you did not plant.’ 22 He said to him, ‘With your own words I shall condemn you, you wicked servant. You knew I was a demanding person, taking up what I did not lay down and harvesting what I did not plant; 23 why did you not put my money in a bank? Then on my return I would have collected it with interest.’ 24 And to those standing by he said, ‘Take the gold coin from him and give it to the servant who has ten.’ 25 But they said to him, ‘Sir, he has ten gold coins.’ 26 ‘I tell you, to everyone who has, more will be given, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. 27 Now as for those enemies of mine who did not want me as their king, bring them here and slay them before me.’”

Jericho is about fifteen miles from Jerusalem; it’s a day’s leisurely walk. This time Luke’s geography is good. He says that Jesus told this parable because they were nearing Jerusalem, and that they thought that the kingdom of God would appear there immediately.

We're not told who the "they" is, but we can safely assume it is the people in the crowd which has been following Jesus to Jerusalem.

In Matthew's version of Jesus' parable, there are only three servants. Both Matthew and Luke got the story the Q source and adapted it.

In both versions of the story, the nobleman (Luke) or the man (Matthew) goes off on a journey, for Luke the nobleman is going off to a foreign land to be made king. The nobleman had given a gold coin to each of his ten slaves. When he returns he confronts three of them. (The other seven are not mentioned again.) The first slave turned his coin into ten, so he is given charge of ten cities. The second turned his coin into five, so he is given charge of five cities. The third slave didn't make any profit, so his coin is taken away from him.

Then the king deals with those who didn't want him to be king. He kills them. This parable is possibly based on a real event. When Herod the Great died, his son, Archelaus, traveled to Rome to be made king in place of his father. An embassy of Jews went to Rome to oppose his being made king. The Emperor Augustus didn't make him king, but tetrarch, which is nonetheless the ruler. When he returned he was brutal in dealing with the Jews.

The point of the parable may be twofold. First, what one has is a gift from God. Second, what one does with his or her talents is meant to be a gift returned to God. (‡)

Another interpretation of this parable implies that Luke used it as an outline of what he is going to narrate in the following section: Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and his ministry there, including his death and resurrection. Jesus is named king both by acclamation at his entry into Jerusalem, and by ridicule in his passion and crucifixion. The apostles are given charge over sections of Jesus' kingdom, symbolized by the servants' taking charge of cities. Jesus as king will return in his resurrection.

With that parable, the journey to Jerusalem is completed.

## Jerusalem Ministry - 19:28-21:38

19:28-40 - Entry into Jerusalem [Mark 11:1-11; Matthew 21:1-11; John 12:12-19]

28 After he had said this, he proceeded on his journey up to Jerusalem. 29 As he drew near to Bethphage and Bethany at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples. 30 He said, "Go into the village opposite you, and as you enter it you will find a colt tethered on which no one has ever sat. Untie it and bring it here. 31 And if anyone should ask you, 'Why are you untying it?' you will answer, 'The Master has need of it.'" 32 So those who had been sent went off and found everything just as he had told them. 33 And as they were untying the colt, its owners said to them, "Why are you untying this colt?" 34 They answered, "The Master has need of it." 35 So they brought it to Jesus, threw their cloaks over the colt, and helped Jesus to mount. 36 As he rode along, the people were spreading their cloaks on the road; 37 and now as he was approaching the slope of the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of his disciples began to praise God aloud with joy for all the mighty deeds they had seen. 38 They proclaimed:

"Blessed is the king

who comes in the name of the Lord.

Peace in heaven

and glory in the highest."

39 Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples." 40 He said in reply, "I tell you, if they keep silent, the stones will cry out!"

It is helpful for us to remember the previous parable of Jesus about the nobleman going to a distant place to be named king and then returning. Jesus' entry into Jerusalem is the fulfillment of the prophecy contained in that parable. Jesus is proclaimed as king. He has been teaching along the way; now he will teach in the temple in Jerusalem.

Back in 7:18-19, the disciples sent by John the Baptist asked Jesus if he were the one who is to come, or should they look for another. Here's the answer: Jesus is the one who is to come. Luke gathers up another previous episode also. The crowds cry out, "Peace in heaven and glory in the highest," reminiscent of the angels proclamation at Jesus' birth (2:14). Clearly this is the time of fulfillment.

Even though Luke is now following Mark's Gospel very closely, he makes some changes. In Mark the crowds strew palms as well as their cloaks in Jesus path; in Luke it is their cloaks (their most expensive garment) which they lay down over which Jesus will ride. It's another of Luke's subtle reminders that wealth is to be put at the disposal for the use of the king. (‡)

The Pharisees, of course, don't like all the people proclaiming Jesus as king, and they ask Jesus to stop them. In the preceding parable, they are represented by the ones who did not want the nobleman to be made king over them. Jesus' reply means that there is no stopping this movement. If the people stop proclaiming, the stones will take up the proclamation. Stones will be mentioned several times in the next few verses and chapters, harkening back to 3:8 where Jesus said that God could raise up children for Abraham from these stones. The crowd which is following Jesus is made up of Jews, children of Abraham.

Of course, the kingship of Jesus which is being proclaimed will culminate in his reigning from the cross, and ultimately in his resurrection. This is the last time the Pharisees are mentioned in Luke's Gospel. In 20:20 the "they" may be understood as Pharisees, but if it is they, Luke does not name them.

## 19:41-44 - Lament for Jerusalem

41 As he drew near, he saw the city and wept over it, 42 saying, “If this day you only knew what makes for peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes. 43 For the days are coming upon you when your enemies will raise a palisade against you; they will encircle you and hem you in on all sides. 44 They will smash you to the ground and your children within you, and they will not leave one stone upon another within you because you did not recognize the time of your visitation.”

This is found only in Luke. Jerusalem has been destroyed by the time Luke wrote. We can envision Jesus on a donkey, followed by a huge crowd pausing on the Mount of Olives overlooking the city of Jerusalem. Jesus’ lament over the city is because of its current blindness and its future destruction. It is so typical of Luke, one could even say of “gentle” Luke. In Luke’s Gospel, few are condemned; many are sympathetically understood. (‡) The point he is making here is that the destruction of Jerusalem is not a victory for those who believe in Jesus; it is a tragedy shared by Jew and Christian. (‡)

The time of visitation of which Jesus speaks is his current coming in peace. But because Jerusalem does not recognize the visitation of peace, a destructive visitation will come upon the city, in which one stone will not be left upon another.

## 19:45-48 - Cleansing of the temple [Mark 11:15-17; Matthew 21:12-13; John 2:13-17]

45 Then Jesus entered the temple area and proceeded to drive out those who were selling things, 46 saying to them, “It is written, ‘My house shall be a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of thieves.’” 47 And every day he was teaching in the temple area. The chief priests, the scribes, and the leaders of the people, meanwhile, were seeking to put him to death, 48 but they could find no way to accomplish their purpose because all the people were hanging on his words.

All four evangelists narrate this event after Jesus enters Jerusalem. John places it at the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry, the first visit to Jerusalem by Jesus. In that he agrees with the other three evangelists. But the other three evangelists have Jesus entering Jerusalem only once. In John’s Gospel, Jesus visits Jerusalem three times. If it weren’t for John’s Gospel, we would have the impression that Jesus’ public ministry lasted only one year.

Some have suggested that Jesus cleansed the temple in preparation for his own teaching there in the coming days. Luke writes that Jesus was teaching there every day. In some ways it’s a flashback to 2:49, where the young Jesus answers his mother by saying, “Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” And Jesus will be teaching in the temple up to 21:38.

Here Jesus designates the temple as a house of prayer, rather than the den of thieves which has grown up around people’s desire and intention to come to the temple to worship God by praying. The things which were sold in the temple precincts were items needed to offer sacrifice in the temple. Others were changing currency into the Hebrew coinage in which people had to pay the temple tax. But in Lukan Jesus’ mind, concerns about the accouterments for praying had replaced the practice of praying. (‡)

The chief priests, the scribes and the leaders of the people (no Pharisees) objected to Jesus’ activity in cleansing the temple and they were seeking a way to have him killed, but they couldn’t find a way because all the people were hanging on his every word. Luke places

responsibility for Jesus' death squarely on the shoulders of the authorities; it is not the whole people who oppose him.

#### 20:1-8 - Jesus' authority questioned [Mark 11:27-33; Matthew 21:23-27]

1 One day as he was teaching the people in the temple area and proclaiming the good news, the chief priests and scribes, together with the elders, approached him 2 and said to him, "Tell us, by what authority are you doing these things? Or who is the one who gave you this authority?" 3 He said to them in reply, "I shall ask you a question. Tell me, 4 was John's baptism of heavenly or of human origin?" 5 They discussed this among themselves, and said, "If we say, 'Of heavenly origin,' he will say, 'Why did you not believe him?'" 6 But if we say, 'Of human origin,' then all the people will stone us, for they are convinced that John was a prophet." 7 So they answered that they did not know from where it came. 8 Then Jesus said to them, "Neither shall I tell you by what authority I do these things."

Beginning here and continuing on through 21:4, Luke gives his readers one confrontation after another between Jesus and the religious authorities, mostly over the issue of real religious authority and observance.

As he's teaching in the temple, Jesus is questioned about his authority for doing what he's doing by the chief priests, scribes and elders. These are people whose business it was to authorize people to preach and teach in the temple, and everyone knew they had not authorized Jesus to do so. If Jesus said that God gave him the authority to preach in the temple, the authorities could accuse him of blasphemy. They figured they had him. Jesus' response to their question is another question: "Was John's baptism of heavenly or human origin?" After consulting among themselves, they figured out that no matter which way they answered Jesus' question, they'd be in trouble. If they said the baptism of John was of heavenly origin, Jesus would ask them why they didn't believe him. And they could hardly say that it was of human origin, because they were surrounded by people who regarded John as a prophet, and those people would stone anyone who opposed John. So they said that they didn't know. Jesus responds in effect, "Well, I guess you aren't all that concerned about the source of someone's authority to preach after all; so I won't trouble you by getting into a discussion about from where or from whom my authority comes."

#### 20:9-19 - Parable of the tenant farmers [Mark 12:1-12; Matthew 21:33-46]

9 Then he proceeded to tell the people this parable. "[A] man planted a vineyard, leased it to tenant farmers, and then went on a journey for a long time. 10 At harvest time he sent a servant to the tenant farmers to receive some of the produce of the vineyard. But they beat the servant and sent him away empty-handed. 11 So he proceeded to send another servant, but him also they beat and insulted and sent away empty-handed. 12 Then he proceeded to send a third, but this one too they wounded and threw out. 13 The owner of the vineyard said, 'What shall I do? I shall send my beloved son; maybe they will respect him.' 14 But when the tenant farmers saw him they said to one another, 'This is the heir. Let us kill him that the inheritance may become ours.' 15 So they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. What will the owner of the vineyard do to them? 16 He will come and put those tenant farmers to death and turn over the vineyard to others." When the people heard this, they exclaimed, "Let it not be so!" 17 But he looked at them and asked, "What then does this scripture passage mean:

'The stone which the builders rejected  
has become the cornerstone'?

18 Everyone who falls on that stone will be dashed to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls." 19 The

scribes and chief priests sought to lay their hands on him at that very hour, but they feared the people, for they knew that he had addressed this parable to them.

The crowd of people listening to Jesus teach in the temple have heard the confrontation between Jesus and the religious authorities about Jesus' authority in the previous story. Luke now has the parable which Jesus addressed to the crowds. But the butt of the criticism in Jesus' parable is the religious authorities, and they knew it (20:19).

A vineyard was a traditional allegory for Israel. The whole parable is really an allegory. The owner of the vineyard is God. The tenant farmers are the religious leaders. They do not give God what is His due. The servants sent by the owner are the prophets. The beloved son is Jesus. Even the detail that they threw him out of the vineyard is allegorical for the fact that Jesus was crucified outside the walls of Jerusalem. It is God who will take the vineyard away from the tenant farmers and give it to others. Luke will show that happening in the Acts of the Apostles.

The people who were listening exclaimed, "Let it not be so!" They are responding to the entire parable, not just to the part about turning the vineyard over to others.

Jesus' response could be, "Oh no? Well let me tell you about the stone which the builders rejected. It will become the corner stone." But instead he quotes Psalm 118 and Isaiah 28: "The stone which has been rejected has become the cornerstone." No one in the crowd could have missed Jesus' meaning that the religious leaders were the builders, and that Jesus was the stone rejected.

#### 20:20-26 - Taxes to Caesar [Mark 12:13-17; Matthew 22:15-22]

20 They watched him closely and sent agents pretending to be righteous who were to trap him in speech, in order to hand him over to the authority and power of the governor. 21 They posed this question to him, "Teacher, we know that what you say and teach is correct, and you show no partiality, but teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. 22 Is it lawful for us to pay tribute to Caesar or not?" 23 Recognizing their craftiness he said to them, 24 "Show me a denarius; whose image and name does it bear?" They replied, "Caesar's." 25 So he said to them, "Then repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God." 26 They were unable to trap him by something he might say before the people, and so amazed were they at his reply that they fell silent.

This exchange between Jesus and the "they" in verse 20 continues the efforts of "them" to find some way to do away with Jesus; we may presume that the "they" are the chief priests, the scribes and the leaders of the people. The question which "they" ask poses a dilemma between religious and political realities. There had been riots by the Jews against paying taxes to Rome, based on religious beliefs. Jesus adroitly escapes the horns of the dilemma by asking for a coin by which the tribute to Caesar was paid. It held Caesar's image and name. So, since it belongs to Caesar, give it to Caesar. The added irony is that if "they" were devout Jews (religious), they should not even have had a Roman coin (political) in their possession, because it contained an image of the Emperor, and therefore it was idolatry for a Jew to possess such a coin. But they promptly produced one. It is another case of Luke pointing out "their" hypocrisy.

The clever questioners fell silent.

## 20:27-40 - Question about the resurrection [Mark 12:18-27; Matthew 22:23-33]

27 Some Sadducees, those who deny that there is a resurrection, came forward and put this question to him, 28 saying, “Teacher, Moses wrote for us, ‘If someone’s brother dies leaving a wife but no child, his brother must take the wife and raise up descendants for his brother.’ 29 Now there were seven brothers; the first married a woman but died childless. 30 Then the second 31 and the third married her, and likewise all the seven died childless. 32 Finally the woman also died. 33 Now at the resurrection whose wife will that woman be? For all seven had been married to her.” 34 Jesus said to them, “The children of this age marry and are given in marriage; 35 but those who are deemed worthy to attain to the coming age and to the resurrection of the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage. 36 They can no longer die, for they are like angels; and they are the children of God because they are the ones who will rise. 37 That the dead will rise even Moses made known in the passage about the bush, when he called ‘Lord’ the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob; 38 and he is not God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive.” 39 Some of the scribes said in reply, “Teacher, you have answered well.” 40 And they no longer dared to ask him anything.

The Pharisees and the Sadducees didn’t get along, mainly because the Sadducees denied the resurrection and the Pharisees believed in it. However, the hatred of both groups for Jesus made them temporarily bed-fellows. Since the Pharisees failed to get any traction for condemning Jesus on the issue of taxes to Caesar, the Sadducees tried a different tack.

It’s a distressfully long story they tell Jesus about seven brothers marrying and same woman and each of them dying, including eventually the woman. But the Sadducees delighted in providing Jesus with a situation in which resurrection from the dead would be difficult to understand and uphold. Jesus doesn’t mince words; he just tells them that they have it all wrong, because as Sadducees they are obliged to consider life on this side of the grave only. On the other side of the grave spousal relationships don’t exist. But the dead will rise like the angels of God.

Jesus gives the evidence that belief in the resurrection is part of the Jewish theology. God told Moses that he was the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, all of whom had died. But God is not God of the dead, but of the living. So even though they had died, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob must still be alive.

Some of the scribes thought that Jesus had answered well, and they told him so. Luke adds that after that, no one dared to ask him any more question. So, Jesus asks them a question.

## 20:41-44 - David’s son [Mark 12:35-37; Matthew 22:41-45]

41 Then he said to them, “How do they claim that the Messiah is the Son of David? 42 For David himself in the Book of Psalms says:

‘The Lord said to my lord,

“Sit at my right hand

43 till I make your enemies your footstool.”

44 Now if David calls him ‘lord,’ how can he be his son?”

Jesus asked, “How do they claim that the Messiah is the son of David?” In Psalm 110:1, David called him “Lord.” How can he be David’s son and at the same time David’s Lord? Luke reports no response from those who heard Jesus’ question. Neither do Mark or Matthew. But Mark reports that the crowd was delighted at seeing the Scribes stymied. The underlying point Jesus makes is that the Scribes have forfeited the right to be teachers in Israel, because they obviously don’t know the scriptures.

## 20:45-47 - Denunciation of the scribes [Mark 12:38-40; Matthew 23:1-36]

45 Then, within the hearing of all the people, he said to [his] disciples, 46 “Be on guard against the scribes, who like to go around in long robes and love greetings in marketplaces, seats of honor in synagogues, and places of honor at banquets. 47 They devour the houses of widows and, as a pretext, recite lengthy prayers. They will receive a very severe condemnation.”

Jesus speaks to his disciples, but it’s within the hearing of all the people, and he’s really sending a message of condemnation to the Scribes because they were the wealthy and powerful members of society. How exactly they “devour the houses of widows” is a mystery. But it must be some kind of taking advantage of the powerless. (‡) The mention of “widow” leads Luke to the following story.

## 21:1-4 - The widow’s offering [Mark 12:41-44]

1 When he looked up he saw some wealthy people putting their offerings into the treasury 2 and he noticed a poor widow putting in two small coins. 3 He said, “I tell you truly, this poor widow put in more than all the rest; 4 for those others have all made offerings from their surplus wealth, but she, from her poverty, has offered her whole livelihood.”

Luke says that right after Jesus mentioned widows, he looked up and saw wealthy people putting offerings into the temple treasury. And he saw a poor widow putting in two small coins. The wealthy put in money from their surplus; the widow “offered her whole livelihood.”

So how could anyone tell who was putting in how much? The receptacle for the coins was made out of metal, so the clinking sound of the deposit indicated how much was contributed.

We need to remember the make-up of Luke’s community. It had some very wealthy people, and some who were very poor. While not denying the common belief in First Century Judaism that wealth is a blessing from God, Luke has consistently maintained that the reason for God’s giving some people wealth is so they can give alms to take care of the poor. (‡) Luke’s Jesus doesn’t seem to be disparaging the wealthy who contributed out of their surplus; he’s simply pointing out that the poor widow in reality gave even more than the wealthy. He was perhaps offering motivation to the wealthy in his community to be even more generous in their care of the poor.

## 21:5-36 - The end-time discourse [Mark 13:1-27; Matthew 24:1-31]

5 While some people were speaking about how the temple was adorned with costly stones and votive offerings, he said, 6 “All that you see here—the days will come when there will not be left a stone upon another stone that will not be thrown down.”

7 Then they asked him, “Teacher, when will this happen? And what sign will there be when all these things are about to happen?” 8 He answered, “See that you not be deceived, for many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am he,’ and ‘The time has come.’ Do not follow them! 9 When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for such things must happen first, but it will not immediately be the end.” 10 Then he said to them, “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. 11 There will be powerful earthquakes, famines, and plagues from place to place; and awesome sights and mighty signs will come from the sky.

12 “Before all this happens, however, they will seize and persecute you, they will hand you over to the synagogues and to prisons, and they will have you led before kings and governors because of my name. 13 It will lead

to your giving testimony. 14 Remember, you are not to prepare your defense beforehand, 15 for I myself shall give you a wisdom in speaking that all your adversaries will be powerless to resist or refute. 16 You will even be handed over by parents, brothers, relatives, and friends, and they will put some of you to death. 17 You will be hated by all because of my name, 18 but not a hair on your head will be destroyed. 19 By your perseverance you will secure your lives.

20 “When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, know that its desolation is at hand. 21 Then those in Judea must flee to the mountains. Let those within the city escape from it, and let those in the countryside not enter the city, 22 for these days are the time of punishment when all the scriptures are fulfilled. 23 Woe to pregnant women and nursing mothers in those days, for a terrible calamity will come upon the earth and a wrathful judgment upon this people. 24 They will fall by the edge of the sword and be taken as captives to all the Gentiles; and Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.

25 “There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on earth nations will be in dismay, perplexed by the roaring of the sea and the waves. 26 People will die of fright in anticipation of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. 27 And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. 28 But when these signs begin to happen, stand erect and raise your heads because your redemption is at hand.”

29 He taught them a lesson. “Consider the fig tree and all the other trees. 30 When their buds burst open, you see for yourselves and know that summer is now near; 31 in the same way, when you see these things happening, know that the kingdom of God is near. 32 Amen, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. 33 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

34 “Beware that your hearts do not become drowsy from carousing and drunkenness and the anxieties of daily life, and that day catch you by surprise 35 like a trap. For that day will assault everyone who lives on the face of the earth. 36 Be vigilant at all times and pray that you have the strength to escape the tribulations that are imminent and to stand before the Son of Man.”

This whole section in Luke and the corresponding sections in Mark and Matthew are end-time discourses, which include some things which, when Jesus spoke them, were future events, but by the time Luke wrote them they were events in the past. The destruction of the temple and the persecution of the disciples were events that Luke had witnessed. The wars and rumors of war, and the coming of the Son of Man were yet to come, even from Luke’s perspective.

When Luke wrote about the destruction of the temple, the event had already occurred. He follows very carefully what Mark had written. Mark wrote prior to the destruction of the temple, but the threat of imminent Roman oppression was already evident. Mark seems to have thought that with the destruction of the temple the end-time was arriving. By the time Luke wrote, the Christian community had come to terms with the thought that the end-time was to be delayed. Luke has consistently advocated a day-to-day living of the teachings of Jesus until such time that the end would come. (†) Rather than concentrating on the destruction of the temple, Luke focuses on what will happen at the end of time, without expecting that that will happen soon.

The disciples, admiring the beauty of the temple, and hearing about its destruction ask, “Teacher, when will this happen?” Both Mark and Matthew had recorded that no one knows when the end will come, not even the Son, but only the Father. Luke had Mark’s Gospel in front of him, but he ignored that part of Jesus’ admonition. But he does include Jesus’ warning not to believe those who say that the end is coming soon. Jesus describes all kinds of natural disasters which must happen first, and wars and famines and plagues. These things have already happened by the time Luke is writing.

Besides the destruction of the temple and the natural disasters and wars, the disciples will be persecuted; that is already happening as Luke describes in Acts. But the disciples must

persevere; the end is not here yet. All the persecutions Jesus foretells in the gospel will be verified in the Acts of the Apostles.

Jesus also describes the cosmic events which will occur with the coming of the Son of Man. That is in the future both for Jesus and for Luke. We are not to imagine the details Jesus narrates; we are to understand that these things represent the turning of the world upside down with the coming of the Son of Man. And the Son of Man has already come, and his life and teaching have already begun to turn the world upside down.

The fig tree can teach the disciples a lesson. When it begins to bear fruit, one can know that summer is near. When one sees the things Jesus is describing, you can know that the end is near. The message in all of this is: be vigilant. (†)

#### 21:37-38 - Jerusalem ministry concluded

37 During the day, Jesus was teaching in the temple area, but at night he would leave and stay at the place called the Mount of Olives. 38 And all the people would get up early each morning to listen to him in the temple area.

Jesus taught each day in the temple area; at night he would go to the Mount of Olives. And the people would get up early in the morning and come to the temple to listen to Jesus' teaching.

### **The Passion Narrative - 22:1-23:56**

Before looking at Luke's narration of the passion, we should recall that this part of Jesus' life was the first to be reported in a rather complete way even before Mark's Gospel was written. Parts of the account appear in the letters of Saint Paul. So by the time Luke wrote, there was not only the oral tradition, but even some written accounts of the passion.

Although the passion, death and the resurrection of Jesus were the first parts of Jesus' life to be recalled and reported, the passion and death posed something of a problem to those who were sharing the stories in an attempt to bring others to believe the good news of Jesus. The problem posed to the disciples was this: How could Jesus be all you say he is, if he was executed as a criminal, rejected by both the civil and religious leaders?

Luke is among those who tried to put things into perspective for believers and for those who were invited to believe. Among Luke's preoccupations in his account of the passion and death of Jesus is his emphasis that it was the *leaders* of the people who were opposed to Jesus, not all the people. His other preoccupation is to sanitize Mark's narrative in two ways: to show that Jesus was in charge throughout all the events, and to show that the apostles were not as deficient as they appear in Mark's narrative.

#### 22:1-6 - Conspiracy against Jesus [Mark 14:1-2; Matthew 26:1-5; John 11:47-53]

1 Now the feast of Unleavened Bread, called the Passover, was drawing near, 2 and the chief priests and the scribes were seeking a way to put him to death, for they were afraid of the people. 3 Then Satan entered into Judas, the one surnamed Iscariot, who was counted among the Twelve, 4 and he went to the chief priests and temple guards to discuss a plan for handing him over to them. 5 They were pleased and agreed to pay him money. 6 He accepted their offer and sought a favorable opportunity to hand him over to them in the absence of a crowd.

During the feasts of Passover and Unleavened Bread, Jerusalem swelled by as much as over a million people. It was a time of unrest because of the crowds, and the Romans were conspicuously on guard against any kind of rebellion. Besides being a time of unrest, it was also a time of festivities. The chief priests and the scribes were seeking a way to do away with Jesus, but they were afraid because of the crowds, many of whom had been listening to Jesus in the temple area during the preceding days.

Luke narrates that Satan entered into Judas. Neither Mark nor Matthew narrate that, and John seems to indicate that Judas' motive was greed. This is Luke's interpretation of the events about to take place; it is Satan who is bringing about the death of Jesus. Back in 4:13, after Satan had tempted Jesus, Luke tells us that Satan "departed from him for a time." Well, the time of his return has arrived. Judas went to the chief priests and the temple guards to discuss a plan for handing Jesus over to them. They gave Judas money, and Judas looked for a time and place away from the crowd where he could hand Jesus over.

## 22:7-13 - Preparations for the Passover [Mark 14:12-16; Matthew 26:17-19]

7 When the day of the feast of Unleavened Bread arrived, the day for sacrificing the Passover lamb, 8 he sent out Peter and John, instructing them, "Go and make preparations for us to eat the Passover." 9 They asked him, "Where do you want us to make the preparations?" 10 And he answered them, "When you go into the city, a man will meet you carrying a jar of water. Follow him into the house that he enters 11 and say to the master of the house, 'The teacher says to you, "Where is the guest room where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?'" 12 He will show you a large upper room that is furnished. Make the preparations there." 13 Then they went off and found everything exactly as he had told them, and there they prepared the Passover.

As if to emphasize the religious significance of his narration about Jesus' death, Luke mentions preparation for the Passover seven times in this short section. This is not only the preparation for the feast of Passover; it is the beginning of Jesus' Passover to the Father.

Peter and John are sent off to find a *large upper room* where Jesus and his *disciples* might eat the Passover meal. One commentator writes that our familiarity with famous paintings of the Last Supper makes it difficult for us to envision that Jesus is eating with many more people than just his *apostles*. The Twelve were possibly accompanied by other men and women, especially those who had come with Jesus from Galilee. However, in 22:14 Luke writes that Jesus took his place at table with his *apostles*; Mark and Matthew write that he reclined with the Twelve. Perhaps others were reclining at other tables. [Who knows?]

In John's Gospel we are introduced to "the disciple whom Jesus loved." He appears at the Last Supper, and has usually been identified as John, the son of Zebedee. However, John the Evangelist tells us that all the apostles fled, yet "the disciple whom Jesus loved" is standing under the cross. This suggests that that disciple is not one of the Twelve. [Who knows?]

It is important to Luke that he portray Jesus in charge of his destiny even though he is going to be a victim of other people's malice. He parallels this sending of Peter and John with his instructions prior to his entry into Jerusalem. There he told his disciples to go into town and they will find a colt and they are to say to the owner that the master has need of it. And they found everything as Jesus had said. Here he sends his disciples into town to find a room in which to eat the Passover. He tells them they will find a man carrying a water jar and they are to follow him to

his house and ask for a room in which to celebrate the Passover. (Men didn't usually carry water jars; that was women's work.) And they find everything just as Jesus said. This is sort of a set-up by Luke. If Jesus could correctly foresee the colt and the man with a large upper room, then the disciples might be more prepared to believe the other things he was going to say to them this night.

There's an interesting twist here which can be grasped only by those who can read Greek. The word for the "guestroom" which will provide the hospitality for Jesus' final meal on this earth before he dies, is the same word used for the "inn" in 2:7 where Mary and Joseph were refused hospitality at the time of Jesus' birth.

#### 22:14-38 - The Last Supper

Luke's description of events in the upper room is twice as long as Mark's and Matthew's, because Luke includes sayings of Jesus in the upper room which Mark and Matthew write took place on the way from the supper to the garden. It may be helpful to remember the other times Jesus has shared a meal with others, usually with sinners and tax collectors, for which he was charged as being a glutton and a wine-drinker and a friend of sinners.

This meal is really no different; the apostles (disciples) will demonstrate that they are sinners in need of Jesus' forgiveness, mercy, and protection. In Luke's account, their sinfulness becomes manifest as one of them betrays Jesus; all of them squabble over their greatness; one of them denies that he knows him; and they misunderstand his word about swords. In earlier meals Jesus was engaged in controversy with the religious leaders; in this meal, too, he deals with controversy over the roles of church officials in the community.

#### 22:14-20 - The supper [Mark 14:22-26; Matthew 26:26-30]

14 When the hour came, he took his place at table with the apostles. 15 He said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer, 16 for, I tell you, I shall not eat it [again] until there is fulfillment in the kingdom of God." 17 Then he took a cup, gave thanks, and said, "Take this and share it among yourselves; 18 for I tell you [that] from this time on I shall not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." 19 Then he took the bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which will be given for you; do this in memory of me." 20 And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which will be shed for you.

At this Passover meal Jesus shares with his apostles (disciples), Luke, gentle and tender person that he is, narrates that Jesus has desired to eat this meal with his apostles before he suffers. The Passover meal celebrated the liberation of God's people from the slavery in Egypt. Jesus gives the meal a new significance. It is his own Passover to the Father which will liberate all people.

The Passover meal was a remembrance of the exodus from Egypt. When Jesus says that the disciples should do this in memory of *him*, rather than in memory of the exodus, the notion of remembrance is stronger than is usually our understanding of it. When the Passover was remembered, those who celebrated the meal were transported in memory back to the event which is being remembered. In the Eucharist, the remembrance moves in the opposite direction. It pulls

into the present the event from the past which is being remembered. The celebration of the Eucharist in memory of Jesus makes Jesus present.

Perhaps Catholics more than others look for the deepest possible meaning of Jesus supper with his apostles (disciples), because the celebration of the Eucharist is so central to the practice of their religious beliefs. They in particular find meaning in all the words and gestures recorded about the Last Supper. Like the meals which Jesus shared with sinners during his earthly life, each celebration of the Eucharist begins with the acknowledgment that those gathered for the Eucharist are also sinners. (‡)

#### 22:21-23 - Betrayal foretold [Mark 14:18-21; Matthew 26:21-25; John 13:21-30]

21 “And yet behold, the hand of the one who is to betray me is with me on the table; 22 for the Son of Man indeed goes as it has been determined; but woe to that man by whom he is betrayed.” 23 And they began to debate among themselves who among them would do such a deed.

Jesus foretold his betrayal at the supper without naming his betrayer. All the apostles asked who would do such a thing. Luke has the notice of the betrayal after the Eucharist; Mark has Judas leave before the Eucharist. Luke is assuring his community that participation in the Eucharist is not a sure sign that one will not betray Jesus in the way one lives. (‡)

#### 22:24-30 - The role of the disciples [Mark 10:41-45; Matthew 20:24-28]

24 Then an argument broke out among them about which of them should be regarded as the greatest. 25 He said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them and those in authority over them are addressed as ‘Benefactors’; 26 but among you it shall not be so. Rather, let the greatest among you be as the youngest, and the leader as the servant. 27 For who is greater: the one seated at table or the one who serves? Is it not the one seated at table? I am among you as the one who serves. 28 It is you who have stood by me in my trials; 29 and I confer a kingdom on you, just as my Father has conferred one on me, 30 that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom; and you will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

As they were still at table, a dispute broke out among the disciples about who was the greatest. In Mark and Matthew this dispute broke out earlier in Jesus’ ministry, and Jesus brought a child into their midst in order to instruct about greatness. Luke has Jesus speak directly to the issue. “Let the greatest among you be as the youngest, and the leader as the servant.” (‡) And he continued, “I am among you as one who serves.” (‡) This is a discourse preparing the apostles for their role after Jesus’ death: they are to be as those who serve at table. (‡)

Jesus addresses his apostles as “those who have stood by me in my trials.” (In what is to follow, Luke does not have the apostles abandon Jesus as Mark and Matthew do; in Luke they are just not mentioned for awhile.) And Jesus says that he confers a kingdom on them just as the Father has conferred a kingdom on him. Now, don’t miss the point: if they have learned that to rule is to serve, then the same kind of kingdom which the Father conferred on Jesus, who came to serve not to be served, will be conferred on the apostles. Their leadership is one of service. (‡)

## 22:31-34 - Peter's denial foretold [Mark 14:29-31; Matthew 26:33-35; John 13:37-38]

31 "Simon, Simon, behold Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, 32 but I have prayed that your own faith may not fail; and once you have turned back, you must strengthen your brothers." 33 He said to him, "Lord, I am prepared to go to prison and to die with you." 34 But he replied, "I tell you, Peter, before the cock crows this day, you will deny three times that you know me."

If one compares Luke's rendition of Jesus' foretelling of Peter's denial with those in Mark and Matthew and John, one sees that Luke is less harsh than the other evangelists, which has been typical of Luke's treatment of the disciples throughout his gospel. After saying that Satan has wanted to sift "all of you," Jesus' assurance that he has prayed for Peter and his understanding that Peter will turn and support his brethren is much more gentle than in Mark and Matthew and John. Peter is already assured that his denial will be forgiven and that just because he failed, Jesus will not take from him his position within the apostles. Jesus can accept and forgive even his friends' failures. (†)

## 22:35-38 - Instructions for tough times

35 He said to them, "When I sent you forth without a money bag or a sack or sandals, were you in need of anything?" "No, nothing," they replied. 36 He said to them, "But now one who has a money bag should take it, and likewise a sack, and one who does not have a sword should sell his cloak and buy one. 37 For I tell you that this scripture must be fulfilled in me, namely, 'He was counted among the wicked'; and indeed what is written about me is coming to fulfillment." 38 Then they said, "Lord, look, there are two swords here." But he replied, "It is enough!"

Times have changed. Back in 9:3 and 10:4 [Mark 6:7-9; Matthew 10:9-10] Jesus sent out the apostles and the seventy-two with instructions to carry nothing on their journey, but to depend on the hospitality of those who received them. Now that Jesus is about to be counted among the criminals, the disciples cannot count on such a hospitable reception, but must be prepared for hostility. So they should travel prepared, even to the point of having to sell their cloak in order to buy a sword. Jesus is speaking figuratively, but the apostles take him literally and declare that they're ready because they have two swords. Jesus' reply is translated in two different ways. New American Bible Revised has "It is enough!" Others translate it "Enough of that!" The changed circumstances of Jesus and his disciples, and of Luke's community, warrant "purchasing a sword." The meaning is sell your clothes and buy trouble.

In either case, that abruptly concludes the Last Supper discourse.

## 22:39-53 - The garden [Mark 14:26, 32-42; Matthew 26:30, 36-46; John 18:1-2]

39 Then going out he went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives, and the disciples followed him. 40 When he arrived at the place he said to them, "Pray that you may not undergo the test." 41 After withdrawing about a stone's throw from them and kneeling, he prayed, 42 saying, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup away from me; still, not my will but yours be done." [43 And to strengthen him an angel from heaven appeared to him. 44 He was in such agony and he prayed so fervently that his sweat became like drops of blood falling on the ground.] 45 When he rose from prayer and returned to his disciples, he found them sleeping from grief. 46 He said to them, "Why are you sleeping? Get up and pray that you may not undergo the test."

47 While he was still speaking, a crowd approached and in front was one of the Twelve, a man named Judas. He went up to Jesus to kiss him. 48 Jesus said to him, "Judas, are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?" 49 His disciples realized what was about to happen, and they asked, "Lord, shall we strike with a sword?" 50 And one of them struck the high priest's servant and cut off his right ear. 51 But Jesus said in reply, "Stop, no more of this!" Then he touched the servant's ear and healed him. 52 And Jesus said to the chief priests and temple guards and elders who had come for him, "Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs? 53 Day after day I was with you in the temple area, and you did not seize me; but this is your hour, the time for the power of darkness."

As always, Luke's Jesus is much more composed than Jesus appears in Mark and Matthew. And the disciples are not made to look as bad in Luke's description. Luke's scene in the garden is shorter. Jesus goes off to pray and returns to find the disciples sleeping only once. There is no description of Jesus' emotions nor of his falling to the ground; Jesus kneels, the customary posture for prayer within the Lucan community.

If verses 43 and 44 were written by Luke, and not by a later copyist, Luke differs from Mark and Matthew, because here Jesus' prayer is answered by the coming of an angel to comfort him. This is meant to indicate Jesus' closeness to the Father. Mark and Matthew have an angel comforting Jesus after he was tempted at the beginning of his public life. Luke moves that incident to the end of his public life.

Luke narrates that Judas went up to Jesus to kiss him, but not that Judas actually did kiss him. The disciples realized what was happening and asked if they should strike with the sword, and Peter does so, cutting off the right ear of the servant of the high priest. Luke, ever the gentle physician, commands that the sword not be used, and he heals the ear of the servant. This was indicative of Luke's attempt to maintain a non-violent attitude among his own community (†) which faced persecution.

In his on-going attempt to show that it was the leaders of the people, not all the people, who were responsible for Jesus' suffering and death, Luke indicates that the crowd which accompanied Judas was made up of "chief priests the temple guards and the elders." There's even a bit of humor when Jesus asks if they need all those swords and clubs, as if to arrest a robber, when all he has been is a teacher. Luke uses the same word for "robber" in the story of the Good Samaritan who fell victim to "robbers."

22:54-62 - Peter denies [Mark 14:53-15:1; Matthew 26:57-27:1 John 18:13-27]

54 After arresting him they led him away and took him into the house of the high priest; Peter was following at a distance. 55 They lit a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat around it, and Peter sat down with them. 56 When a maid saw him seated in the light, she looked intently at him and said, "This man too was with him." 57 But he denied it saying, "Woman, I do not know him." 58 A short while later someone else saw him and said, "You too are one of them"; but Peter answered, "My friend, I am not." 59 About an hour later, still another insisted, "Assuredly, this man too was with him, for he also is a Galilean." 60 But Peter said, "My friend, I do not know what you are talking about." Just as he was saying this, the cock crowed, 61 and the Lord turned and looked at Peter;[p] and Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, "Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times." 62 He went out and began to weep bitterly.

As Jesus predicted (22:31-34), Peter denies Jesus three times. But Luke draws the contrast between Peter and Judas. Peter repents and weeps for his sin. Jesus looks at Peter, possibly calling

him back to his senses. The prayer Jesus said for Peter (22:32) is effective. Peter will turn and lead the others.

22:62-65 - Jesus mocked [Mark 14:65; Matthew 26:67-68]

62 He went out and began to weep bitterly. 63 The men who held Jesus in custody were ridiculing and beating him. 64 They blindfolded him and questioned him, saying, "Prophecy! Who is it that struck you?" 65 And they reviled him in saying many other things against him.

Although Luke tells us Jesus was mocked and beaten, he gives us neither the identity of his abuser nor the place where it happened.

22:66-71 - Before the Sanhedrin [Mark 14:55-64; Matthew 26:59-66]

66 When day came the council of elders of the people met, both chief priests and scribes, and they brought him before their Sanhedrin. 67 They said, "If you are the Messiah, tell us," but he replied to them, "If I tell you, you will not believe, 68 and if I question, you will not respond. 69 But from this time on the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God." 70 They all asked, "Are you then the Son of God?" He replied to them, "You say that I am." 71 Then they said, "What further need have we for testimony? We have heard it from his own mouth."

When the members of the Sanhedrin ask Jesus if he is the messiah, Jesus' answer is evasive, claiming that they are not prepared to believe anything he says. But he tells them from this time on they will see the Son of Man seated on the right hand of the power of God. They ask him if he is the Son of God. Jesus answers, "You say that I AM." Well that nails it! Jesus has blasphemed and therefore he must die.

But the problem is they cannot execute anyone. So off they go to someone who can – Pilate.

23:1-5 - Before Pilate [Mark 15:1-5; Matthew 27:1-2, 11-14; John 18:28-38]

1 Then the whole assembly of them arose and brought him before Pilate. 2 They brought charges against him, saying, "We found this man misleading our people; he opposes the payment of taxes to Caesar and maintains that he is the Messiah, a king." 3 Pilate asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" He said to him in reply, "You say so." 4 Pilate then addressed the chief priests and the crowds, "I find this man not guilty." 5 But they were adamant and said, "He is inciting the people with his teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee where he began even to here."

Pilate could care less about the issue of blasphemy, so the whole Sanhedrin shapes the charges in a way which might get Pilate's attention: misleading the people, opposing paying taxes to Caesar and claiming to be the messiah, a king. Pilate asks only one question: "Are you king of the Jews." Jesus doesn't plead guilty or not guilty; he says only, "You say so." Pilate declares Jesus not guilty. When they told Pilate that Jesus has been making trouble all the way from Galilee to Jerusalem, Pilate learns that Jesus is from Galilee, so he decides to send Jesus to Herod, who was in Jerusalem at the time.

## 23:6-12 - Before Herod

6 On hearing this Pilate asked if the man was a Galilean; 7 and upon learning that he was under Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him to Herod who was in Jerusalem at that time. 8 Herod was very glad to see Jesus; he had been wanting to see him for a long time, for he had heard about him and had been hoping to see him perform some sign. 9 He questioned him at length, but he gave him no answer. 10 The chief priests and scribes, meanwhile, stood by accusing him harshly. 11 [Even] Herod and his soldiers treated him contemptuously and mocked him, and after clothing him in resplendent garb, he sent him back to Pilate. 12 Herod and Pilate became friends that very day, even though they had been enemies formerly.

Herod had been interested in seeing Jesus ever since he heard about him. Herod had beheaded John the Baptist, and when he heard about Jesus, he concluded that Jesus was John the Baptist risen from the dead (Luke 9:7-9). Luke writes that Herod was anxious to see Jesus because he was hoping to see some sign from him. Despite the best efforts of the chief priests and the scribes, and despite being treated contemptuously by Herod's guards, Jesus said nothing. His silence is reminiscent of the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53:7: "He was oppressed and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth." Herod sent Jesus back to Pilate.

Luke reports that Herod and Pilate became friends that day, while previously they hated each other.

## 23:13-25 - Death sentence [Mark 15:6-7, 11-15; Matthew 27:20-26; John 18:38-40, 19:14-16]

13 Pilate then summoned the chief priests, the rulers, and the people 14 and said to them, "You brought this man to me and accused him of inciting the people to revolt. I have conducted my investigation in your presence and have not found this man guilty of the charges you have brought against him, 15 nor did Herod, for he sent him back to us. So no capital crime has been committed by him. 16 Therefore I shall have him flogged and then release him." [17] 18 But all together they shouted out, "Away with this man! Release Barabbas to us." 19 (Now Barabbas had been imprisoned for a rebellion that had taken place in the city and for murder.) 20 Again Pilate addressed them, still wishing to release Jesus, 21 but they continued their shouting, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" 22 Pilate addressed them a third time, "What evil has this man done? I found him guilty of no capital crime. Therefore I shall have him flogged and then release him." 23 With loud shouts, however, they persisted in calling for his crucifixion, and their voices prevailed. 24 The verdict of Pilate was that their demand should be granted. 25 So he released the man who had been imprisoned for rebellion and murder, for whom they asked, and he handed Jesus over to them to deal with as they wished.

Short and to the point, Pilate said that neither he nor Herod found any capital crime in Jesus behavior. So, Pilate, presumably in order to give the chief priests and scribes some satisfaction, said he would have Jesus flogged and then released. But they cried out that he should release Barabbas, a rioter and murderer, instead. Pilate resisted for awhile, but finally gave in to their request, and "handed Jesus over to them to deal with as they wished."

Now, of course the chief priests and the scribes could not crucify anyone, so the Roman soldiers were put at their disposal.

## 23:26-32 - The way of the cross [Mark 15:21, 27; Matthew 27:32, 38; John 19:17]

26 As they led him away they took hold of a certain Simon, a Cyrenian, who was coming in from the country; and after laying the cross on him, they made him carry it behind Jesus. 27 A large crowd of people followed Jesus, including many women who mourned and lamented him. 28 Jesus turned to them and said, "Daughters of

Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep instead for yourselves and for your children, 29 for indeed, the days are coming when people will say, 'Blessed are the barren, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed.' 30 At that time people will say to the mountains, 'Fall upon us!' and to the hills, 'Cover us!' 31 for if these things are done when the wood is green what will happen when it is dry?' 32 Now two others, both criminals, were led away with him to be executed.

Luke narrates the presence of several groups of people during this way of the cross. The other evangelists don't have all these groups. Prior to the crucifixion, there are Simon the Cyrenian, a large crowd, women who mourned and lamented him, and two criminals. Jesus' speech to the women indicates that the ramifications of the present event will affect the next generation of their children, as of course Luke knew because Jerusalem had already been destroyed by the time he wrote. The saying of green wood/dry wood is probably a proverb, meaning here that if this what they will do to Jesus, who is life-giving, what will happen to dead, unrepentant Jerusalem?

### 23:33-49 - Crucifixion and death [Mark 15:22-32; Matthew 27:33-44; John 19:17-24]

33 When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him and the criminals there, one on his right, the other on his left. 34 [Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do."] They divided his garments by casting lots. 35 The people stood by and watched; the rulers, meanwhile, sneered at him and said, "He saved others, let him save himself if he is the chosen one, the Messiah of God." 36 Even the soldiers jeered at him. As they approached to offer him wine 37 they called out, "If you are King of the Jews, save yourself." 38 Above him there was an inscription that read, "This is the King of the Jews."

39 Now one of the criminals hanging there reviled Jesus, saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us." 40 The other, however, rebuking him, said in reply, "Have you no fear of God, for you are subject to the same condemnation? 41 And indeed, we have been condemned justly, for the sentence we received corresponds to our crimes, but this man has done nothing criminal." 42 Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." 43 He replied to him, "Amen, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

44 It was now about noon and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon 45 because of an eclipse of the sun. Then the veil of the temple was torn down the middle. 46 Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit"; and when he had said this he breathed his last. 47 The centurion who witnessed what had happened glorified God and said, "This man was innocent[h] beyond doubt." 48 When all the people who had gathered for this spectacle saw what had happened, they returned home beating their breasts; 49 but all his acquaintances stood at a distance, including the women who had followed him from Galilee and saw these events.

The verbal exchanges with the two criminals is peculiar to Luke, and important to his theology. Even at the moment of his death, Jesus extends the generosity of God's love to another. The words of the "good thief" are the fourth time Jesus has been declared innocent: twice by Pilate, once by Herod, and now the thief. And in verse 47 the centurion will also declare him innocent for the fifth time. But nonetheless he was killed.

The veil in the temple was torn down the middle. The sanctuary is no longer the place where God dwells. Jesus has replaced the temple, as will be seen in his appearances after his resurrection, where we will learn that God is no longer limited to one place. In his resurrection appearances, Jesus will reveal that he has shed his human limitations of time and place, and can now be present to all places at all times.

Luke highlights the death of Jesus by having the accompanying negative events (the darkness, the temple veil) occur before he dies.

After Jesus' death Luke groups other people who were there: the rulers, the soldiers, the criminals, the centurion and the women who had followed him from Galilee. Again, Luke highlights the role of women. They have been eye-witnesses of the life, death and burial of Jesus. He also carefully places the villainy on the leaders of the people, not the people as a whole.

23:50-56 - The burial [Mark 15:42-50; Matthew 27:57-61; John 19:38-42]

50 Now there was a virtuous and righteous man named Joseph who, though he was a member of the council, 51 had not consented to their plan of action. He came from the Jewish town of Arimathea and was awaiting the kingdom of God. 52 He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. 53 After he had taken the body down, he wrapped it in a linen cloth and laid him in a rock-hewn tomb in which no one had yet been buried. 54 It was the day of preparation, and the sabbath was about to begin. 55 The women who had come from Galilee with him followed behind, and when they had seen the tomb and the way in which his body was laid in it, 56 they returned and prepared spices and perfumed oils. Then they rested on the sabbath according to the commandment.

Joseph from Arimathea shows up in all four gospels. John mentions also Nicodemus. Joseph is described as a member of the council, who did not go along with the plot to kill Jesus. He has to ask Pilate for Jesus' body, but Luke doesn't include all the material about Pilate inquiring if Jesus was dead. Joseph and others wrap the body in linen and put it in a tomb which was hewn out of rock in which no one had yet been laid. It is again the women who observed all this, and they went home to prepare spices and perfumed oils so that after the Sabbath rest, they could return and provide a full burial for Jesus.

In the note that the women observed the Sabbath rest, Luke is very intent to show that from birth to death Jesus lived his whole life within the confines of Judaism.

## The Resurrection Appearances - 24:1-49

### 24:1-12 - The women evangelists [Mark 16:1-8; Matthew 28:1-8; John 20:1-17]

1 But at daybreak on the first day of the week they took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. 2 They found the stone rolled away from the tomb; 3 but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. 4 While they were puzzling over this, behold, two men in dazzling garments appeared to them. 5 They were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground. They said to them, "Why do you seek the living one among the dead? 6 He is not here, but he has been raised. Remember what he said to you while he was still in Galilee, 7 that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners and be crucified, and rise on the third day." 8 And they remembered his words. 9 Then they returned from the tomb and announced all these things to the eleven and to all the others. 10 The women were Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James; the others who accompanied them also told this to the apostles, 11 but their story seemed like nonsense and they did not believe them. 12 But Peter got up and ran to the tomb, bent down, and saw the burial cloths alone; then he went home amazed at what had happened.

At daybreak the Sabbath is over. The women go to the tomb to anoint the body. But there ain't no body! The stone at the entrance of the tomb has been rolled back. Two men in dazzling garments ask the women why they are seeking the living one among the dead. The women run to tell the apostles and others, but their announcement is too amazing to be believed. But Peter at least goes to the tomb to verify what the women had said, and finds that it was true. But no one saw the risen Lord.

### 24:13-35 - The road to Emmaus [Mark 16:12-13]

13 Now that very day two of them were going to a village seven miles from Jerusalem called Emmaus, 14 and they were conversing about all the things that had occurred. 15 And it happened that while they were conversing and debating, Jesus himself drew near and walked with them, 16 but their eyes were prevented from recognizing him. 17 He asked them, "What are you discussing as you walk along?" They stopped, looking downcast. 18 One of them, named Cleopas, said to him in reply, "Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know of the things that have taken place there in these days?" 19 And he replied to them, "What sort of things?" They said to him, "The things that happened to Jesus the Nazarene, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, 20 how our chief priests and rulers both handed him over to a sentence of death and crucified him. 21 But we were hoping that he would be the one to redeem Israel; and besides all this, it is now the third day since this took place. 22 Some women from our group, however, have astounded us: they were at the tomb early in the morning 23 and did not find his body; they came back and reported that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who announced that he was alive. 24 Then some of those with us went to the tomb and found things just as the women had described, but him they did not see." 25 And he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are! How slow of heart to believe all that the prophets spoke! 26 Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" 27 Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them what referred to him in all the scriptures. 28 As they approached the village to which they were going, he gave the impression that he was going on farther. 29 But they urged him, "Stay with us, for it is nearly evening and the day is almost over." So he went in to stay with them. 30 And it happened that, while he was with them at table, he took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them. 31 With that their eyes were opened and they recognized him, but he vanished from their sight. 32 Then they said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning [within us] while he spoke to us on the way and opened the scriptures to us?" 33 So they set out at once and returned to Jerusalem where they found gathered together the eleven and those with them 34 who were saying, "The Lord has truly been raised and has appeared to Simon!" 35 Then the two recounted what had taken place on the way and how he was made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

Only Luke narrates this episode in detail. The story is worth long meditation. It reveals what Jesus' resurrection appearances were meant to reveal. First, that Jesus is alive; he did not

come back to life (he wasn't resuscitated), but he was raised to a new life. Second, that he is alive in a new and mysterious way; it just isn't the same; it's sort of spooky; the old familiarity is gone; they don't recognize him. And third – although not exactly exemplified in this story – that he no longer comes and goes; he's just present. In order to grasp the revelation in this narration, those three things need to be kept in mind.

The disciples are leaving Jerusalem now that the Sabbath is over, and they are permitted by the law and traditions of the elders to travel a distance of seven miles. They're basically getting out of town as soon as they can do so without violating the Sabbath prescriptions. We can probably assume that they are afraid because of all they have witnessed in the last couple of days.

Luke tells us that the two disciples were discussing all the things which had happened, and Jesus drew near and began to walk with them. [No indication how he came there.] But their eyes were prevented from recognizing him [a new and mysterious way: they don't recognize him]. It's almost humorous that Jesus asked them about what they were discussing, and they told him all about himself! Then they told him about the women who returned from the tomb saying that he was alive, and how others from their company had gone to the tomb and found things just as the women had said. They told of their own hopes, which were dashed by what they had experienced in Jerusalem. Then Jesus said, "Oh, how foolish you are. So slow of heart to believe all that the prophets spoke." Then he explained all the scriptures which spoke about him.

They had reached the place where they intended to go, and Jesus pretended to go on farther. But they pressed him to stay with them. So he did, and when he broke the bread with them at the table their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. But he had disappeared from their sight. [This is the only time in any of the gospels where we are told how the risen Lord left.]

They recognized that they had been inspired while listening to this stranger on the road. They returned to Jerusalem – another seven mile walk – and were greeted by the news that Jesus was alive and had appeared to Simon. And they reported what had happened on the road and "how he was made known to them in the breaking of the bread."

*He is alive, in a new and mysterious way, in which he no longer comes and goes, but is just present.*

#### 24:36-49 - Appearance in Jerusalem [Mark 16:14-19; John 20:19-20]

36 While they were still speaking about this, he stood in their midst and said to them, "Peace be with you." 37 But they were startled and terrified and thought that they were seeing a ghost. 38 Then he said to them, "Why are you troubled? And why do questions arise in your hearts? 39 Look at my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me and see, because a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you can see I have." 40 And as he said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. 41 While they were still incredulous for joy and were amazed, he asked them, "Have you anything here to eat?" 42 They gave him a piece of baked fish; 43 he took it and ate it in front of them.

44 He said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the law of Moses and in the prophets and psalms must be fulfilled." 45 Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures. 46 And he said to them, "Thus it is written that the Messiah would suffer and rise from the dead on the third day 47 and that repentance, for the forgiveness of sins, would be preached in his name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. 48 You are witnesses of these things. 49 And [behold] I am sending the promise of my Father upon you; but stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high."

While the Emmaus travelers were still telling their story to the disciples assembled in Jerusalem, Jesus “stood in their midst [He no longer comes and goes, he’s just present.] and said, ‘Peace be with you.’” They are startled and think they’re seeing a ghost. [He’s present in a new and mysterious way.] By eating a piece of fish in their presence, he lets them know that it is truly he, not just a vision. And, as he did with the two on the way to Emmaus, he explains the scriptures to them which were about himself.

Then he announces their mission. “Repentance for the forgiveness of sins, would be preached in his name to all the nations.” And he said they should stay in Jerusalem until clothed with power from on high. Which Luke takes up in his writing of the Acts of the Apostles.

Luke’s Jesus tells the disciples to remain in Jerusalem until they are “clothed with power from on high.” Mark and Matthew narrated that Jesus said they should go to Galilee where they will see him. [Who knows?]

24:50-53 - Ascension [Mark 16:19]

50 Then he led them [out] as far as Bethany, raised his hands, and blessed them. 51 As he blessed them he parted from them and was taken up to heaven. 52 They did him homage and then returned to Jerusalem with great joy, 53 and they were continually in the temple praising God.

Jesus takes the disciples to a hill near Bethany, and ascending into the heavens, he blesses them. The disciples are filled with joy and continue in the temple praising God.

The Gospel of the Lord



# A Reflection on the Acts of the Apostles



## **Introduction**

Acts of the Apostles is not so much a companion piece to the Gospel according to Luke; it is more a continuation of the story, and of the theology of Luke. In the Gospel Luke followed Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem, the center of the Jewish religion. In Acts, Luke follows the risen Lord, in the person of Paul, from Jerusalem to Rome, the center of the political world. In both works, there is a theology-by-geography.

### **When and where was it written?**

It was written shortly after the Gospel according to Luke, probably somewhere around 85 A.D. No one knows with any certainty where he was when Luke wrote this or the gospel.

### **Luke, the historian**

The introduction to the Acts of the Apostles in the New American Bible, Revised Edition puts the matter of Luke's history quite delicately. "His approach to the history of the church is motivated by his theological interests. . . In the interpretation of Acts, care must be exercised to determine Luke's theological aims and interests and to evaluate his historical data without either exaggerating their literal accuracy or underestimating their historical worth." What does that mean? If you're interested theology, you'll love it; if you're interested in history, go carefully!

### **Connection of Acts to the Gospel**

In writing his account of Jesus' life and ministry in his gospel, Luke was intent on showing that Jesus was not a "new thing" in the world, but a continuity with Israel, fulfilling their messianic expectations. In Acts, Luke shows the continuity between Jesus and the church, a preoccupation of his because of the failure of the Jews to believe in Jesus and the Gentile acceptance of him. So we go from Israel as God's Chosen People, to Jesus, the fulfillment of the Chosen People's hopes, to the church as the new Chosen People.

### **Luke's style**

Luke highlights events by describing them in quite some detail; but the transitions between these events is often minimal and inexact. So, for instance, we have detailed descriptions of Pentecost (Chapter 2), Stephen's martyrdom (Chapters 6 and 7), the conversion of Cornelius (Chapter 10), the Jerusalem agreement (Chapter 15), Paul in Athens (Chapter 17:16-34),

successive trials (Chapters 21-26). These are treated at greater length, because of the theology they contain, not because of their history.

These episodes, and others, often have speeches as part of the narrative. Of course, there were no scribes taking down the words of the speaker, so the speeches are the work of Luke himself, designed to further the point he wishes to make.

Most exegetes give much less commentary on passages from Acts than they do for passages from the gospels and the letters of the New Testament, and certainly than they do for the Book of Revelation. Luke's Acts doesn't require much commentary. There are places where the connecting narratives between Luke's major events do not coincide with what Paul has written in his letters. I will make no effort to correct Luke's apparent historical inaccuracies. I'll just take what Luke writes about the history and pay closer attention to his theology.

## 1:1-26 - Introduction: Preparing for the Spirit

### 1:1-5 - Promise of the Spirit

1In the first book, Theophilus, I dealt with all that Jesus did and taught 2until the day he was taken up, after giving instructions through the holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. 3He presented himself alive to them by many proofs after he had suffered, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. 4While meeting with them, he enjoined them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for “the promise of the Father about which you have heard me speak; 5for John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the holy Spirit.”

Immediately we have an example of Luke’s penchant for preferring mystery over history. At the end of his Gospel, he wrote that Jesus ascended on the evening of Easter Sunday. In Acts he stays around for forty days. In the fifteenth chapter of his First Letter to the Corinthians Paul enumerates several appearances of Jesus after his resurrection over a considerable period of time. Historians would like a more precise chronology of the events between the resurrection and the ascension, but they will not get that from these writers who are interested only in the mystery which they experienced and are presenting in their writings. In the Gospel Luke uses the ascension to show the termination of Jesus life and ministry on earth; in Acts, he uses it to show the beginning of the activity of the church.

### 1:6-12 - Ascension

6When they had gathered together they asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” 7He answered them, “It is not for you to know the times or seasons that the Father has established by his own authority. 8But you will receive power when the holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” 9When he had said this, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him from their sight. 10While they were looking intently at the sky as he was going, suddenly two men dressed in white garments stood beside them. 11They said, “Men of Galilee, why are you standing there looking at the sky? This Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven will return in the same way as you have seen him going into heaven.” 12Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day’s journey away.

The disciples’ question about restoring the kingdom to Israel “at this time” and Jesus’ answer are essential to this book. If the end were to come immediately, there would be no need for the author to write. But since no one knows when the end is coming, except the Father, our author writes on.

Jesus’ statement about the disciples’ being his witnesses “in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth” provides the outline for what he will present in his writing. Luke is writing fifty years after the ascension. He is looking back at what has taken place over those fifty years and places in Jesus’ mouth a prediction about what has, in fact, happened.

The two men (angels) in white who explain what is happening is reminiscent of the two who explained to the women at the tomb what had happened there (Luke 24:4).

## 1:13-14 - Waiting

13When they entered the city they went to the upper room where they were staying, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. 14All these devoted themselves with one accord to prayer, together with some women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.

Those gathered in the upper room provide continuity with the Gospel. The Eleven can bear witness to Jesus' life and ministry and the risen Lord; the women to the burial and the empty tomb; Mary to the events of Jesus' childhood and youth.

## 1:15-26 - Judas' replacement

15During those days Peter stood up in the midst of the brothers (there was a group of about one hundred and twenty persons in the one place). He said, 16"My brothers, the scripture had to be fulfilled which the holy Spirit spoke beforehand through the mouth of David, concerning Judas, who was the guide for those who arrested Jesus. 17He was numbered among us and was allotted a share in this ministry. 18He bought a parcel of land with the wages of his iniquity, and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle, and all his insides spilled out. 19This became known to everyone who lived in Jerusalem, so that the parcel of land was called in their language 'Akeldama,' that is, Field of Blood. 20For it is written in the Book of Psalms:

'Let his encampment become desolate,  
and may no one dwell in it.'

And:

'May another take his office.'

21Therefore, it is necessary that one of the men who accompanied us the whole time the Lord Jesus came and went among us, 22beginning from the baptism of John until the day on which he was taken up from us, become with us a witness to his resurrection." 23So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. 24Then they prayed, "You, Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which one of these two you have chosen 25to take the place in this apostolic ministry from which Judas turned away to go to his own place." 26Then they gave lots to them, and the lot fell upon Matthias, and he was counted with the eleven apostles.

Luke's description of Judas' demise is much more graphic than Matthew's (27:3-10). And again, the history does not jibe with Matthew's. For Matthew Judas returned the money to the chief priests, and hung himself; the chief priest decided to buy the field. For Luke, Judas bought the field and there killed himself; we are not told that he hung himself.

In the minds of First Century Christian community, it was important that the number of apostles be reconstituted to the original number of twelve. The "Twelve" are to sit on the twelve thrones to judge the twelve tribes of Israel. The number had to be reconstituted. However, the "Twelve" were also "Apostles." In their capacity as apostles, their number did not have to be reconstituted as each one died. They had successors, but not replacements. Matthias, who was chosen to reconstitute the number, is never mentioned again in the New Testament. His function was merely to be one of the twelve, not to be noted as an apostle.

## 2:1-13 - Pentecost

1When the time for Pentecost was fulfilled, they were all in one place together. 2And suddenly there came from the sky a noise like a strong driving wind, and it filled the entire house in which they were. 3Then there appeared

to them tongues as of fire, which parted and came to rest on each one of them. 4And they were all filled with the holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues, as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim. 5Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven staying in Jerusalem. 6At this sound, they gathered in a large crowd, but they were confused because each one heard them speaking in his own language. 7They were astounded, and in amazement they asked, “Are not all these people who are speaking Galileans? 8Then how does each of us hear them in his own native language? 9We are Parthians, Medes, and Elamites, inhabitants of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the districts of Libya near Cyrene, as well as travelers from Rome, 11both Jews and converts to Judaism, Cretans and Arabs, yet we hear them speaking in our own tongues of the mighty acts of God.” 12They were all astounded and bewildered, and said to one another, “What does this mean?” 13But others said, scoffing, “They have had too much new wine.”

First, a word about the Jewish Feast of Pentecost. It’s name comes from the fifty days after Passover. It was typical for Jewish families to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to celebrate the feast. It was originally an agricultural festival in the Spring, but had taken on the added meaning of a remembrance of the giving of the covenant on Sinai, when Israel was called to be God’s own people (Exodus 19). After that, other nations were called “no people.” Luke describes the first Christian Pentecost in Jerusalem as the renewal of God’s covenant, once more calling a people to be God’s own.

The disciples were at the feast, but whether they had remained in Jerusalem as Luke wrote was Jesus’ instruction at the end of his Gospel, or whether they and other family members had returned for the feast is not historically discernable. Back in 1:15 we were told that there were 120 persons gathered together; were they still all together?

The list of the origins of the people who heard the apostles speaking in their own languages includes the entire populace of the Roman Empire, a sure implication by Luke that the mission inaugurated by the coming of the Spirit was to the whole world. One commentator wrote: “Implicitly this Pentecost is more momentous and wider-reaching than the first Pentecost at Sinai.”

Some of those who heard the apostles speaking in their own tongue were astonished and bewildered, perhaps even impressed. Others knew immediately that the apostles were drunk. Intended by Luke or not, this presages the diverse reception of the message throughout his whole book.

## 2:14-36 - Peter’s proclamation

14Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice, and proclaimed to them, “You who are Jews, indeed all of you staying in Jerusalem. Let this be known to you, and listen to my words. 15These people are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. 16No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

17‘It will come to pass in the last days,’ God says,  
‘that I will pour out a portion of my spirit upon all flesh.  
Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,  
your young men shall see visions,  
your old men shall dream dreams.

18Indeed, upon my servants and my handmaids  
I will pour out a portion of my spirit in those days,  
and they shall prophesy.

19And I will work wonders in the heavens above  
and signs on the earth below:

blood, fire, and a cloud of smoke.  
20The sun shall be turned to darkness,  
and the moon to blood,  
before the coming of the great and splendid day of the Lord,  
21and it shall be that everyone shall be saved who calls on  
the name of the Lord.'

22You who are Israelites, hear these words. Jesus the Nazorean was a man commended to you by God with mighty deeds, wonders, and signs, which God worked through him in your midst, as you yourselves know. 23This man, delivered up by the set plan and foreknowledge of God, you killed, using lawless men to crucify him. 24But God raised him up, releasing him from the throes of death, because it was impossible for him to be held by it. 25For David says of him:

'I saw the Lord ever before me,  
with him at my right hand I shall not be disturbed.  
26Therefore my heart has been glad and my tongue has exulted;  
my flesh, too, will dwell in hope,  
27because you will not abandon my soul to the netherworld,  
nor will you suffer your holy one to see corruption.  
28You have made known to me the paths of life;  
you will fill me with joy in your presence.'

29My brothers, one can confidently say to you about the patriarch David that he died and was buried, and his tomb is in our midst to this day. 30But since he was a prophet and knew that God had sworn an oath to him that he would set one of his descendants upon his throne, 31he foresaw and spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, that neither was he abandoned to the netherworld nor did his flesh see corruption. 32God raised this Jesus; of this we are all witnesses. 33Exalted at the right hand of God, he received the promise of the holy Spirit from the Father and poured it forth, as you (both) see and hear. 34For David did not go up into heaven, but he himself said:

'The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand  
35until I make your enemies your footstool."'

36Therefore let the whole house of Israel know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified."

While Luke portrays this as the first announcement of the *kerygma*, the Greek word for proclamation, he is writing about an event which took place roughly 50 years prior to his writing. Preaching about Jesus had been going on for a long time already. Peter's sermon as given here is a compendium of that preaching. There will be five more of these "kerygma" sermons in the Acts of the Apostles. Peter gives all but one, which Paul gives.

While this is a composition of Luke, rather than of Peter, it points to the shift from Jesus' preaching, as described by Luke in his Gospel, to that of the early church. Jesus never preached about himself; he preached about the Kingdom of God. Here, early in the account of the beginnings of the Christian church, the preaching is about Jesus as the fulfillment of prophesy and the divine messiah. It's as if the Christian preacher could not proclaim the Kingdom of God without first preaching about the one who revealed and established it.

## 2:37-41 - Response to the sermon

37Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and they asked Peter and the other apostles, "What are we to do, my brothers?" 38Peter [said] to them, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the holy Spirit. 39For the promise is made to you and to your children and to all those far off, whomever the Lord our God will call." 40He testified with many other arguments, and was exhorting them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." 41Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand persons were added that day.

Peter's first response to the question "What are we to do?" is "Repent." This word means "change of heart." It's a positive response to the good news, rather than any idea of being sorry, let alone, miserable. In his Gospel, Luke writes that the people asked John the Baptist the same questions, "What then should we do?" John told them to do works of mercy toward their neighbors. That would represent a change of heart from one's selfishness. In Matthew's Gospel, John says, "Produce good works as evidence of your repentance." It would seem that the repentance which is called for is not merely an interior change of heart, but that change of heart must be made manifest in one's behavior, not toward God, but toward one's neighbor. And then Peter adds, "be baptized," the sign that one has changed one's heart. The result of this change of heart and baptism is that one's sins are forgiven and the Holy Spirit is given. The result of Peter's promise that the Holy Spirit will be given to those who are baptized is to emphasize that this whole process is more God's doing than the individual's, as Peter says, "For the promise is made to you and to your children and to all those far off, whomever the Lord our God will call."

Luke sets up the expectation of his message in Acts in the words of Peter, "For the promise is made to you and to your children and to all those far off, whomever the Lord our God will call." Later in Acts, we will learn that some were surprised to find out who this "all the people whom God calls" included Gentiles, too. It's not only Jews to whom the promise has been made; it is to a whole lot of others also. There are no second class citizens in Christian life, an issue which will be debated in Acts 10.

Peter says that one must be baptized "in the name of Jesus Christ." There is as yet no Trinitarian formula for baptism. One was baptized the name of Jesus by professing that "Jesus is Lord," or "Jesus is the Messiah," or "Jesus is the Son of God," or "Jesus is the Son of Man."

Luke writes "three thousand were added that day." Added to the 120 we read about back in 1:15? Luke wasn't concerned about this, but I am. There were originally 120 believers; then 3,000 were added to that number on Pentecost (admittedly that should be understood only as a lot of people, not an exact number). That *is* a lot of people to be gathered in one place. I might suggest that since the Pentecost baptisms were of people from throughout the Roman Empire, most of them had gone back home. But in 4:4 Luke tells us that the group had grown to about 5,000.

## 2:42-47 - Communal life

42They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers. 43Awe came upon everyone, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. 44All who believed were together and had all things in common; 45they would sell their property and possessions and divide them among all according to each one's need. 46Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple area and to breaking bread in their homes. They ate their meals with exultation and sincerity of heart, 47praising God and enjoying favor with all the people. And every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

The description of the community given here is an idealized version. There's more theology than history here, the description embodying what the community *should* be. The four features given here are *koinonia*, prayers, breaking of the bread and the teaching of the apostles.

First, *koinonia* (fellowship, communion, community): As a result of baptism, individuals were taken up into a community, they became members of the *ekklesia*, the Greek word which usually means "church." The New Israel was much like the Old Israel: one was saved by

membership in the group which God saved. An important aspect of this fellowship was the sharing of goods. Paul's efforts among the Gentile churches he founded to raise funds for the poor of the Jerusalem church was an example of the *koinonia* which is meant. This *koinonia* characterized the church in the New Testament until the report in 1 John that a group had "gone out from us," and were branded as anti-Christ.

Second, prayers: At first these must have been prayers in common usage in the Jewish community from which the first believers came, in fact, they continued their attendance in the temple and at the synagogue until expelled. Other prayers for each other and eventually for other Christian churches were most likely included. Paul writes that he prayed constantly for the churches. Gradually prayers in praise of what Jesus had done were probably added, reflecting a growing sense of Christian distinctiveness.

Third, breaking of bread: Originally the celebration of Eucharist was done along with, rather than instead of, participation in the prayer life of the Jewish community. How did the first Christians regard the "breaking of bread?" Probably, almost certainly, in the way they regarded the celebration of Passover. In the Jewish mind, the yearly celebration made the original event present again. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 "As often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes." Almost certainly this was modeled after the Jewish idea of the Passover, making the Lord's death present again. Luke's narration of the story of the disciples on their way to Emmaus, and the breaking of bread which took place there, indicates that the disciples recognized him in the breaking of the bread.

Fourth, the teaching of the apostles: For the first Christians, the Hebrew scriptures were a sacred heritage. They knew that in a few cases Jesus had modified the law or differed in the interpretation of the Law from what had traditionally been taught. This teaching was regarded as secondary to the divinely inspired "law and the prophets." However, these teachings, based almost entirely on the memories of the apostles, were the beginning of a second set of scriptures, which we now possess as the New Testament.

The Christians thought of themselves, and their neighbors thought of them, as good worshiping Jews who had also a distinctive outlook and practice. The tension caused by these two pulls would eventually be resolved when the Christians were excluded from the synagogue.

### 3:1-10 - Healing

1Now Peter and John were going up to the temple area for the three o'clock hour of prayer. 2And a man crippled from birth was carried and placed at the gate of the temple called "the Beautiful Gate" every day to beg for alms from the people who entered the temple. 3When he saw Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked for alms. 4But Peter looked intently at him, as did John, and said, "Look at us." 5He paid attention to them, expecting to receive something from them. 6Peter said, "I have neither silver nor gold, but what I do have I give you: in the name of Jesus Christ the Nazorean, [rise and] walk." 7Then Peter took him by the right hand and raised him up, and immediately his feet and ankles grew strong. 8He leaped up, stood, and walked around, and went into the temple with them, walking and jumping and praising God. 9When all the people saw him walking and praising God, 10they recognized him as the one who used to sit begging at the Beautiful Gate of the temple, and they were filled with amazement and astonishment at what had happened to him.

The story is simple enough and straight forward. It is in the name of Jesus that Peter heals the beggar, who was well-known in the temple because he was there every day. It is probably

because the man was so well-known that the Jewish authorities didn't do any more than admonish the apostles not to preach in Jesus name (4:21).

### 3:11-26 - Peter's speech

11As he clung to Peter and John, all the people hurried in amazement toward them in the portico called "Solomon's Portico." 12When Peter saw this, he addressed the people, "You Israelites, why are you amazed at this, and why do you look so intently at us as if we had made him walk by our own power or piety? 13The God of Abraham, [the God] of Isaac, and [the God] of Jacob, the God of our ancestors, has glorified his servant Jesus whom you handed over and denied in Pilate's presence, when he had decided to release him. 14You denied the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. 15The author of life you put to death, but God raised him from the dead; of this we are witnesses. 16And by faith in his name, this man, whom you see and know, his name has made strong, and the faith that comes through it has given him this perfect health, in the presence of all of you. 17Now I know, brothers, that you acted out of ignorance, just as your leaders did; 18but God has thus brought to fulfillment what he had announced beforehand through the mouth of all the prophets, that his Messiah would suffer. 19Repent, therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be wiped away, 20and that the Lord may grant you times of refreshment and send you the Messiah already appointed for you, Jesus, 21whom heaven must receive until the times of universal restoration of which God spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old. 22For Moses said:

'A prophet like me will the Lord, your God, raise up for you  
from among your own kinsmen;  
to him you shall listen in all that he may say to you.  
23Everyone who does not listen to that prophet  
will be cut off from the people.'

24Moreover, all the prophets who spoke, from Samuel and those afterwards, also announced these days. 25You are the children of the prophets and of the covenant that God made with your ancestors when he said to Abraham, 'In your offspring all the families of the earth shall be blessed.' 26For you first, God raised up his servant and sent him to bless you by turning each of you from your evil ways."

Although Luke puts this speech on Peter's lips, the composition is Luke's, giving him the opportunity for teaching about the meaning of Jesus' resurrection. Among the things he teaches is that God has glorified "his servant Jesus," thereby identifying Jesus with the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 52 and 53. Verses 13-16 are a proclamation of the Easter *kerigma*. In verses 17 to 19, Luke lets both the people and their leaders off the hook, because they acted in ignorance. Ignorant though they were, they were fulfilling God's plan that the messiah would suffer. This is a brief recapitulation of Luke's Gospel, Chapter 23.

This first attempt at evangelization in Luke's Acts is an appeal for the Jews to convert. Much of the rest of Acts will be an appeal to Gentiles.

### 4:1-22 - Aftermath of the healing

1While they were still speaking to the people, the priests, the captain of the temple guard, and the Sadducees confronted them, 2disturbed that they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. 3They laid hands on them and put them in custody until the next day, since it was already evening. 4But many of those who heard the word came to believe and (the) number of men grew to [about] five thousand.

5On the next day, their leaders, elders, and scribes were assembled in Jerusalem, 6with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly class. 7They brought them into their presence and questioned them, "By what power or by what name have you done this?" 8Then Peter, filled with the holy Spirit, answered them, "Leaders of the people and elders: 9If we are being examined today about a good deed done to a cripple, namely, by what means he was saved, 10then all of you and all the people of Israel should know that it was in

the name of Jesus Christ the Nazorean whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead; in his name this man stands before you healed. 11He is ‘the stone rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone.’ 12There is no salvation through anyone else, nor is there any other name under heaven given to the human race by which we are to be saved.”

13Observing the boldness of Peter and John and perceiving them to be uneducated, ordinary men, they were amazed, and they recognized them as the companions of Jesus. 14Then when they saw the man who had been cured standing there with them, they could say nothing in reply. 15So they ordered them to leave the Sanhedrin, and conferred with one another, saying, 16“‘What are we to do with these men? Everyone living in Jerusalem knows that a remarkable sign was done through them, and we cannot deny it. 17But so that it may not be spread any further among the people, let us give them a stern warning never again to speak to anyone in this name.’”

18So they called them back and ordered them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. 19Peter and John, however, said to them in reply, “Whether it is right in the sight of God for us to obey you rather than God, you be the judges. 20It is impossible for us not to speak about what we have seen and heard.” 21After threatening them further, they released them, finding no way to punish them, on account of the people who were all praising God for what had happened. 22For the man on whom this sign of healing had been done was over forty years old.

There’s the 5,000! I can’t imagine where they gathered, and no one is telling me; although Solomon’s Portico was about two football fields in length. Of course, that’s not Luke’s problem. He’s just showing that the initial preaching attracted lots of people.

The Sadducees would be upset at the apostles’ preaching by the mere fact that someone was talking about the resurrection from the dead, because they didn’t believe that was a possibility. But Peter boldly proclaimed that Jesus had been raised. All the Jewish officials were surprised at Peter’s eloquence, because he was “uneducated,” meaning that he was unlettered in the Law. In Luke 22:31-32, Jesus had said that he had prayed for Peter that his faith would not fail. Here we have that prayer answered. Peter quotes Psalm 118:32 about the stone rejected to condemn his hearers.

The members of the Sanhedrin conferred, but their conferring could not remove the fact that the crippled man was standing there in good health, so they admonished them not to preach Jesus any more and threatened them and sent them off, but not before Peter confronted them about whom they should obey – God or the Sanhedrin.

#### 4:23-31 - The community prayer

23After their release they went back to their own people and reported what the chief priests and elders had told them. 24And when they heard it, they raised their voices to God with one accord and said, “Sovereign Lord, maker of heaven and earth and the sea and all that is in them, 25you said by the holy Spirit through the mouth of our father David, your servant:

‘Why did the Gentiles rage  
and the peoples entertain folly?  
26The kings of the earth took their stand  
and the princes gathered together  
against the Lord and against his anointed.’

27Indeed they gathered in this city against your holy servant Jesus whom you anointed, Herod and Pontius Pilate, together with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, 28to do what your hand and [your] will had long ago planned to take place. 29And now, Lord, take note of their threats, and enable your servants to speak your word with all boldness, 30as you stretch forth [your] hand to heal, and signs and wonders are done through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” 31As they prayed, the place where they were gathered shook, and they were all filled with the holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.

Recalling Psalm 2:1-2, the prayer compares the way Herod and Pilate treated Jesus with the way the Sanhedrin is treating his followers. The faith of the community is expressed in their saying that all that had happened was according to God's will and plan.

#### 4:32-37 - Community life

<sup>32</sup>The community of believers was of one heart and mind, and no one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they had everything in common. <sup>33</sup>With great power the apostles bore witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great favor was accorded them all. <sup>34</sup>There was no needy person among them, for those who owned property or houses would sell them, bring the proceeds of the sale, <sup>35</sup>and put them at the feet of the apostles, and they were distributed to each according to need.

<sup>36</sup>Thus Joseph, also named by the apostles Barnabas (which is translated "son of encouragement"), a Levite, a Cypriot by birth, <sup>37</sup>sold a piece of property that he owned, then brought the money and put it at the feet of the apostles.

Luke's description of the Christian community manifests the observance of what Jesus said in 12:33-34 of his Gospel, "Sell your belongings and give alms." and in 18:22, "Sell all that you have and distribute it to the poor." Barnabas, who later became a companion of Paul's, is introduced as an example of Jesus' teaching.

There are a couple other Barnabas connections. He is identified as a Levite (priestly cast) from Cyprus. In Acts 6:7, we are told that a large number of priests were coming to believe in Jesus. Perhaps at the encouragement of Barnabas? In Acts 13:2-3, we learn that as soon as Barnabas joined Paul they went off to Cyprus.

#### 5:1-11 - Ananias and Sapphira

<sup>1</sup>A man named Ananias, however, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property. <sup>2</sup>He retained for himself, with his wife's knowledge, some of the purchase price, took the remainder, and put it at the feet of the apostles. <sup>3</sup>But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart so that you lied to the holy Spirit and retained part of the price of the land? <sup>4</sup>While it remained unsold, did it not remain yours? And when it was sold, was it not still under your control? Why did you contrive this deed? You have lied not to human beings, but to God." <sup>5</sup>When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last, and great fear came upon all who heard of it. <sup>6</sup>The young men came and wrapped him up, then carried him out and buried him.

<sup>7</sup>After an interval of about three hours, his wife came in, unaware of what had happened. <sup>8</sup>Peter said to her, "Tell me, did you sell the land for this amount?" She answered, "Yes, for that amount." <sup>9</sup>Then Peter said to her, "Why did you agree to test the Spirit of the Lord? Listen, the footsteps of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out." <sup>10</sup>At once, she fell down at his feet and breathed her last. When the young men entered they found her dead, so they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. <sup>11</sup>And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things.

OK, so everything wasn't so perfect in the community. Luke has gone to quite some length to demonstrate that the sin was the lie, not the withholding. The events caused great fear in the whole "church." This is the first time the word is used in Acts of the Apostles.

#### 5:12-16 - Signs and wonders

<sup>12</sup>Many signs and wonders were done among the people at the hands of the apostles. They were all together in Solomon's portico. <sup>13</sup>None of the others dared to join them, but the people esteemed them. <sup>14</sup>Yet more than ever,

believers in the Lord, great numbers of men and women, added to them. 15Thus they even carried the sick out into the streets and laid them on cots and mats so that when Peter came by, at least his shadow might fall on one or another of them. 16A large number of people from the towns in the vicinity of Jerusalem also gathered, bringing the sick and those disturbed by unclean spirits, and they were all cured.

Both numbers and the esteem of others! Wonderful! But it provokes a jealous reaction by the authorities.

#### 5:17-26 - Arrest/release/arrest

17Then the high priest rose up and all his companions, that is, the party of the Sadducees, and, filled with jealousy, 18laid hands upon the apostles and put them in the public jail. 19But during the night, the angel of the Lord opened the doors of the prison, led them out, and said, 20“Go and take your place in the temple area, and tell the people everything about this life.” 21When they heard this, they went to the temple early in the morning and taught. When the high priest and his companions arrived, they convened the Sanhedrin, the full senate of the Israelites, and sent to the jail to have them brought in. 22But the court officers who went did not find them in the prison, so they came back and reported, 23“We found the jail securely locked and the guards stationed outside the doors, but when we opened them, we found no one inside.” 24When they heard this report, the captain of the temple guard and the chief priests were at a loss about them, as to what this would come to. 25Then someone came in and reported to them, “The men whom you put in prison are in the temple area and are teaching the people.” 26Then the captain and the court officers went and brought them in, but without force, because they were afraid of being stoned by the people.

This is a pretty straight forward narration of events with one irony: the Sadducees didn't believe in angels. The apostles have disobeyed the admonition of the Sanhedrin by continuing to preach about Jesus. But their second arrest is done “politely” because the crowds have come to like the apostles, and the guards don't want to get stoned.

#### 5:27-42 - Before the Sanhedrin

27When they had brought them in and made them stand before the Sanhedrin, the high priest questioned them, 28“We gave you strict orders [did we not?] to stop teaching in that name. Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and want to bring this man's blood upon us.” 29But Peter and the apostles said in reply, “We must obey God rather than men. 30The God of our ancestors raised Jesus, though you had him killed by hanging him on a tree. 31God exalted him at his right hand as leader and savior to grant Israel repentance and forgiveness of sins. 32We are witnesses of these things, as is the holy Spirit that God has given to those who obey him.” 33When they heard this, they became infuriated and wanted to put them to death. 34But a Pharisee in the Sanhedrin named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, respected by all the people, stood up, ordered the men to be put outside for a short time, 35and said to them, “Fellow Israelites, be careful what you are about to do to these men. 36Some time ago, Theudas appeared, claiming to be someone important, and about four hundred men joined him, but he was killed, and all those who were loyal to him were disbanded and came to nothing. 37After him came Judas the Galilean at the time of the census. He also drew people after him, but he too perished and all who were loyal to him were scattered. 38So now I tell you, have nothing to do with these men, and let them go. For if this endeavor or this activity is of human origin, it will destroy itself. 39But if it comes from God, you will not be able to destroy them; you may even find yourselves fighting against God.” They were persuaded by him. 40After recalling the apostles, they had them flogged, ordered them to stop speaking in the name of Jesus, and dismissed them. 41So they left the presence of the Sanhedrin, rejoicing that they had been found worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name. 42And all day long, both at the temple and in their homes, they did not stop teaching and proclaiming the Messiah, Jesus.

Even with a couple of historical inaccuracies, this is a great story. The inaccuracies concern the two incidents to which Gamaliel refers; one happened thirty years earlier, and the other actually came later, around 44 to 46 A.D.

This episode fulfills what Luke had written in his Gospel (21:12-14): “They will seize you and persecute you, they will hand you over to the synagogues and to prisons, and they will have led before kings and governors because of my name. It will lead to your giving testimony.”

The Pharisee, Gamaliel, a most respected teacher of the Law, a mentor to Paul of Tarsus, carries the day with his argumentation. This is the first time a Pharisee is mentioned in Acts, while in Luke’s Gospel, we heard often of the scribes and Pharisees and Sadducees. And this Pharisee is portrayed in a most positive light. This is possibly Luke’s attempt to gain a sympathetic opinion for Paul’s mentor, and therefore for Paul. Also in Acts 23:6-9, it will be the Pharisees who side with Paul in his contention with the Sadducees.

Despite Gamaliel’s intervention the Sanhedrin has the apostles flogged, and releases them with the admonition not to preach about Jesus any more, which admonition they were only too happy to disobey.

#### 6:1-7 - Help wanted

1At that time, as the number of disciples continued to grow, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. 2So the Twelve called together the community of the disciples and said, “It is not right for us to neglect the word of God to serve at table. 3Brothers, select from among you seven reputable men, filled with the Spirit and wisdom, whom we shall appoint to this task, 4whereas we shall devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” 5The proposal was acceptable to the whole community, so they chose Stephen, a man filled with faith and the holy Spirit, also Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicholas of Antioch, a convert to Judaism. 6They presented these men to the apostles who prayed and laid hands on them. 7The word of God continued to spread, and the number of the disciples in Jerusalem increased greatly; even a large group of priests were becoming obedient to the faith.

Again, we have Luke’s assertion that the community continued to grow. By his account we now have over 5,000 men; presumably there were also women. The largeness of the group caused some logistical problems. While I understand that it would be imposing on the text concepts from much later years, it seems that the apostles, recognizing the difficulty, did not take it upon themselves to solve it. They called the community together and had them select the people needed to solve the problem. Modern social commentators would see here the principle of subsidiarity at work in the very first meeting of the infant church.

The situation in Jerusalem at the time seems to be this. There were Jewish Christians whose homes were in Jerusalem or nearby. And there were Jewish Christian pilgrims who came to Jerusalem, some or many of whom eventually settled there. The locals spoke Aramaic; the immigrants spoke Greek. The Greek-speaking widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food, so the solution proposed by the Apostles and carried out by the community was to select “the Seven” to carry out the ministry of serving “at table.” All seven names are Greek. Although their ministry was supposedly “table waiting,” Stephen and Philip, later identified as “Philip the evangelist, one of the Seven” (21:8), obviously also took part in the ministry of the word.

In what follows, I will be following Raymond E. Brown's (*An Introduction to the New Testament*) analysis of the situation in the Jerusalem church. First, we see the role of the Apostles in maintaining the unity of the church. While they were all Jewish Christians, they made room for equal membership in the community for the Hellenist Christians. Second, although there were cultural and theological disagreements between the two groups, the church decided that maintaining *koinonia* of the entire groups was more important than trying to impose a single cultural and theological identity. The big theological difference concerned whether or not to remain practicing Temple worshippers. Third, an administrative and structural division takes place among the believers in Christ between "the Seven" as administrators of the Hellenist group, and, as we shall see later, with James as the leader of the Hebrew church in Jerusalem. Fourth, by keeping responsibility for the Hellenist Christians within the community, but seeing them as a distinct group, the leaders of the church prepared the way for the evangelization of the nations, as the Hellenist branch was evicted from Jerusalem for their opposition to an exclusively Hebrew way of worship. It was the Hellenist group which was persecuted by the high priests for their denigration of temple worship, and which was evicted from Jerusalem, thus beginning the evangelization of Gentiles.

This decision effectively divided the community of believers in Jesus into two segments, the Hebrews and the Hellenists. The seven chosen to attend to the distribution of food, in fact became the administrators of the Hellenist community. The Apostles' position as the leaders of the whole community held the two groups together in *koinonia*, community. Mutual acceptance of the two groups provided the basis for accepting diversity within the one community.

#### 6:8-15 - Accusations against Stephen

8Now Stephen, filled with grace and power, was working great wonders and signs among the people. 9Certain members of the so-called Synagogue of Freedmen, Cyrenians, and Alexandrians, and people from Cilicia and Asia, came forward and debated with Stephen, 10but they could not withstand the wisdom and the spirit with which he spoke. 11Then they instigated some men to say, "We have heard him speaking blasphemous words against Moses and God." 12They stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes, accosted him, seized him, and brought him before the Sanhedrin. 13They presented false witnesses who testified, "This man never stops saying things against [this] holy place and the law. 14For we have heard him claim that this Jesus the Nazorean will destroy this place and change the customs that Moses handed down to us." 15All those who sat in the Sanhedrin looked intently at him and saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

While commentators debate the meaning of "Synagogue of Freedmen," its precise designation seems to have no relevance to the story. It seems to have been Hellenized Jews living in Jerusalem.

As yet unknown to Luke's readers, he is setting the scene for the division between the Jerusalem church and the Hellenist church, which will be hinted at by the mention that Paul observed the stoning of Stephen (Acts 8:1).

Stephen himself, being a Hellenized Jew, would not have been interested in maintaining the worship of God only in the temple in Jerusalem. His views could easily have been twisted by his opponents to be understood in the way they describe. However, Luke says they did this with deliberate falsehood. But, in fact, the essence of their accusation was true. By his inclusion of the

phrase “false witnesses” (verse 13), Luke begins here to draw the parallel between Stephen’s death and that of Jesus, which parallel he will continue to demonstrate in 7:54.

The speech by Stephen which follows is, of course, a construct of Luke. It gives him the chance to give an almost complete recapitulation of his entire Gospel. In writing his Gospel, Luke went to great lengths to show that the Christian community was in continuity with the Jewish faith and history, and that Jesus was the fulfillment of the promises made through the prophets. In Stephen’s speech Luke consolidates his evidence for his viewpoint, reaching back into the Hebrew scriptures and showing its connection with the life of Jesus.

### 7:1-53 - Stephen’s speech

1Then the high priest asked, “Is this so?” 2And he replied, “My brothers and fathers, listen. The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was in Mesopotamia, before he had settled in Haran, 3and said to him, ‘Go forth from your land and [from] your kinsfolk to the land that I will show you.’ 4So he went forth from the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. And from there, after his father died, he made him migrate to this land where you now dwell. 5Yet he gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot’s length, but he did promise to give it to him and his descendants as a possession, even though he was childless. 6And God spoke thus, ‘His descendants shall be aliens in a land not their own, where they shall be enslaved and oppressed for four hundred years; 7but I will bring judgment on the nation they serve,’ God said, ‘and after that they will come out and worship me in this place.’ 8Then he gave him the covenant of circumcision, and so he became the father of Isaac, and circumcised him on the eighth day, as Isaac did Jacob, and Jacob the twelve patriarchs.

9“And the patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into slavery in Egypt; but God was with him 10and rescued him from all his afflictions. He granted him favor and wisdom before Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, who put him in charge of Egypt and [of] his entire household. 11Then a famine and great affliction struck all Egypt and Canaan, and our ancestors could find no food; 12but when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our ancestors there a first time. 13The second time, Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph’s family became known to Pharaoh. 14Then Joseph sent for his father Jacob, inviting him and his whole clan, seventy-five persons; 15and Jacob went down to Egypt. And he and our ancestors died 16and were brought back to Shechem and placed in the tomb that Abraham had purchased for a sum of money from the sons of Hamor at Shechem.

17“When the time drew near for the fulfillment of the promise that God pledged to Abraham, the people had increased and become very numerous in Egypt, 18until another king who knew nothing of Joseph came to power [in Egypt]. 19He dealt shrewdly with our people and oppressed [our] ancestors by forcing them to expose their infants, that they might not survive. 20At this time Moses was born, and he was extremely beautiful. For three months he was nursed in his father’s house; 21but when he was exposed, Pharaoh’s daughter adopted him and brought him up as her own son. 22Moses was educated [in] all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in his words and deeds.

23“When he was forty years old, he decided to visit his kinsfolk, the Israelites. 24When he saw one of them treated unjustly, he defended and avenged the oppressed man by striking down the Egyptian. 25He assumed [his] kinsfolk would understand that God was offering them deliverance through him, but they did not understand. 26The next day he appeared to them as they were fighting and tried to reconcile them peacefully, saying, ‘Men, you are brothers. Why are you harming one another?’ 27Then the one who was harming his neighbor pushed him aside, saying, ‘Who appointed you ruler and judge over us?’ 28Are you thinking of killing me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?’ 29Moses fled when he heard this and settled as an alien in the land of Midian, where he became the father of two sons.

30“Forty years later, an angel appeared to him in the desert near Mount Sinai in the flame of a burning bush. 31When Moses saw it, he was amazed at the sight, and as he drew near to look at it, the voice of the Lord came, 32‘I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob.’ Then Moses, trembling, did not dare to look at it. 33But the Lord said to him, ‘Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground. 34I have witnessed the affliction of my people in Egypt and have heard their groaning, and I have come down to rescue them. Come now, I will send you to Egypt.’ 35This Moses, whom they had rejected with the words, ‘Who appointed you ruler and judge?’ God sent as [both] ruler and deliverer, through the angel who appeared to him in the bush. 36This man led them out, performing wonders and signs in the land of Egypt, at the Red Sea, and in the desert

for forty years. 37It was this Moses who said to the Israelites, ‘God will raise up for you, from among your own kinsfolk, a prophet like me.’ 38It was he who, in the assembly in the desert, was with the angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai and with our ancestors, and he received living utterances to hand on to us.

39“Our ancestors were unwilling to obey him; instead, they pushed him aside and in their hearts turned back to Egypt, 40saying to Aaron, ‘Make us gods who will be our leaders. As for that Moses who led us out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has happened to him.’ 41 So they made a calf in those days, offered sacrifice to the idol, and reveled in the works of their hands. 42Then God turned and handed them over to worship the host of heaven, as it is written in the book of the prophets:

‘Did you bring me sacrifices and offerings  
for forty years in the desert, O house of Israel?

43No, you took up the tent of Moloch  
and the star of (your) god Rephan,  
the images that you made to worship.

So I shall take you into exile beyond Babylon.’

44Our ancestors had the tent of testimony in the desert just as the One who spoke to Moses directed him to make it according to the pattern he had seen. 45Our ancestors who inherited it brought it with Joshua when they dispossessed the nations that God drove out from before our ancestors, up to the time of David, 46who found favor in the sight of God and asked that he might find. 47But Solomon built a house for him. 48Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made by human hands. As the prophet says:

49‘The heavens are my throne,  
the earth is my footstool.

What kind of house can you build for me?  
says the Lord,

or what is to be my resting place?

50Did not my hand make all these things?’

51“‘You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always oppose the holy Spirit; you are just like your ancestors. 52Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They put to death those who foretold the coming of the righteous one, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become. 53You received the law as transmitted by angels, but you did not observe it.’”

Luke had been waiting a long time for a chance like this. His Gospel tried to show that believers in Jesus were a legitimate extension of all that had preceded in the history of the Chosen People. His passion to show the continuity between the history of the Hebrew people and his own community which believes in Jesus finally found an outlet in Stephen’s speech.

Luke has a couple of mistakes in Stephen’s recounting of Israelite history. In verse 2, he says that God spoke to Abraham in Mesopotamia; Genesis says this took place in Haran. In verse 16, he says that Jacob was buried in Shechem; Genesis says he was buried at Hebron. In the same verse he says that Abraham had purchased the tomb; Genesis says Jacob had purchased it himself.

Stephen’s speech demonstrates a consistent pattern of the people not honoring those who came among them as prophets, especially Joseph and Moses. Luke uses these to show the parallel with Jesus as Luke portrayed him in his Gospel. Presumably when Luke wrote “He [Moses] assumed [his] kinsfolk would understand that God was offering them deliverance through him, but they did not understand” (verse 25), he was drawing a poignant parallel between Moses being misunderstood by his people and Jesus being misjudged by his. The whole section on Moses (verses 23-29) offers a dramatic parallel with Jesus.

Verses 44 to 46 contain a veiled argument against the necessity of worshiping in the temple, which was one of the points of Stephen’s controversy with the Sanhedrin. The argument which Stephen makes goes like this. Moses received from God a vision of what the Meeting Tent

was to look like. He build this tent which was carried from place to place as the Israelites traveled toward the Promised Land. The point Stephen is making is that God did not design a temple, but only a tent. When the Israelites reached the Promised Land, God continued to reside in the Tent, until David prayed to find a “dwelling place for the house of Jacob.” But David did not build the temple; Solomon did. So the temple which exists is not the result of what God had instructed, nor a result of the prayer of David. It’s legitimacy as the place where God is to be worshiped can justly be challenged.

If Stephen had not gone into the matter of God not dwelling in a house made by human hands, he might have been alright. But that issue of temple worship divided, not only the two parts of the Christian community, but the practicing Jew from everyone else. And Stephen had to bring that up. That sealed his fate.

### 7:54-8:1a - Stephen’s death

54When they heard this, they were infuriated, and they ground their teeth at him. 55But he, filled with the holy Spirit, looked up intently to heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, 56and he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” 57But they cried out in a loud voice, covered their ears, and rushed upon him together. 58They threw him out of the city, and began to stone him. The witnesses laid down their cloaks at the feet of a young man named Saul. 59As they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” 60Then he fell to his knees and cried out in a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them”; and when he said this, he fell asleep. 8:1Now Saul was consenting to his execution.

Luke describes Stephen’s death in terms he used to describe Jesus’ death in Chapter 23 of his Gospel. Stephen sees God’s glory in heaven with the risen Lord, rather than in the temple. Stephen’s forgiveness of his murderers imitate’s Jesus’ forgiveness of those who crucified him. And the parallel between Stephen’s “receive my spirit” and Jesus’ words on the cross is obvious.

### 8:1-3 - The aftermath of Stephen’s death

1bOn that day, there broke out a severe persecution of the church in Jerusalem, and all were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. 2Devout men buried Stephen and made a loud lament over him. 3Saul, meanwhile, was trying to destroy the church; entering house after house and dragging out men and women, he handed them over for imprisonment.

It would seem that the persecution of the church in Jerusalem was limited to the Hellenist Jewish Christians, those who, like Stephen, had no need nor use for the temple worship. The apostles, and apparently the Hebrew Christians who continued to worship in the temple were not affected by this persecution. The persecution led to the evangelization of “the countryside of Judea and Samaria.”

I again quote Raymond E. Brown. “In the figure of Peter Acts has shown continuity with Jesus’ ministry of healing and preaching; in the figure of Stephen Acts has shown continuity with Jesus’ death. And just as Jesus’ death was not the end because the apostles would receive his Spirit to carry on the work, the death of Stephen is not the end, for observing is a young man named Saul (7:58). He consents to the death (8:1), but in God’s providence he will continue the work of Stephen.”

Saul was trying to destroy the church. He was a devout Jew, a Pharisee, a student of Gamaliel's. It was abhorrent to him that anyone would disparage temple worship. So he tried to wipe out this new sect. Saul's vehemence shows how profoundly difficult it was for a practicing Jew to embrace this new way.

#### 8:4-8 - Philip in Samaria

4Now those who had been scattered went about preaching the word. 5Thus Philip went down to [the] city of Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah to them. 6With one accord, the crowds paid attention to what was said by Philip when they heard it and saw the signs he was doing. 7For unclean spirits, crying out in a loud voice, came out of many possessed people, and many paralyzed and crippled people were cured. 8There was great joy in that city.

Luke immediately shifts his focus to a positive fall-out of the persecution in Jerusalem. Because the believers were dispersed, the word reached Samaria in the person of Philip. And it was accepted there with great results and happiness. The evangelists were Hellenist Jewish believers in Jesus, so their evangelizing would have no trace of connection with the Temple. Of course, the Samaritans already didn't think that the Temple was the place to worship. They had their own place of worship, Mount Gerizim.

#### 8:9-25 - Simon the Magician (with an interlude)

9A man named Simon used to practice magic in the city and astounded the people of Samaria, claiming to be someone great. 10All of them, from the least to the greatest, paid attention to him, saying, "This man is the 'Power of God' that is called 'Great.'" 11They paid attention to him because he had astounded them by his magic for a long time, 12but once they began to believe Philip as he preached the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, men and women alike were baptized. 13Even Simon himself believed and, after being baptized, became devoted to Philip; and when he saw the signs and mighty deeds that were occurring, he was astounded.

14Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent them Peter and John, 15who went down and prayed for them, that they might receive the holy Spirit, 16for it had not yet fallen upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. 17Then they laid hands on them and they received the holy Spirit.

18When Simon saw that the Spirit was conferred by the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money 19and said, "Give me this power too, so that anyone upon whom I lay my hands may receive the holy Spirit." 20But Peter said to him, "May your money perish with you, because you thought that you could buy the gift of God with money. 21You have no share or lot in this matter, for your heart is not upright before God. 22Repent of this wickedness of yours and pray to the Lord that, if possible, your intention may be forgiven. 23For I see that you are filled with bitter gall and are in the bonds of iniquity." 24Simon said in reply, "Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may come upon me." 25So when they had testified and proclaimed the word of the Lord, they returned to Jerusalem and preached the good news to many Samaritan villages.

It's possible, but not certain, that Simon the Magician was the founder of the heresy known as gnosticism.

Verses 14 to 17 seem like an interlude concerning the evangelization of Samaria. Up to this point in Acts, even though some are baptized in the name of Jesus, the gift of the Spirit is something more. The descent of the Spirit is related always to the action of an apostle or an apostolic delegate.

The Simon story continues with Simon wanting to buy from the apostles the power to convey the Spirit to others. Peter is disgusted at the proposal, distinguishing the gift of the Spirit

from magic. Simon repents, and the apostles return to Jerusalem, preaching on the way in many Samaritan villages.

### 8:26-40 - Philip and the Ethiopian

26Then the angel of the Lord spoke to Philip, "Get up and head south on the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza, the desert route." 27So he got up and set out. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, that is, the queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury, who had come to Jerusalem to worship, 28and was returning home. Seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. 29The Spirit said to Philip, "Go and join up with that chariot." 30Philip ran up and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and said, "Do you understand what you are reading?" 31He replied, "How can I, unless someone instructs me?" So he invited Philip to get in and sit with him. 32This was the scripture passage he was reading:

"Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,  
and as a lamb before its shearer is silent,  
so he opened not his mouth.

33In (his) humiliation justice was denied him.

Who will tell of his posterity?  
For his life is taken from the earth."

34Then the eunuch said to Philip in reply, "I beg you, about whom is the prophet saying this? About himself, or about someone else?" 35Then Philip opened his mouth and, beginning with this scripture passage, he proclaimed Jesus to him. 36As they traveled along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, "Look, there is water. What is to prevent my being baptized?" [37] 38Then he ordered the chariot to stop, and Philip and the eunuch both went down into the water, and he baptized him. 39When they came out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more, but continued on his way rejoicing. 40Philip came to Azotus, and went about proclaiming the good news to all the towns until he reached Caesarea.

Here is a story about a Hellenist Jewish Christian baptizing the first Gentile. Once again Luke situates Jesus as an extension of what is found in the Hebrew scriptures. Chapter 10 will tell of Cornelius' baptism, another Gentile. The parallel between the two also contains the difference between the two. Here it is the Hellenist Christian Philip who welcomes a Gentile into the Community; in Chapter 10, it is Peter, a Hebrew Christian, who baptizes a Gentile. In both cases, Philip and Peter are shown to be the merest pawn in the grasp of the Spirit, which directs both of them forcefully to approach a Gentile. With the baptism of Cornelius, we will have an African and a Roman in the fold, on our way to what Jesus said in Luke 24:47, "And he said to them, 'Thus it is written that the Messiah would suffer and rise from the dead on the third day 47 and that repentance, for the forgiveness of sins, would be preached in his *"to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem."*'" And in Acts 1:8, Jesus said, "But you will receive power when the holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Another interesting point which Luke might have been making is that according to Deuteronomy 23:2, a eunuch could not be admitted into the assembly of the Lord. But this Hellenist Jewish Christian doesn't hesitate to baptize this man. The diversity of the Christian community is increasing.

Gentiles are now firmly part of the believing community. Luke interrupts the story of the spread of belief in Jesus "to all nations" and "to the ends of the earth" to tell us the story of the man who would be the great apostle of that movement.

## 9:1-9 - Saul's conversion

1Now Saul, still breathing murderous threats against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest 2and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, that, if he should find any men or women who belonged to the Way, he might bring them back to Jerusalem in chains. 3On his journey, as he was nearing Damascus, a light from the sky suddenly flashed around him. 4He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" 5He said, "Who are you, sir?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. 6Now get up and go into the city and you will be told what you must do." 7The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, for they heard the voice but could see no one. 8Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him to Damascus. 9For three days he was unable to see, and he neither ate nor drank.

First of all, no horse is mentioned; Saul "fell to the ground;" he was not knocked off his horse. It is the Hellenist Jewish Christians who have been driven out of Jerusalem whom Saul is searching out. Although these Christians had no use for the temple, they apparently continued to engage in synagogue services; from the high priest Saul sought letters to the synagogues in Damascus. Here Luke narrates for the first time the conversation between the risen Lord and Saul. He will put that story on Paul's lips twice more in Chapters 22 and 26, with slight variations; some times his companions hear but do not see, other times they see but do not hear.

Jesus' reply to Saul's question, "Who are you, sir?" will form the basis of much of Paul's preaching, namely the identification of the believing community with their risen Lord. His companions bring Paul to Damascus, where Paul lives a penitential life for three days.

The scene switches now to Ananias' house.

## 9:10-19 - Saul's baptism

10There was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias, and the Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." He answered, "Here I am, Lord." 11The Lord said to him, "Get up and go to the street called Straight and ask at the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus named Saul. He is there praying, 12and [in a vision] he has seen a man named Ananias come in and lay [his] hands on him, that he may regain his sight." 13But Ananias replied, "Lord, I have heard from many sources about this man, what evil things he has done to your holy ones in Jerusalem. 14And here he has authority from the chief priests to imprison all who call upon your name." 15But the Lord said to him, "Go, for this man is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before Gentiles, kings, and Israelites, 16and I will show him what he will have to suffer for my name." 17So Ananias went and entered the house; laying his hands on him, he said, "Saul, my brother, the Lord has sent me, Jesus who appeared to you on the way by which you came, that you may regain your sight and be filled with the holy Spirit." 18Immediately things like scales fell from his eyes and he regained his sight. He got up and was baptized, 19and when he had eaten, he recovered his strength.

The risen Jesus' appearance to Saul is really no different from his appearances to the other apostles. Saul-become-Paul has equal status with the other apostles, because like them, he was called directly by the Lord. Of all the apostles, Paul is the only one for whom we have any mention of having been baptized.

## 9:19-22 - Stay in Damascus

He stayed some days with the disciples in Damascus, 20and he began at once to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, that he is the Son of God. 21All who heard him were astounded and said, "Is not this the man who in

Jerusalem ravaged those who call upon this name, and came here expressly to take them back in chains to the chief priests?" 22But Saul grew all the stronger and confounded [the] Jews who lived in Damascus, proving that this is the Messiah.

We do not know what "some days" means. Saul began his preaching career by preaching to those whom he had come to Damascus to imprison, much to everyone's amazement.

### 9:23-31 - To Jerusalem

23After a long time had passed, the Jews conspired to kill him, 24but their plot became known to Saul. Now they were keeping watch on the gates day and night so as to kill him, 25but his disciples took him one night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket.

26When he arrived in Jerusalem he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple. 27Then Barnabas took charge of him and brought him to the apostles, and he reported to them how on the way he had seen the Lord and that he had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had spoken out boldly in the name of Jesus. 28He moved about freely with them in Jerusalem, and spoke out boldly in the name of the Lord. 29He also spoke and debated with the Hellenists, but they tried to kill him. 30And when the brothers learned of this, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him on his way to Tarsus.

31The church throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria was at peace. It was being built up and walked in the fear of the Lord, and with the consolation of the holy Spirit it grew in numbers.

Luke says simply that "after a long time had passed" the Jews wanted to kill Saul. Perhaps Luke's "long time" is what Paul refers to in Galatians 1:17, where he writes that he spent three years in Arabia. Luke writes that some Jews conspired to kill him. In 2 Corinthians 11:32, Paul writes that it was the deputy of King Aretas who drove him out of the city.

There are several inconsistencies between the narration here and what Paul wrote in Galatians. It's anybody's guess whose memory is better, Luke's or Paul's. But there is no need for historical accuracy here. Luke's point of Paul's debate with the Hellenists is not given. These Hellenists most likely were not the Hellenist Christians. Paul was sent off to Tarsus.

Paul might have had some tense moments, but Luke reports that the church was at peace.

### 9:32-35 - Peter heals Aeneas

32As Peter was passing through every region, he went down to the holy ones living in Lydda. 33There he found a man named Aeneas, who had been confined to bed for eight years, for he was paralyzed. 34Peter said to him, "Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you. Get up and make your bed." He got up at once. 35And all the inhabitants of Lydda and Sharon saw him, and they turned to the Lord.

Peter becomes the focus of Luke's writing now. His healing of Aeneas in Lydda is described pretty much as Luke described Jesus' healing in his Gospel (5:24).

### 9:36-43 - Peter heals Tabitha

36Now in Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (which translated means Dorcas). She was completely occupied with good deeds and almsgiving. 37Now during those days she fell sick and died, so after washing her, they laid [her] out in a room upstairs. 38Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, hearing that Peter was there, sent two men to him with the request, "Please come to us without delay." 39So Peter got up and went with them. When he

arrived, they took him to the room upstairs where all the widows came to him weeping and showing him the tunics and cloaks that Dorcas had made while she was with them. 40Peter sent them all out and knelt down and prayed. Then he turned to her body and said, "Tabitha, rise up." She opened her eyes, saw Peter, and sat up. 41He gave her his hand and raised her up, and when he had called the holy ones and the widows, he presented her alive. 42This became known all over Joppa, and many came to believe in the Lord. 43And he stayed a long time in Joppa with Simon, a tanner.

Joppa is about 10 miles from Lydda. The story of the raising of Tabitha from the dead is a very close parallel to Jesus' raising of the daughter of Jairus in Luke 8:49-56. Luke's point is that Jesus' powers have not been withheld from the church, not even the power over death.

10:1-11:18 - Cornelius (in six scenes)

This is the longest story in the Acts of the Apostles, and perhaps it's most profound revelation. If the place of Gentiles in the New Israel was signaled by the baptism of the Ethiopian by Philip in Chapter 8, the message is given full bore here.

### Scene 1 - Cornelius' vision

1Now in Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of the Cohort called the Italica, 2devout and God-fearing along with his whole household, who used to give alms generously to the Jewish people and pray to God constantly. 3One afternoon about three o'clock, he saw plainly in a vision an angel of God come in to him and say to him, "Cornelius." 4He looked intently at him and, seized with fear, said, "What is it, sir?" He said to him, "Your prayers and almsgiving have ascended as a memorial offering before God. 5Now send some men to Joppa and summon one Simon who is called Peter. 6He is staying with another Simon, a tanner, who has a house by the sea." 7When the angel who spoke to him had left, he called two of his servants and a devout soldier from his staff, 8explained everything to them, and sent them to Joppa.

Cornelius was a centurion of the Cohort called the Italica. This was a archery battalion originally stationed in Syria, but moved to Israel. (Luke's history is poor here; the cohort didn't exist until 69 A.D.) Cornelius and his whole household are also described as "God-fearing" persons. This was a category of persons recognized by the Jews as inquirers into the Jewish faith who had not actually been circumcised to become full members of the community. He was generous in giving alms to his Jewish neighbors (an important point for Luke throughout his Gospel), and apparently participated in the daily prayers of the Jewish community. He was observing the regular 3:00 PM prayer.

### Scene 2 - Peter's vision

9The next day, while they were on their way and nearing the city, Peter went up to the roof terrace to pray at about noontime. 10He was hungry and wished to eat, and while they were making preparations he fell into a trance. 11He saw heaven opened and something resembling a large sheet coming down, lowered to the ground by its four corners. 12In it were all the earth's four-legged animals and reptiles and the birds of the sky. 13A voice said to him, "Get up, Peter. Slaughter and eat." 14But Peter said, "Certainly not, sir. For never have I eaten anything profane and unclean." 15The voice spoke to him again, a second time, "What God has made clean, you are not to call profane." 16This happened three times, and then the object was taken up into the sky.

Peter was hungry, but his vision included creatures he could legally eat and some he was forbidden to eat. The theological point made here, and later applied to the human species, is that anything God made is to be considered holy, even if that includes Jews and Gentiles.

### Scene 3 - Peter receives the messengers

17While Peter was in doubt about the meaning of the vision he had seen, the men sent by Cornelius asked for Simon's house and arrived at the entrance. 18They called out inquiring whether Simon, who is called Peter, was staying there. 19As Peter was pondering the vision, the Spirit said [to him], "There are three men here looking for you. 20So get up, go downstairs, and accompany them without hesitation, because I have sent them." 21Then Peter went down to the men and said, "I am the one you are looking for. What is the reason for your being here?" 22They answered, "Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, respected by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to summon you to his house and to hear what you have to say." 23So he invited them in and showed them hospitality.

There's a nice little twist here, which helps to make Luke's point throughout the story. Peter is a guest in the house of Simon the tanner. And yet he feels free to invite in and offer hospitality to the Gentile visitors.

### Scene 4 - Cornelius' house

The next day he got up and went with them, and some of the brothers from Joppa went with him. 24On the following day he entered Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. 25When Peter entered, Cornelius met him and, falling at his feet, paid him homage. 26Peter, however, raised him up, saying, "Get up. I myself am also a human being." 27While he conversed with him, he went in and found many people gathered together 28and said to them, "You know that it is unlawful for a Jewish man to associate with, or visit, a Gentile, but God has shown me that I should not call any person profane or unclean. 29And that is why I came without objection when sent for. May I ask, then, why you summoned me?"

30Cornelius replied, "Four days ago at this hour, three o'clock in the afternoon, I was at prayer in my house when suddenly a man in dazzling robes stood before me and said, 31 'Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your almsgiving remembered before God. 32Send therefore to Joppa and summon Simon, who is called Peter. He is a guest in the house of Simon, a tanner, by the sea.' 33So I sent for you immediately, and you were kind enough to come. Now therefore we are all here in the presence of God to listen to all that you have been commanded by the Lord."

Here we are told that "some of the brothers" went with Peter; later we will be told there were six of them. The point of Peter's vision becomes clear to him, and he expresses his understanding in verse 28.

### Scene 5 - Peter preaches; the Spirit descends

34Then Peter proceeded to speak and said, "In truth, I see that God shows no partiality. 35Rather, in every nation whoever fears him and acts uprightly is acceptable to him. 36You know the word [that] he sent to the Israelites as he proclaimed peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all, 37what has happened all over Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached, 38how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the holy Spirit and power. He went about doing good and healing all those oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. 39We are witnesses of all that he did both in the country of the Jews and (in) Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree. 40This man God raised (on) the third day and granted that he be visible, 41not to all the people, but to us, the witnesses chosen by God in advance, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. 42He commissioned us

to preach to the people and testify that he is the one appointed by God as judge of the living and the dead. 43To him all the prophets bear witness, that everyone who believes in him will receive forgiveness of sins through his name.”

44While Peter was still speaking these things, the holy Spirit fell upon all who were listening to the word. 45The circumcised believers who had accompanied Peter were astounded that the gift of the holy Spirit should have been poured out on the Gentiles also, 46for they could hear them speaking in tongues and glorifying God. Then Peter responded, 47“Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people, who have received the holy Spirit even as we have?” 48He ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. 49Then they invited him to stay for a few days.

Peter’s speech is the kerygma, the good news of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. Luke is really writing this for the benefit of his own audience, indicating that the Christian community is indeed a continuation and extension of the life and preaching of Jesus. The astonishment of those who accompanied Peter that the Holy Spirit should be given to Gentiles, and Peter’s calm acceptance of that fact and of baptizing them is the great theological message of this section: Gentiles are in!

### Scene 6 - Peter’s account

11:1Now the apostles and the brothers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles too had accepted the word of God. 2So when Peter went up to Jerusalem the circumcised believers confronted him, 3saying, “You entered the house of uncircumcised people and ate with them.” 4Peter began and explained it to them step by step, saying, 5“I was at prayer in the city of Joppa when in a trance I had a vision, something resembling a large sheet coming down, lowered from the sky by its four corners, and it came to me. 6Looking intently into it, I observed and saw the four-legged animals of the earth, the wild beasts, the reptiles, and the birds of the sky. 7I also heard a voice say to me, ‘Get up, Peter. Slaughter and eat.’ 8But I said, ‘Certainly not, sir, because nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’ 9But a second time a voice from heaven answered, ‘What God has made clean, you are not to call profane.’ 10This happened three times, and then everything was drawn up again into the sky. 11Just then three men appeared at the house where we were, who had been sent to me from Caesarea. 12The Spirit told me to accompany them without discriminating. These six brothers also went with me, and we entered the man’s house. 13He related to us how he had seen (the) angel standing in his house, saying, ‘Send someone to Joppa and summon Simon, who is called Peter, 14who will speak words to you by which you and all your household will be saved.’ 15As I began to speak, the holy Spirit fell upon them as it had upon us at the beginning, 16and I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, ‘John baptized with water but you will be baptized with the holy Spirit.’ 17If then God gave them the same gift he gave to us when we came to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to be able to hinder God?” 18When they heard this, they stopped objecting and glorified God, saying, “God has then granted life-giving repentance to the Gentiles too.”

Peter’s explanation of his behavior is meant to show that it was God’s idea, not Peter’s, that the Gentiles would be included in the membership of the New Israel. The final sentence spells out succinctly the message of the whole: “God has then granted life-giving repentance to the Gentiles too.”

### 11:19-26 - Antioch

19Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that arose because of Stephen went as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to no one but Jews. 20There were some Cypriots and Cyrenians among them, however, who came to Antioch and began to speak to the Greeks as well, proclaiming the Lord Jesus. 21The hand of the Lord was with them and a great number who believed turned to the Lord. 22The news about them reached the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas [to go] to Antioch. 23When he arrived and saw

the grace of God, he rejoiced and encouraged them all to remain faithful to the Lord in firmness of heart, <sup>24</sup>for he was a good man, filled with the holy Spirit and faith. And a large number of people was added to the Lord. <sup>25</sup>Then he went to Tarsus to look for Saul, <sup>26</sup>and when he had found him he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught a large number of people, and it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called Christians.

Those Jewish Christians who fled Jerusalem after Stephen's martyrdom (8:1-3) were the Hellenists, the ones who embraced the Hebrew faith, but did not think the temple was the only place to worship. In Chapter 8 we were told that they were scattered to Judea and Samaria; here we learn that they went farther. Luke's testimony that only Jews were evangelized is his way of setting up for all the follows. Among those who were scattered after Stephen's death, however, were some Cypriots and Cyrenians who spoke of Jesus to other Greek-speakers. These non-Jews started to join the community in a great number. This stirred up concern in Jerusalem, so they sent Barnabas to check things out. He was impressed with what he saw. He went to Tarsus to find Saul, with whom he returned to Antioch, where they preached for a year.

The community was called by the name "Christian" for the first time at Antioch. This is a very important point. The Christian identity is being established as distinct, if not yet separate, from the Jewish community.

#### 11:27-30 - Prediction of Agabus

<sup>27</sup>At that time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch, <sup>28</sup>and one of them named Agabus stood up and predicted by the Spirit that there would be a severe famine all over the world, and it happened under Claudius. <sup>29</sup>So the disciples determined that, according to ability, each should send relief to the brothers who lived in Judea. <sup>30</sup>This they did, sending it to the presbyters in care of Barnabas and Saul.

Precisely how the Antioch community learned of the famine in Jerusalem is not known. Perhaps those who fled Jerusalem brought the news, or those prophets who came from Jerusalem did. Luke's intention in reporting this is to show that despite the differences in the two communities, there was a definite *koinonia* between them. Barnabas and Saul became the collectors of the gifts for Jerusalem from the various churches, as we shall see.

#### 12:1-19 - Herod's persecution

<sup>1</sup>About that time King Herod laid hands upon some members of the church to harm them. <sup>2</sup>He had James, the brother of John, killed by the sword, <sup>3</sup>and when he saw that this was pleasing to the Jews he proceeded to arrest Peter also. (It was [the] feast of Unleavened Bread.) <sup>4</sup>He had him taken into custody and put in prison under the guard of four squads of four soldiers each. He intended to bring him before the people after Passover. <sup>5</sup>Peter thus was being kept in prison, but prayer by the church was fervently being made to God on his behalf.

<sup>6</sup>On the very night before Herod was to bring him to trial, Peter, secured by double chains, was sleeping between two soldiers, while outside the door guards kept watch on the prison. <sup>7</sup>Suddenly the angel of the Lord stood by him and a light shone in the cell. He tapped Peter on the side and awakened him, saying, "Get up quickly." The chains fell from his wrists. <sup>8</sup>The angel said to him, "Put on your belt and your sandals." He did so. Then he said to him, "Put on your cloak and follow me." <sup>9</sup>So he followed him out, not realizing that what was happening through the angel was real; he thought he was seeing a vision. <sup>10</sup>They passed the first guard, then the second, and came to the iron gate leading out to the city, which opened for them by itself. They emerged and made their way down an alley,

and suddenly the angel left him. 11Then Peter recovered his senses and said, “Now I know for certain that [the] Lord sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people had been expecting.” 12When he realized this, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John who is called Mark, where there were many people gathered in prayer. 13When he knocked on the gateway door, a maid named Rhoda came to answer it. 14She was so overjoyed when she recognized Peter’s voice that, instead of opening the gate, she ran in and announced that Peter was standing at the gate. 15They told her, “You are out of your mind,” but she insisted that it was so. But they kept saying, “It is his angel.” 16But Peter continued to knock, and when they opened it, they saw him and were astounded. 17He motioned to them with his hand to be quiet and explained [to them] how the Lord had led him out of the prison, and said, “Report this to James and the brothers.” Then he left and went to another place. 18At daybreak there was no small commotion among the soldiers over what had become of Peter. 19Herod, after instituting a search but not finding him, ordered the guards tried and executed. Then he left Judea to spend some time in Caesarea.

King Herod ruled in Judea from 41 to 44 A.D. He was a Jew, and a Pharisaic one. His persecution of the Christians may have been motivated by a dislike for the Hellenistic Jews, and certainly a dislike of the Christians who had separated from the Hebrew Jews. When he saw that the Jews liked the murder of James, he intended to please them further with the killing of Peter, so he arrested him and put him in prison under guard. He would have to wait until after Passover to display his new sport.

This whole story is something of a reprise of 5:17-42, where Luke wrote about the Sanhedrin putting the apostles in jail and their marvelous release. And it is a great story, the conclusion of which follows.

#### 12:20-24 - Herod’s

20He had long been very angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon, who now came to him in a body. After winning over Blastus, the king’s chamberlain, they sued for peace because their country was supplied with food from the king’s territory. 21On an appointed day, Herod, attired in royal robes, [and] seated on the rostrum, addressed them publicly. 22The assembled crowd cried out, “This is the voice of a god, not of a man.” 23At once the angel of the Lord struck him down because he did not ascribe the honor to God, and he was eaten by worms and breathed his last. 24But the word of God continued to spread and grow.

The theological message in this passage is: Don’t mess with God’s church, and not expect God to punish you.

#### 12:25 - Mission of Barnabas and Saul

25After Barnabas and Saul completed their relief mission, they returned to Jerusalem, taking with them John, who is called Mark.

This verse doesn’t make sense. Other manuscripts translate the Greek “they returned *from* Jerusalem.” That would make some sense since in 11:30 they seem already to be in Jerusalem.

#### 13:1-3 - Prelude to the first missionary journey

1Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Symeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen who was a close friend of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. 2While they were worshiping the

Lord and fasting, the holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.”  
3Then, completing their fasting and prayer, they laid hands on them and sent them off.

Antioch becomes the center of missionary activity, from which, at the Spirit’s bidding, Saul and Barnabas are sent off. Jerusalem had the apostles; Antioch has prophets and teachers.

### 13:4-12 - The mission begins

4So they, sent forth by the holy Spirit, went down to Seleucia and from there sailed to Cyprus. 5When they arrived in Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the Jewish synagogues. They had John also as their assistant. 6When they had traveled through the whole island as far as Paphos, they met a magician named Bar-Jesus who was a Jewish false prophet. 7He was with the proconsul Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence, who had summoned Barnabas and Saul and wanted to hear the word of God. 8But Elymas the magician (for that is what his name means) opposed them in an attempt to turn the proconsul away from the faith. 9But Saul, also known as Paul, filled with the holy Spirit, looked intently at him 10and said, “You son of the devil, you enemy of all that is right, full of every sort of deceit and fraud. Will you not stop twisting the straight paths of [the] Lord? 11Even now the hand of the Lord is upon you. You will be blind, and unable to see the sun for a time.” Immediately a dark mist fell upon him, and he went about seeking people to lead him by the hand. 12When the proconsul saw what had happened, he came to believe, for he was astonished by the teaching about the Lord.

We note immediately that in verse 9 this is the first time we have read the name “Paul.” Salamis is a seaport on the Island of Cyprus. Cyprus was the homeland of Barnabas. They began their preaching in the synagogues. The “John” who is mentioned is John Mark.

The magician with two names seems to have been in the retinue of the proconsul Sergius. He didn’t want Sergius to entertain any words from Paul and Barnabas, but Paul effectively silenced him. Sergius became a believer. He was astonished by the teaching about the Lord, not about his magician’s blindness. The temporary nature of the blindness would seem to indicate that it was meant to lead to repentance, rather than an act of retribution.

This is almost a parallel with Peter’s dealing with Simon the magician back in Chapter 8. Luke is showing what Paul will write in some of his letters, that the opposition to the Gospel is beyond the human.

### 13:13-15 - On to Antioch in Pisidia

13From Paphos, Paul and his companions set sail and arrived at Perga in Pamphylia. But John left them and returned to Jerusalem. 14They continued on from Perga and reached Antioch in Pisidia. On the sabbath they entered (into) the synagogue and took their seats. 15After the reading of the law and the prophets, the synagogue officials sent word to them, “My brothers, if one of you has a word of exhortation for the people, please speak.”

Saul and Barnabas left Antioch, and now they have arrived in Antioch. Obviously there are two Antiochs, both founded by the horrible Antiochus IV (2 Maccabees) about 150 years before Christ. The departure Antioch is Antioch in Syria; the place they arrived is Antioch in Pisidia, north of the Syrian Antioch.

People can only conjecture about the reason for John Mark’s departure for Jerusalem. But Paul will indicate that he was not pleased about his departure.

On the Sabbath they went to synagogue, and were invited to speak. And Paul spoke to his “fellow Israelites and you others who are God-fearing.” God-fearers were the proselytes of the Jewish community.

## 13:16-41 - Paul's sermon

16So Paul got up, motioned with his hand, and said, "Fellow Israelites and you others who are God-fearing, listen. 17The God of this people Israel chose our ancestors and exalted the people during their sojourn in the land of Egypt. With uplifted arm he led them out of it 18and for about forty years he put up with them in the desert. 19When he had destroyed seven nations in the land of Canaan, he gave them their land as an inheritance 20at the end of about four hundred and fifty years. After these things he provided judges up to Samuel [the] prophet. 21Then they asked for a king. God gave them Saul, son of Kish, a man from the tribe of Benjamin, for forty years. 22Then he removed him and raised up David as their king; of him he testified, 'I have found David, son of Jesse, a man after my own heart; he will carry out my every wish.' 23From this man's descendants God, according to his promise, has brought to Israel a savior, Jesus. 24John heralded his coming by proclaiming a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel; 25and as John was completing his course, he would say, 'What do you suppose that I am? I am not he. Behold, one is coming after me; I am not worthy to unfasten the sandals of his feet.'

26"My brothers, children of the family of Abraham, and those others among you who are God-fearing, to us this word of salvation has been sent. 27The inhabitants of Jerusalem and their leaders failed to recognize him, and by condemning him they fulfilled the oracles of the prophets that are read sabbath after sabbath. 28For even though they found no grounds for a death sentence, they asked Pilate to have him put to death, 29and when they had accomplished all that was written about him, they took him down from the tree and placed him in a tomb. 30But God raised him from the dead, 31and for many days he appeared to those who had come up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem. These are [now] his witnesses before the people. 32We ourselves are proclaiming this good news to you that what God promised our ancestors 33he has brought to fulfillment for us, (their) children, by raising up Jesus, as it is written in the second psalm, 'You are my son; this day I have begotten you.' 34And that he raised him from the dead never to return to corruption he declared in this way, 'I shall give you the benefits assured to David.' 35That is why he also says in another psalm, 'You will not suffer your holy one to see corruption.' 36Now David, after he had served the will of God in his lifetime, fell asleep, was gathered to his ancestors, and did see corruption. 37But the one whom God raised up did not see corruption. 38You must know, my brothers, that through him forgiveness of sins is being proclaimed to you, [and] in regard to everything from which you could not be justified under the law of Moses, 39in him every believer is justified. 40Be careful, then, that what was said in the prophets not come about:

41 'Look on, you scoffers,  
be amazed and disappear.  
For I am doing a work in your days,  
a work that you will never believe  
even if someone tells you.'"

The sermon has three parts: recounting the Old Testament events leading up to Jesus, the *kerygma* of Jesus life and ministry, and the summons to faith and forgiveness.

In verse 18, it is unclear what time is being measured to come to the number 450 years. Verse 31 has special interest for Luke, who wants to show that there is continuity between what Jesus taught and what the disciples are saying.

## 13:42-43 - After the sermon

42As they were leaving, they invited them to speak on these subjects the following sabbath. 43After the congregation had dispersed, many Jews and worshipers who were converts to Judaism followed Paul and Barnabas, who spoke to them and urged them to remain faithful to the grace of God.

All is going well after the synagogue service. People want to hear more.

## 13:44-52 - The following Sabbath

44On the following sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord. 45When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and with violent abuse contradicted what Paul said. 46Both Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly and said, “It was necessary that the word of God be spoken to you first, but since you reject it and condemn yourselves as unworthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. 47For so the Lord has commanded us, ‘I have made you a light to the Gentiles, that you may be an instrument of salvation to the ends of the earth.’”

48The Gentiles were delighted when they heard this and glorified the word of the Lord. All who were destined for eternal life came to believe, 49and the word of the Lord continued to spread through the whole region. 50The Jews, however, incited the women of prominence who were worshipers and the leading men of the city, stirred up a persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and expelled them from their territory. 51So they shook the dust from their feet in protest against them and went to Iconium. 52The disciples were filled with joy and the holy Spirit.

By the end of the story, because Paul and Barnabas preached also to the Gentiles of the city, out of jealousy, the Jews drove them out of town. This is a pivotal moment in Luke’s narrative as became obvious in what Paul and Barnabas say in verse 46. “It was necessary that the word of God be spoken to you first, but since you reject it and condemn yourselves as unworthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles.” And there we have the pattern for the rest of the Acts of the Apostles: preach first to the Jews, who reject the teaching, then preach to the Gentiles.

## 14:1-7 - Iconium

1In Iconium they entered the Jewish synagogue together and spoke in such a way that a great number of both Jews and Greeks came to believe, 2although the unbelieving Jews stirred up and poisoned the minds of the Gentiles against the brothers. 3So they stayed for a considerable period, speaking out boldly for the Lord, who confirmed the word about his grace by granting signs and wonders to occur through their hands. 4The people of the city were divided: some were with the Jews; others, with the apostles. 5When there was an attempt by both the Gentiles and the Jews, together with their leaders, to attack and stone them, 6they realized it and fled to the Lycaonian cities of Lystra and Derbe and to the surrounding countryside, 7where they continued to proclaim the good news.

This is simply a repeat performance of what happened in Antioch of Pisidia: preaching in synagogues, rejection and flight.

## 14:8-20 - On to Lystra

8At Lystra there was a crippled man, lame from birth, who had never walked. 9He listened to Paul speaking, who looked intently at him, saw that he had the faith to be healed, 10and called out in a loud voice, “Stand up straight on your feet.” He jumped up and began to walk about. 11When the crowds saw what Paul had done, they cried out in Lycaonian, “The gods have come down to us in human form.” 12They called Barnabas “Zeus” and Paul “Hermes,” because he was the chief speaker. 13And the priest of Zeus, whose temple was at the entrance to the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates, for he together with the people intended to offer sacrifice.

14The apostles Barnabas and Paul tore their garments when they heard this and rushed out into the crowd, shouting, 15“Men, why are you doing this? We are of the same nature as you, human beings. We proclaim to you good news that you should turn from these idols to the living God, ‘who made heaven and earth and sea and all that is in them.’ 16In past generations he allowed all Gentiles to go their own ways; 17yet, in bestowing his goodness, he did not leave himself without witness, for he gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, and filled you with nourishment and gladness for your hearts.” 18Even with these words, they scarcely restrained the crowds from offering sacrifice to them.

19However, some Jews from Antioch and Iconium arrived and won over the crowds. They stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead. 20But when the disciples gathered around him, he got up and entered the city. On the following day he left with Barnabas for Derbe.

This episode starts with a miracle, the curing of the cripple. It is a close parallel with what Peter did in 3:1-11. Jesus' healing is passed on to Peter in dealing with the Jews in Jerusalem, and also to Paul in dealing with Gentiles. The initial enthusiasm of the people of Lystra at seeing the miracle is misdirected into wanting to hold Barnabas and Paul as gods. Their identifying Barnabas as Zeus and Paul as Hermes suggests that they thought Barnabas was the leader, and Paul was his subordinate who spoke for him. Zeus was the chief god, and Hermes was the messenger of the gods. Although this is usually called Paul's first missionary journey, in fact Barnabas was probably the leader who brought Paul along with him. Paul never wrote letters to the communities Barnabas and he founded, nor did he ever return to visit any of them. Defeating the move of the citizens trying to make gods out of them, the apostles preached Jesus. But the same pattern of events happens here again: preaching, opposition, flight.

#### 14:21-28 - The closing of the first missionary journey

21After they had proclaimed the good news to that city and made a considerable number of disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch. 22They strengthened the spirits of the disciples and exhorted them to persevere in the faith, saying, "It is necessary for us to undergo many hardships to enter the kingdom of God." 23They appointed presbyters for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, commended them to the Lord in whom they had put their faith. 24Then they traveled through Pisidia and reached Pamphylia. 25After proclaiming the word at Perga they went down to Attalia. 26From there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work they had now accomplished. 27And when they arrived, they called the church together and reported what God had done with them how he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. 28Then they spent no little time with the disciples.

The city referred to in verse 21 is Derbe, and the Antioch referred to is Antioch in Pisidia. In verse 26 it is reported that they sailed back to Antioch in Syria, the place from which they began. On their way back home, they passed through and appointed leaders for each of the churches they had founded; Luke calls them presbyters, a name prevalent at Luke's time, but not yet in use at the time of Barnabas' and Paul's travels. Going back to Antioch in Syria was like coming home where they stayed for quite awhile. They reported that God "had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles." That is the point Luke wanted to make in this entire narrative.

This missionary journey is usually dated 46 to 49 A.D.

#### 15:1-12 - Council of Jerusalem

1Some who had come down from Judea were instructing the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the Mosaic practice, you cannot be saved." 2Because there arose no little dissension and debate by Paul and Barnabas with them, it was decided that Paul, Barnabas, and some of the others should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and presbyters about this question. 3They were sent on their journey by the church, and passed through Phoenicia and Samaria telling of the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers. 4When they arrived in Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church, as well as by the apostles and the presbyters, and they reported what God had done with them. 5But some from the party of the Pharisees who had become believers stood up and said, "It is necessary to circumcise them and direct them to observe the Mosaic law."

6The apostles and the presbyters met together to see about this matter. 7After much debate had taken place, Peter got up and said to them, “My brothers, you are well aware that from early days God made his choice among you that through my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe. 8And God, who knows the heart, bore witness by granting them the holy Spirit just as he did us. 9He made no distinction between us and them, for by faith he purified their hearts. 10Why, then, are you now putting God to the test by placing on the shoulders of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? 11On the contrary, we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they.” 12The whole assembly fell silent, and they listened while Paul and Barnabas described the signs and wonders God had worked among the Gentiles through them.

Paul and Barnabas were staying in Antioch. Some came from Judea (Jerusalem?), and insisted that the Gentile believers in Jesus had to be circumcised or they could not be saved. (Is this what Paul wrote about in Galatians 2: 11-14, where he describes Peter’s going to eat with the circumcised, where prior to the arrival of people from Jerusalem, he had eaten with the uncircumcised?) As a result of the Antioch debate, it was decided to consult the apostles in Jerusalem. Paul and Barnabas and some others made the trip, and they were welcomed by the church in Jerusalem, which included the apostles, minus James “the greater,” who had already been martyred.

The statement that it was Paul and Barnabas and some others who went to Jerusalem is filled out in the Letter to the Galatians, where we are told that Titus, an uncircumcised Gentile believer, was part the delegation. This may have been a shrewd move by Paul, since the people in Jerusalem who demanded circumcision had probably never seen such a person, let alone enter into discussion with him. It’s not the last time that meeting eyeball-to-eyeball with a person trumped theory about a person.

Some converted Pharisees were not happy with the report Paul and Barnabas made, insisting that Gentile believers must be circumcised and observe the Law of Moses. After much debate, it was Peter who reported his experience of the Gentiles receiving the Holy Spirit (Cornelius and his household in Chapter 10). He concluded that since God made no distinction between Jew and Gentile believers, neither should the church. After Peter’s intervention they were silent and listened to the report of Barnabas and Paul.

#### 15:13-21 - James responds

13After they had fallen silent, James responded, “My brothers, listen to me. 14Symeon has described how God first concerned himself with acquiring from among the Gentiles a people for his name. 15The words of the prophets agree with this, as is written:

16‘After this I shall return  
and rebuild the fallen hut of David;  
from its ruins I shall rebuild it  
and raise it up again,

17so that the rest of humanity may seek out the Lord,  
even all the Gentiles on whom my name is invoked.

Thus says the Lord who accomplishes these things,  
18known from of old.’

19It is my judgment, therefore, that we ought to stop troubling the Gentiles who turn to God, 20but tell them by letter to avoid pollution from idols, unlawful marriage, the meat of strangled animals, and blood. 21For Moses, for generations now, has had those who proclaim him in every town, as he has been read in the synagogues every sabbath.”

James quotes the Prophet Amos (9:11-12) to argue his point that Gentiles should not have the Mosaic Law imposed on them. He also submits some things which should be required of Gentiles. These are from the Book of Leviticus. These observances will allow for table-sharing among the Jews and Gentiles in the community. It is a concession rather than a prescription.

Paul's description of this Jerusalem conference is slightly different from Luke's. In Paul's description in Galatians, Chapter 2. Paul does not mention the four concessions which James prescribed; the only admonition in Galatians is that Paul and companions should remember the poor in Jerusalem.

#### 15:22-29 - The letter

22Then the apostles and presbyters, in agreement with the whole church, decided to choose representatives and to send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. The ones chosen were Judas, who was called Barsabbas, and Silas, leaders among the brothers.23This is the letter delivered by them: "The apostles and the presbyters, your brothers, to the brothers in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia of Gentile origin: greetings. 24Since we have heard that some of our number [who went out] without any mandate from us have upset you with their teachings and disturbed your peace of mind, 25we have with one accord decided to choose representatives and to send them to you along with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, 26who have dedicated their lives to the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. 27So we are sending Judas and Silas who will also convey this same message by word of mouth: 28'It is the decision of the holy Spirit and of us not to place on you any burden these necessities, 29namely, to abstain from meat sacrificed to idols, from blood, from meats of strangled animals, and from unlawful marriage. If you keep free of these, you will be doing what is right. Farewell.'"

If we consider the Jerusalem conference the first ecumenical council of the church, this letter is the council document, given on the authority of the mother church in Jerusalem. The importance of this conference and its results cannot be overestimated. Those Christians who feared that neglecting to require circumcision of the Gentiles would lead eventually to a schism within Judaism were prescient; that's exactly what happened. In this first council of the church, those who fought to maintain the status quo lost; those who favored change won the day. In Romans 11, Paul used the metaphor of a branch being grafted onto the tree; but the branch eventually became another tree.

#### 15:30-35 - The aftermath

30And so they were sent on their journey. Upon their arrival in Antioch they called the assembly together and delivered the letter. 31When the people read it, they were delighted with the exhortation. 32Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, exhorted and strengthened the brothers with many words. 33After they had spent some time there, they were sent off with greetings of peace from the brothers to those who had commissioned them. [34] 35But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, teaching and proclaiming with many others the word of the Lord.

Luke tells us that Judas and Silas were sent off, but verse 40 seems to indicate that Silas is still in Antioch. Oh, well.

#### 15:36-41 - Paul and Barnabas separate

36After some time, Paul said to Barnabas, "Come, let us make a return visit to see how the brothers are getting on in all the cities where we proclaimed the word of the Lord." 37Barnabas wanted to take with them also

John, who was called Mark, 38but Paul insisted that they should not take with them someone who had deserted them at Pamphylia and who had not continued with them in their work. 39So sharp was their disagreement that they separated. Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cyprus. 40But Paul chose Silas and departed after being commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. 41He traveled through Syria and Cilicia bringing strength to the churches.

Luke gives as the reason for the separation of Barnabas from Paul their disagreement over taking Mark along with them. But in Galatians 2:13 Paul writes that when people from Jerusalem came to Antioch, Peter and the Hebrew Christians left their table-fellowship with the Gentile Christians and began to eat with the Hebrew Christians, “with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy.” This may have been the real reason, or at least another reason, for the separation between them.

This passage could be considered the beginning of a new venture in Luke’s narrative. In the rest of the Acts of the Apostles Luke will hurry Paul’s journeys until eventually he arrives in Rome as a prisoner. Arriving at Rome is the whole point of the rest of the narrative. Luke has shown in his Gospel how Jesus traveled from Galilee to Jerusalem, the center of the Jewish faith; now he must get Paul to Rome, the center of civilization. The effects of the Jerusalem conference will be borne out as Luke records the conversion of Gentiles and the continued hostility of the Jews. Paul and Silas start out on what is called Paul’s second missionary journey.

#### 16:1-5 - Timothy

1He [Paul] reached (also) Derbe and Lystra where there was a disciple named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek. 2The brothers in Lystra and Iconium spoke highly of him, 3and Paul wanted him to come along with him. On account of the Jews of that region, Paul had him circumcised, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. 4As they traveled from city to city, they handed on to the people for observance the decisions reached by the apostles and presbyters in Jerusalem. 5Day after day the churches grew stronger in faith and increased in number.

Now, here’s a conundrum! Timothy was the product of a mixed marriage, his father Greek and his mother Hebrew. According to the Law this was an illegal union. The child of any such union was to be considered Jewish. But Timothy had not been circumcised as an infant. And he was already a baptized Christian. After everything Paul had fought for during the Jerusalem conference, how could he insist that Timothy be circumcised? Luke writes that this was an expedient on Paul’s part “because of the Jews of that region.” Many commentators think Luke is mistaken in this instance. For Timothy’s sake, don’t we all hope so? Luke writes that they handed on to the communities the decisions reached in Jerusalem. And Luke’s preoccupation: “the churches grew stronger in faith and increased in number.”

#### 16:6-10 - Through Asia Minor

6They traveled through the Phrygian and Galatian territory because they been prevented by the holy Spirit from preaching the message in the province of Asia. 7When they came to Mysia, they tried to go on into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them, 8so they crossed through Mysia and came down to Troas. 9During [the] night Paul had a vision. A Macedonian stood before him and implored him with these words, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” 10When he had seen the vision, we sought passage to Macedonia at once, concluding that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.

Paul's vision of the Macedonian man propels Luke's drive to narrate the conversion of Gentiles. However, the word of greatest interest in this section is "we" in verse 10. Was Luke accompanying Paul? After a thorough analysis of the scholarly opinions which exist, the best conclusion is that it is not impossible that Luke was with Paul in those parts of Acts which contain the "we" narratives.

#### 16:11-15 - To Europe

11 We set sail from Troas, making a straight run for Samothrace, and on the next day to Neapolis, 12 and from there to Philippi, a leading city in that district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We spent some time in that city. 13 On the sabbath we went outside the city gate along the river where we thought there would be a place of prayer. We sat and spoke with the women who had gathered there. 14 One of them, a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth, from the city of Thyatira, a worshiper of God, listened, and the Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what Paul was saying. 15 After she and her household had been baptized, she offered us an invitation, "If you consider me a believer in the Lord, come and stay at my home," and she prevailed on us.

Philippi was an important city in the Roman Empire. Lydia was a God-fearer, that is one who accepted Jewish monotheism and worship practices without accepting all the demands of the Law, although she obviously took seriously the law of hospitality.

#### 16:16-24 - Arrest

16 As we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave girl with an oracular spirit, who used to bring a large profit to her owners through her fortune-telling. 17 She began to follow Paul and us, shouting, "These people are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation." 18 She did this for many days. Paul became annoyed, turned, and said to the spirit, "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." Then it came out at that moment. 19 When her owners saw that their hope of profit was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them to the public square before the local authorities. 20 They brought them before the magistrates and said, "These people are Jews and are disturbing our city 21 and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us Romans to adopt or practice." 22 The crowd joined in the attack on them, and the magistrates had them stripped and ordered them to be beaten with rods. 23 After inflicting many blows on them, they threw them into prison and instructed the jailer to guard them securely. 24 When he received these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and secured their feet to a stake.

This incident must have happened at a day after that spoken of in the previous section, because they are going to the place of prayer; in the last section they were already there. The severe imprisonment sets up for the miraculous release in the next section.

#### 16:25-40 - "Don't mess with Paul."

25 About midnight, while Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God as the prisoners listened, 26 there was suddenly such a severe earthquake that the foundations of the jail shook; all the doors flew open, and the chains of all were pulled loose. 27 When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew [his] sword and was about to kill himself, thinking that the prisoners had escaped. 28 But Paul shouted out in a loud voice, "Do no harm to yourself; we are all here." 29 He asked for a light and rushed in and, trembling with fear, he fell down before Paul and Silas. 30 Then he brought them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" 31 And they said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you and your household will be saved." 32 So they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to everyone in his house. 33 He took them in at that hour of the night and bathed their wounds; then he and all his

family were baptized at once. 34He brought them up into his house and provided a meal and with his household rejoiced at having come to faith in God.

35But when it was day, the magistrates sent the lictors with the order, "Release those men." 36The jailer reported the[se] words to Paul, "The magistrates have sent orders that you be released. Now, then, come out and go in peace." 37But Paul said to them, "They have beaten us publicly, even though we are Roman citizens and have not been tried, and have thrown us into prison. And now, are they going to release us secretly? By no means. Let them come themselves and lead us out." 38The lictors reported these words to the magistrates, and they became alarmed when they heard that they were Roman citizens. 39So they came and placated them, and led them out and asked that leave the city. 40When they had come out of the prison, they went to Lydia's house where they saw and encouraged the brothers, and then they left.

To have ordered a Roman citizen to be beaten publically was a serious offense. The magistrates must have been very nervous. So they sent lictors (police officers) to clean up the mess they had made for themselves. But by the intervention of God in releasing him from prison, and by the knowledge of the rights of a Roman citizen, Paul basically says, "Come, and clean your mess yourselves."

### 17:1-9 - To Thessalonica

1When they took the road through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they reached Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. 2Following his usual custom, Paul joined them, and for three sabbaths he entered into discussions with them from the scriptures, 3expounding and demonstrating that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead, and that "This is the Messiah, Jesus, whom I proclaim to you." 4Some of them were convinced and joined Paul and Silas; so, too, a great number of Greeks who were worshipers, and not a few of the prominent women. 5But the Jews became jealous and recruited some worthless men loitering in the public square, formed a mob, and set the city in turmoil. They marched on the house of Jason, intending to bring them before the people's assembly. 6When they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city magistrates, shouting, "These people who have been creating a disturbance all over the world have now come here, 7and Jason has welcomed them. They all act in opposition to the decrees of Caesar and claim instead that there is another king, Jesus." 8They stirred up the crowd and the city magistrates who, upon hearing these charges, 9took a surety payment from Jason and the others before releasing them.

As always, Paul begins in the local synagogue. He must not have been pushy about his evangelization, because it wasn't until the third week that he put forth his message quite bluntly, "This is the Messiah, Jesus, whom I proclaim to you." Actually, from Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians, we get the impression that Paul spent quite a bit of time there before he moved on to Bereoa. Some Greeks joined Paul (these must have been "God-fearers" who attended synagogue), along with some of the Jews and some prominent women in the congregation. This caused the Jews to lose a large part of their congregation to Paul. They were angry and stirred up the crowd. When they could not find Paul at Jason's house, they brought Jason before the magistrates, who made Jason make a surety payment, whatever that is, before releasing him.

However much time Paul spent in Thessalonica, Luke moves him next on to Bereoa.

### 17:10-15 - Bereoa

10The brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas to Bereoa during the night. Upon arrival they went to the synagogue of the Jews. 11These Jews were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with all willingness and examined the scriptures daily to determine whether these things were so. 12Many of them

became believers, as did not a few of the influential Greek women and men. 13But when the Jews of Thessalonica learned that the word of God had now been proclaimed by Paul in Beroea also, they came there too to cause a commotion and stir up the crowds. 14So the brothers at once sent Paul on his way to the seacoast, while Silas and Timothy remained behind. 15After Paul's escorts had taken him to Athens, they came away with instructions for Silas and Timothy to join him as soon as possible.

When one makes enemies, it's hard to shake them. Although the members of the synagogue received Paul and Silas warmly, and many became believers, the Jews from Thessalonica arrived and stirred up trouble again. Without writing much more about Paul's reception in Beroea, Luke hurries him on to Athens, where he will have much more to write. He left Silas and Timothy behind with instructions for them to join him.

### 17:16-21 - Athens

16While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he grew exasperated at the sight of the city full of idols. 17So he debated in the synagogue with the Jews and with the worshipers, and daily in the public square with whoever happened to be there. 18Even some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers engaged him in discussion. Some asked, "What is this scavenger trying to say?" Others said, "He sounds like a promoter of foreign deities," because he was preaching about 'Jesus' and 'Resurrection.' 19They took him and led him to the Areopagus and said, "May we learn what this new teaching is that you speak of? 20For you bring some strange notions to our ears; we should like to know what these things mean." 21Now all the Athenians as well as the foreigners residing there used their time for nothing else but telling or hearing something new.

While awaiting the arrival of Silas and Timothy, Paul debated with the Jews and the worshipers (God-fearers?), and even with some Greek philosophers in the public square. They were intrigued but incredulous, so they asked Paul to speak in the Areopagus. Luke's description of the citizens of Athens is rather condescending: they "used their time for nothing else but telling or hearing something new." Well, at least that inclined them to listen to Paul who was preaching something new, perhaps a new god.

### 17:22-34 - Paul's speech and its result

22Then Paul stood up at the Areopagus and said: "You Athenians, I see that in every respect you are very religious. 23For as I walked around looking carefully at your shrines, I even discovered an altar inscribed, 'To an Unknown God.' What therefore you unknowingly worship, I proclaim to you. 24The God who made the world and all that is in it, the Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in sanctuaries made by human hands, 25nor is he served by human hands because he needs anything. Rather it is he who gives to everyone life and breath and everything. 26He made from one the whole human race to dwell on the entire surface of the earth, and he fixed the ordered seasons and the boundaries of their regions, 27so that people might seek God, even perhaps grope for him and find him, though indeed he is not far from any one of us. 28For 'In him we live and move and have our being,' as even some of your poets have said, 'For we too are his offspring.' 29Since therefore we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the divinity is like an image fashioned from gold, silver, or stone by human art and imagination. 30God has overlooked the times of ignorance, but now he demands that all people everywhere repent 31because he has established a day on which he will 'judge the world with justice' through a man he has appointed, and he has provided confirmation for all by raising him from the dead."

32When they heard about resurrection of the dead, some began to scoff, but others said, "We should like to hear you on this some other time." 33And so Paul left them. 34But some did join him, and became believers. Among them were Dionysius, a member of the Court of the Areopagus, a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

Paul's attempt to be "all things to all people" shows up here. He tries to ingratiate himself with the Athenians by adopting something of their style of persuasion. He gets rather philosophical. Quite frankly it didn't work. But he at least intrigued the audience until he got to the heart of his message, the resurrection of the dead. That was too outlandish for his audience. But the Athenians were polite; they said they'd like to hear more of this talk at a later date. Some did join Paul and became believers, but on the whole the undertaking at Athens was a flop. He left Athens humbled and went to Corinth.

Later when he wrote to the Corinthians for the first time he wrote, perhaps with his Athens experience in mind, "When I came to you, brothers, proclaiming the mystery of God, I did not come with sublimity of words or of wisdom. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. I came among you in weakness and fear and much trembling, and my message and my proclamation were not with persuasive words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of spirit and power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God." (1 Cor. 2:1-5)

### 18:1-17 - Corinth

1After this he left Athens and went to Corinth. 2There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla because Claudius had ordered all the Jews to leave Rome. He went to visit them 3and, because he practiced the same trade, stayed with them and worked, for they were tentmakers by trade. 4Every sabbath, he entered into discussions in the synagogue, attempting to convince both Jews and Greeks.

5When Silas and Timothy came down from Macedonia, Paul began to occupy himself totally with preaching the word, testifying to the Jews that the Messiah was Jesus. 6When they opposed him and reviled him, he shook out his garments and said to them, "Your blood be on your heads! I am clear of responsibility. From now on I will go to the Gentiles." 7So he left there and went to a house belonging to a man named Titus Justus, a worshiper of God; his house was next to a synagogue. 8Crispus, the synagogue official, came to believe in the Lord along with his entire household, and many of the Corinthians who heard believed and were baptized. 9One night in a vision the Lord said to Paul, "Do not be afraid. Go on speaking, and do not be silent, 10for I am with you. No one will attack and harm you, for I have many people in this city." 11He settled there for a year and a half and taught the word of God among them.

12But when Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews rose up together against Paul and brought him to the tribunal, 13saying, "This man is inducing people to worship God contrary to the law." 14When Paul was about to reply, Gallio spoke to the Jews, "If it were a matter of some crime or malicious fraud, I should with reason hear the complaint of you Jews; 15but since it is a question of arguments over doctrine and titles and your own law, see to it yourselves. I do not wish to be a judge of such matters." 16And he drove them away from the tribunal. 17They all seized Sosthenes, the synagogue official, and beat him in full view of the tribunal. But none of this was of concern to Gallio.

In Corinth Paul met Aquila and Priscilla, recently come from Rome because of the Emperor Claudius' decree expelling all Jews from Rome. Suetonius, a Roman historian, gives as reason for the expulsion the disturbance caused at the "instigation of Chrestos," probably meaning "Christ." Aquila and Priscilla were probably already believers in Christ, having come to know of him in Rome. Paul visited them because, like him, they were tent makers. Paul weekly argued in the Sabbath synagogue meetings.

With the arrival of Silas and Timothy, Paul went full time into preaching, but to no avail among the Jews. He went to the house of Titus Justus, "a worshiper of God," meaning that he

shared the theology and ethics and practices of the Jews, but was not himself a circumcised member of that community.

Paul is encouraged by a dream for the second time in his career. He stayed in Corinth for a year and a half, during which time he wrote his first letter to the Thessalonians, our oldest preserved Christian writing.

Toward the end of his stay in Corinth, the Jews, hostile toward Paul because of his success in evangelizing some of their members, try to make trouble for him, but the proconsul dismisses them, because he is not going to get involved in religious matters. This is the pre-Nero era. With Nero, the Roman Empire sets itself against the religious movement of Christianity.

The entire Corinthian episode set Paul's mind even more firmly on trying to evangelize Gentiles.

### 18:18-23 - Back to Syrian Antioch

18Paul remained for quite some time, and after saying farewell to the brothers he sailed for Syria, together with Priscilla and Aquila. At Cenchreae he had his hair cut because he had taken a vow. 19When they reached Ephesus, he left them there, while he entered the synagogue and held discussions with the Jews. 20Although they asked him to stay for a longer time, he did not consent, 21but as he said farewell he promised, "I shall come back to you again, God willing." Then he set sail from Ephesus. 22Upon landing at Caesarea, he went up and greeted the church and then went down to Antioch. 23After staying there some time, he left and traveled in orderly sequence through the Galatian country and Phrygia, bringing strength to all the disciples.

The cutting of hair is part of the nazirite vow, which is sort of the Old Testament's Alcoholics Anonymous (Numbers 6:13-20), meaning that the one who took this vow could not partake of any part of the produce of the grapevine, nor could they cut their hair for the duration of their vow. Sometimes the vow was for a lifetime; at other times it was for a limited period. Luke may have been misinformed about the cutting of the hair at the beginning of the vow. It was a ritual at the end of the time of the vow. People like Samson were under the vow for life, so his hair was never cut.

Luke is hurrying Paul along his journey to Rome. Luke writes that he "went up" and greeted the church. It might mean that he went to Jerusalem, because no matter the typography of the land or the point of the compass, one always went "up" to Jerusalem. In this passage Paul passes through Ephesus, but in the next chapter, he will return and spend quite some time there.

Verse 23 signals the beginning of Paul's third missionary journey.

### 18:24-28 - Apollos

24A Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, an eloquent speaker, arrived in Ephesus. He was an authority on the scriptures. 25He had been instructed in the Way of the Lord and, with ardent spirit, spoke and taught accurately about Jesus, although he knew only the baptism of John. 26He began to speak boldly in the synagogue; but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the Way (of God) more accurately. 27And when he wanted to cross to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples there to welcome him. After his arrival he gave great assistance to those who had come to believe through grace. 28He vigorously refuted the Jews in public, establishing from the scriptures that the Messiah is Jesus.

We have to assume that the ministry of Apollos in Ephesus was prior to Paul's return there. We've been told that Paul passed through Ephesus (18:23) on his way back to Antioch, and we will learn more of Paul's time in Ephesus when he returns (19:1-40).

Apollos was from Alexandria, the great center of learning known for its library. No wonder Apollos was highly educated. He was a Christian, but he knew only of the baptism of John. Aquila and Priscilla furthered his education so that his *kerigma* is fully in accord with Paul's.

### 19:1-12 - Paul in Ephesus

1While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul traveled through the interior of the country and came (down) to Ephesus where he found some disciples. 2He said to them, "Did you receive the holy Spirit when you became believers?" They answered him, "We have never even heard that there is a holy Spirit." 3He said, "How were you baptized?" They replied, "With the baptism of John." 4Paul then said, "John baptized with a baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus." 5When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. 6And when Paul laid [his] hands on them, the holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied. 7Altogether there were about twelve men.

8He entered the synagogue, and for three months debated boldly with persuasive arguments about the kingdom of God. 9But when some in their obstinacy and disbelief disparaged the Way before the assembly, he withdrew and took his disciples with him and began to hold daily discussions in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. 10This continued for two years with the result that all the inhabitants of the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord, Jews and Greeks alike. 11So extraordinary were the mighty deeds God accomplished at the hands of Paul 12that when face cloths or aprons that touched his skin were applied to the sick, their diseases left them and the evil spirits came out of them.

When Paul arrived in Ephesus he found some disciples who, like Apollos, knew only of the baptism of John. Scholars speculate that Apollos and these disciples in Ephesus may have been evangelized by people who learned from Jesus himself during his lifetime, but left Palestine prior to Jesus' death and resurrection. Paul brought them religiously up to speed by baptizing them in the name of Jesus and by laying hands on them to receive the holy Spirit.

Verses 8 to 12 give the typical Lucan trajectory: synagogue preaching, opposition, separation, new forum. Paul's popularity is highlighted.

### 19:13-20 - Jewish exorcists

13Then some itinerant Jewish exorcists tried to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those with evil spirits, saying, "I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul preaches." 14When the seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish high priest, tried to do this, 15the evil spirit said to them in reply, "Jesus I recognize, Paul I know, but who are you?" 16The person with the evil spirit then sprang at them and subdued them all. He so overpowered them that they fled naked and wounded from that house. 17When this became known to all the Jews and Greeks who lived in Ephesus, fear fell upon them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was held in great esteem. 18Many of those who had become believers came forward and openly acknowledged their former practices. 19Moreover, a large number of those who had practiced magic collected their books and burned them in public. They calculated their value and found it to be fifty thousand silver pieces. 20Thus did the word of the Lord continue to spread with influence and power.

If one pictures mentally this scene of the devil challenging the would-be exorcists, it is almost comic relief. It scared the Ephesians, and caused them to have a great respect for the name of Jesus. A great many were converted, and those who had practiced magic burned their books.

## 19:21-22 - Paul's plans

21When this was concluded, Paul made up his mind to travel through Macedonia and Achaia, and then to go on to Jerusalem, saying, "After I have been there, I must visit Rome also." 22Then he sent to Macedonia two of his assistants, Timothy and Erastus, while he himself stayed for a while in the province of Asia.

Paul's plans take him eventually to Jerusalem, where he will deliver the money which has been collect for the poor there. And then to Rome, to his fated death.

## 19:23-40 -Riot of the silversmiths

23About that time a serious disturbance broke out concerning the Way. 24There was a silversmith named Demetrius who made miniature silver shrines of Artemis and provided no little work for the craftsmen. 25He called a meeting of these and other workers in related crafts and said, "Men, you know well that our prosperity derives from this work. 26As you can now see and hear, not only in Ephesus but throughout most of the province of Asia this Paul has persuaded and misled a great number of people by saying that gods made by hands are not gods at all. 27The danger grows, not only that our business will be discredited, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be of no account, and that she whom the whole province of Asia and all the world worship will be stripped of her magnificence."

28When they heard this, they were filled with fury and began to shout, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" 29The city was filled with confusion, and the people rushed with one accord into the theater, seizing Gaius and Aristarchus, the Macedonians, Paul's traveling companions. 30Paul wanted to go before the crowd, but the disciples would not let him, 31and even some of the Asiarchs who were friends of his sent word to him advising him not to venture into the theater. 32Meanwhile, some were shouting one thing, others something else; the assembly was in chaos, and most of the people had no idea why they had come together. 33Some of the crowd prompted Alexander, as the Jews pushed him forward, and Alexander signaled with his hand that he wished to explain something to the gathering. 34But when they recognized that he was a Jew, they all shouted in unison, for about two hours, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" 35Finally the town clerk restrained the crowd and said, "You Ephesians, what person is there who does not know that the city of the Ephesians is the guardian of the temple of the great Artemis and of her image that fell from the sky? 36Since these things are undeniable, you must calm yourselves and not do anything rash. 37The men you brought here are not temple robbers, nor have they insulted our goddess. 38If Demetrius and his fellow craftsmen have a complaint against anyone, courts are in session, and there are proconsuls. Let them bring charges against one another. 39If you have anything further to investigate, let the matter be settled in the lawful assembly, 40for, as it is, we are in danger of being charged with rioting because of today's conduct. There is no cause for it. We shall [not] be able to give a reason for this demonstration." With these words he dismissed the assembly.

The previous section ended with Paul stating his intention to travel on to Macedonia and Achaia, then to Jerusalem and on to Rome. One can wonder if this riot in Ephesus prompted him to move on.

Artemis (or Diana) was one of the female goddesses whose temple in Ephesus was one of the wonders of the ancient world. She was the goddess of the moon, wild nature and fertility. The silversmiths' combined devotion to their goddess and to their pocketbook prompted them to riot against another God preached by Paul since he was winning converts. Paul made enough converts that a Christian community was established there, to whom Paul wrote later, presumed by most to be from Rome.

The argument of the town clerk is Luke's "apologia" for Christian faith. It neither robs nor denigrates the god or her temple. The logic of his argument is: the Christians leave you alone, so you should leave them alone. His logic and persuasion carried the day; the riot broke up.

Paul had spent about three years in Ephesus, from which he probably wrote the letters to the Galatians, the Philippians, Philemon and the First Letter to the Corinthians.

### 20:1-3 - Travels

<sup>1</sup>When the disturbance was over, Paul had the disciples summoned and, after encouraging them, he bade them farewell and set out on his journey to Macedonia. <sup>2</sup>As he traveled throughout those regions, he provided many words of encouragement for them. Then he arrived in Greece, <sup>3</sup>where he stayed for three months. But when a plot was made against him by the Jews as he was about to set sail for Syria, he decided to return by way of Macedonia.

This is a very short narrative of a very long journey, on which – probably during his three months in Greece – he wrote a second letter to the Corinthians before he arrived back there and the Letter to the Romans. Second Corinthians may be a compilation of several letters Paul sent to them during this time.

### 20:4-6 - Helpers

<sup>4</sup>Sopater, the son of Pyrrhus, from Beroea, accompanied him, as did Aristarchus and Secundus from Thessalonica, Gaius from Derbe, Timothy, and Tychicus and Trophimus from Asia <sup>5</sup>who went on ahead and waited for us at Troas. <sup>6</sup>We sailed from Philippi after the feast of Unleavened Bread, and rejoined them five days later in Troas, where we spent a week.

The people mentioned here with their place of origin are probably those who had continued the collections for the people of Jerusalem.

In verse 6 the “we” has returned to the narrative. Apparently Luke rejoined Paul at Philippi, the place where we last heard of the “we.”

### 20:7-12 - Restoring life

<sup>7</sup>On the first day of the week when we gathered to break bread, Paul spoke to them because he was going to leave on the next day, and he kept on speaking until midnight. <sup>8</sup>There were many lamps in the upstairs room where we were gathered, <sup>9</sup>and a young man named Eutychus who was sitting on the window sill was sinking into a deep sleep as Paul talked on and on. Once overcome by sleep, he fell down from the third story and when he was picked up, he was dead. <sup>10</sup>Paul went down, threw himself upon him, and said as he embraced him, “Don’t be alarmed; there is life in him.” <sup>11</sup>Then he returned upstairs, broke the bread, and ate; after a long conversation that lasted until daybreak, he departed. <sup>12</sup>And they took the boy away alive and were immeasurably comforted.

It’s Sunday; it’s evening. Paul is preaching a very long sermon, which puts the young man to sleep. He falls from the window. He’s dead. Paul “threw himself upon him,” reminiscent of Elijah in 1 Kings 17, and Elisha in 2 Kings 4. The boy lives. All are comforted.

### 20:13-16 - Travel

<sup>13</sup>We went ahead to the ship and set sail for Assos where we were to take Paul on board, as he had arranged, since he was going overland. <sup>14</sup>When he met us in Assos, we took him aboard and went on to Mitylene. <sup>15</sup>We sailed away from there on the next day and reached a point off Chios, and a day later we reached Samos, and

on the following day we arrived at Miletus. 16Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus in order not to lose time in the province of Asia, for he was hurrying to be in Jerusalem, if at all possible, for the day of Pentecost.

This is a rather straight forward travelog. The motive given for Paul's bypassing Ephesus is his hurry to get to Jerusalem in time for Pentecost. The circumstances of his rather hasty departure from Ephesus may also have contributed to his decision to bypass the city. They settled in Miletus.

#### 20:17-38 - Farewell: Paul's valedictory address

17From Miletus he had the presbyters of the church at Ephesus summoned. 18When they came to him, he addressed them, "You know how I lived among you the whole time from the day I first came to the province of Asia. 19I served the Lord with all humility and with the tears and trials that came to me because of the plots of the Jews, 20and I did not at all shrink from telling you what was for your benefit, or from teaching you in public or in your homes. 21I earnestly bore witness for both Jews and Greeks to repentance before God and to faith in our Lord Jesus. 22But now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem. What will happen to me there I do not know, 23except that in one city after another the holy Spirit has been warning me that imprisonment and hardships await me. 24Yet I consider life of no importance to me, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to bear witness to the gospel of God's grace.

25"But now I know that none of you to whom I preached the kingdom during my travels will ever see my face again. 26And so I solemnly declare to you this day that I am not responsible for the blood of any of you, 27for I did not shrink from proclaiming to you the entire plan of God. 28Keep watch over yourselves and over the whole flock of which the holy Spirit has appointed you overseers, in which you tend the church of God that he acquired with his own blood. 29I know that after my departure savage wolves will come among you, and they will not spare the flock. 30And from your own group, men will come forward perverting the truth to draw the disciples away after them. 31So be vigilant and remember that for three years, night and day, I unceasingly admonished each of you with tears. 32And now I commend you to God and to that gracious word of his that can build you up and give you the inheritance among all who are consecrated. 33I have never wanted anyone's silver or gold or clothing. 34You know well that these very hands have served my needs and my companions. 35In every way I have shown you that by hard work of that sort we must help the weak, and keep in mind the words of the Lord Jesus who himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

36When he had finished speaking he knelt down and prayed with them all. 37They were all weeping loudly as they threw their arms around Paul and kissed him, 38for they were deeply distressed that he had said that they would never see his face again. Then they escorted him to the ship.

In this passage, Luke demonstrates that he could have been a writer for a modern day television drama. Any reader who puts himself or herself into the scene will probably be brought to tears, as were the companions of Paul who were bidding him farewell for the last time. My personal reflection suggest that this ought to be read – with some adaptation – as the sermon at the ordination of every bishop.

From here until the end of the book, Luke will show himself as quite the dramatist, much as he did in his Gospel, beginning with 9:51 ("When the days of his being taken up were fulfilled, he resolutely determined to journey to Jerusalem . . .").

In verse 26 Paul says, "I am not responsible for the blood of any of you." This is a bit enigmatic, but the intent is that the presbyters have been prepared to take care of themselves and of the church; Paul no longer needs to take responsibility for them. And the warning for the overseers of the community is particularly against false teachers, some of whom will arise from their own midst.

Paul quotes Jesus as saying "It is more blessed to give than to receive." Nowhere else in the Christian scriptures is this found.

And then Paul leaves Miletus for his continued journey to Jerusalem, and then to Rome. The narratives and the speeches for the rest of the Acts of the Apostles are quite detailed as Luke leads his readers along the road to Rome.

### 21:1-14 - Travel to Jerusalem

1When we had taken leave of them we set sail, made a straight run for Cos, and on the next day for Rhodes, and from there to Patara. 2Finding a ship crossing to Phoenicia, we went on board and put out to sea. 3We caught sight of Cyprus but passed by it on our left and sailed on toward Syria and put in at Tyre where the ship was to unload cargo. 4There we sought out the disciples and stayed for a week. They kept telling Paul through the Spirit not to embark for Jerusalem. 5At the end of our stay we left and resumed our journey. All of them, women and children included, escorted us out of the city, and after kneeling on the beach to pray, 6we bade farewell to one another. Then we boarded the ship, and they returned home.

7We continued the voyage and came from Tyre to Ptolemais, where we greeted the brothers and stayed a day with them. 8On the next day we resumed the trip and came to Caesarea, where we went to the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the Seven, and stayed with him. 9He had four virgin daughters gifted with prophecy. 10We had been there several days when a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. 11b He came up to us, took Paul's belt, bound his own feet and hands with it, and said, "Thus says the holy Spirit: This is the way the Jews will bind the owner of this belt in Jerusalem, and they will hand him over to the Gentiles." 12When we heard this, we and the local residents begged him not to go up to Jerusalem. 13Then Paul replied, "What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? I am prepared not only to be bound but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." 14Since he would not be dissuaded we let the matter rest, saying, "The Lord's will be done."

This begins another "we" section, as though Luke were accompanying Paul. The drama of the journey is found in the number of people who cautioned Paul not to go to Jerusalem. Agabus reappears: in 11:27 he predicted the severe famine in the land. Philip the evangelist also reappears; he was one of the seven chosen as deacons back in 6:5. Paul's rejoinder that "The Lord's will be done" identifies Paul with Jesus in Luke's Gospel.

### 21:15-26 - In Jerusalem; further attempts to protect Paul

15After these days we made preparations for our journey, then went up to Jerusalem. 16Some of the disciples from Caesarea came along to lead us to the house of Mnason, a Cypriot, a disciple of long standing, with whom we were to stay. 17When we reached Jerusalem the brothers welcomed us warmly. 18The next day, Paul accompanied us on a visit to James, and all the presbyters were present. 19He greeted them, then proceeded to tell them in detail what God had accomplished among the Gentiles through his ministry. 20They praised God when they heard it but said to him, "Brother, you see how many thousands of believers there are from among the Jews, and they are all zealous observers of the law. 21They have been informed that you are teaching all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to abandon Moses and that you are telling them not to circumcise their children or to observe their customary practices. 22What is to be done? They will surely hear that you have arrived. 23So do what we tell you. We have four men who have taken a vow. 24Take these men and purify yourself with them, and pay their expenses that they may have their heads shaved. In this way everyone will know that there is nothing to the reports they have been given about you but that you yourself live in observance of the law. 25As for the Gentiles who have come to believe, we sent them our decision that they abstain from meat sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals, and from unlawful marriage." 26So Paul took the men, and on the next day after purifying himself together with them entered the temple to give notice of the day when the purification would be completed and the offering made for each of them.

Absent from this account of Paul's arrival in Jerusalem is any mention of the delivery of the collection he had been taking up among the Gentiles for the believers in that city. Also absent is any reference to Paul's fears expressed in the Letter to the Romans (15:31) that he and his collection would be rejected. Paul knew that he was known in Jerusalem as the one who converted the Gentiles, and who told those Gentiles that they didn't have to observe the Mosaic Law. The Christians of Jewish decent in Jerusalem and elsewhere, while believing in Jesus, continued the practices of the Law of Moses. Paul's reception by the leaders of the church in Jerusalem was more than cordial. But other Jews in the city, presumably including some of the Christian Jews, had heard of his championing Gentile converts and telling them they didn't have to observe the Mosaic Law, were suspicious and resentful of Paul.

The believers in Jerusalem suggest that Paul put the suspicion to rest by completing the ritual for the ending of the Nazarite vow (Numbers 6:14-15), which prescribes that certain offerings be made in the temple. That's the payment of the expenses mentioned in verse 24. This was not exactly a ruse, but a theatrical demonstration of something which was true.

#### 21:27-40 - Paul is arrested

27When the seven days were nearly completed, the Jews from the province of Asia noticed him in the temple, stirred up the whole crowd, and laid hands on him, 28shouting, "Fellow Israelites, help us. This is the man who is teaching everyone everywhere against the people and the law and this place, and what is more, he has even brought Greeks into the temple and defiled this sacred place." 29For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian in the city with him and supposed that Paul had brought him into the temple. 30The whole city was in turmoil with people rushing together. They seized Paul and dragged him out of the temple, and immediately the gates were closed. 31While they were trying to kill him, a report reached the cohort commander that all Jerusalem was rioting. 32He immediately took soldiers and centurions and charged down on them. When they saw the commander and the soldiers they stopped beating Paul. 33The cohort commander came forward, arrested him, and ordered him to be secured with two chains; he tried to find out who he might be and what he had done. 34Some in the mob shouted one thing, others something else; so, since he was unable to ascertain the truth because of the uproar, he ordered Paul to be brought into the compound. 35When he reached the steps, he was carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the mob, 36for a crowd of people followed and shouted, "Away with him!"

37Just as Paul was about to be taken into the compound, he said to the cohort commander, "May I say something to you?" He replied, "Do you speak Greek? 38So then you are not the Egyptian who started a revolt some time ago and led the four thousand assassins into the desert?" 39Paul answered, "I am a Jew, of Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no mean city; I request you to permit me to speak to the people." 40When he had given his permission, Paul stood on the steps and motioned with his hand to the people; and when all was quiet he addressed them in Hebrew.

The Jewish man from the diaspora accuses Paul of almost the same things that Stephen was accused of by another diaspora Jew in 6:13. And the "Away with him," of course, reminds readers of Jesus' trial.

Paul's rescue by the Roman soldiers saved his life. The cohort commander at first mistook Paul for an Egyptian rabble rouser with whom the commander had previously dealt. ? Given permission to speak to the crowd, Paul began his defense in Hebrew.

## 22:1-21 - Paul's speech

1 "My brothers and fathers, listen to what I am about to say to you in my defense." 2 When they heard him addressing them in Hebrew they became all the more quiet. And he continued, 3 "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city. At the feet of Gamaliel I was educated strictly in our ancestral law and was zealous for God, just as all of you are today. 4 I persecuted this Way to death, binding both men and women and delivering them to prison. 5 Even the high priest and the whole council of elders can testify on my behalf. For from them I even received letters to the brothers and set out for Damascus to bring back to Jerusalem in chains for punishment those there as well.

6 "On that journey as I drew near to Damascus, about noon a great light from the sky suddenly shone around me. 7 I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?' 8 I replied, 'Who are you, sir?' And he said to me, 'I am Jesus the Nazorean whom you are persecuting.' 9 My companions saw the light but did not hear the voice of the one who spoke to me. 10 I asked, 'What shall I do, sir?' The Lord answered me, 'Get up and go into Damascus, and there you will be told about everything appointed for you to do.' 11 Since I could see nothing because of the brightness of that light, I was led by hand by my companions and entered Damascus.

12 "A certain Ananias, a devout observer of the law, and highly spoken of by all the Jews who lived there, 13 came to me and stood there and said, 'Saul, my brother, regain your sight.' And at that very moment I regained my sight and saw him. 14 Then he said, 'The God of our ancestors designated you to know his will, to see the Righteous One, and to hear the sound of his voice; 15 for you will be his witness before all to what you have seen and heard. 16 Now, why delay? Get up and have yourself baptized and your sins washed away, calling upon his name.'

17 "After I had returned to Jerusalem and while I was praying in the temple, I fell into a trance 18 and saw the Lord saying to me, 'Hurry, leave Jerusalem at once, because they will not accept your testimony about me.' 19 But I replied, 'Lord, they themselves know that from synagogue to synagogue I used to imprison and beat those who believed in you. 20 And when the blood of your witness Stephen was being shed, I myself stood by giving my approval and keeping guard over the cloaks of his murderers.' 21 Then he said to me, 'Go, I shall send you far away to the Gentiles.'"

This is the second time that Paul tells his story. It may be considered a bit ironic that Paul lays out his Jewish credentials in order to impress the crowd, when in Philippians 3:4-11 he so belittled them as loss and rubbish. And the story of his conversion changed a bit. In 9:7 his companions heard the voice but did not see the light. Here that is reversed. The information in verses 17 and 18 are in neither Luke's telling of the road to Damascus story, nor in Paul's first telling of his story. And Ananias' credentials as an observant Jew are given here, but not in Chapter 9.

Paul's Jewish roots and background have not been removed from him. And the fact that he eventually discerned his commissioning to be to the Gentiles does not negate that rootedness and background. Both are true of Paul, but the Jews cannot accept that a mission to the Gentiles is compatible with being an observant Jew. So when Paul uttered the last sentence of his speech, the crowd erupted into another riot.

## 22:22-29 - Paul arrested

22 They listened to him until he said this, but then they raised their voices and shouted, "Take such a one as this away from the earth. It is not right that he should live." 23 And as they were yelling and throwing off their cloaks and flinging dust into the air, 24 the cohort commander ordered him to be brought into the compound and gave instruction that he be interrogated under the lash to determine the reason why they were making such an outcry against him. 25 But when they had stretched him out for the whips, Paul said to the centurion on duty, "Is it lawful for you to scourge a man who is a Roman citizen and has not been tried?" 26 When the centurion heard this, he went to

the cohort commander and reported it, saying, "What are you going to do? This man is a Roman citizen." 27Then the commander came and said to him, "Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?" "Yes," he answered. 28The commander replied, "I acquired this citizenship for a large sum of money." Paul said, "But I was born one." 29At once those who were going to interrogate him backed away from him, and the commander became alarmed when he realized that he was a Roman citizen and that he had had him bound.

In the Roman world of the First Century, where one was born made a difference. Paul was born in the Roman city of Tarsus (although one scripture scholar contends that his family moved there when Paul was a child). He was a Roman citizen of even higher rank than the cohort commander, who had purchased his citizenship at great cost. Because Paul was a citizen by birth he outranked the cohort commander.

### 22:30-23:11 - Before the Sanhedrin

30The next day, wishing to determine the truth about why he was being accused by the Jews, he freed him and ordered the chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin to convene. Then he brought Paul down and made him stand before them.

23:1Paul looked intently at the Sanhedrin and said, "My brothers, I have conducted myself with a perfectly clear conscience before God to this day." 2The high priest Ananias ordered his attendants to strike his mouth. 3Then Paul said to him, "God will strike you, you whitewashed wall. Do you indeed sit in judgment upon me according to the law and yet in violation of the law order me to be struck?" 4The attendants said, "Would you revile God's high priest?" 5Paul answered, "Brothers, I did not realize he was the high priest. For it is written, 'You shall not curse a ruler of your people.'"

6Paul was aware that some were Sadducees and some Pharisees, so he called out before the Sanhedrin, "My brothers, I am a Pharisee, the son of Pharisees; [I] am on trial for hope in the resurrection of the dead." 7When he said this, a dispute broke out between the Pharisees and Sadducees, and the group became divided. 8For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection or angels or spirits, while the Pharisees acknowledge all three. 9A great uproar occurred, and some scribes belonging to the Pharisee party stood up and sharply argued, "We find nothing wrong with this man. Suppose a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?" 10The dispute was so serious that the commander, afraid that Paul would be torn to pieces by them, ordered his troops to go down and rescue him from their midst and take him into the compound. 11The following night the Lord stood by him and said, "Take courage. For just as you have borne witness to my cause in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness in Rome."

Luke shows us a Paul who is conversant in both Jewish and Roman law, able to use both to his advantage. And he shows himself an observer of the Law of Moses by his response after the high priest had ordered him to be slapped. "Brothers, I did not realize he was the high priest. For it is written, 'You shall not curse a ruler of your people.'" And he knows the Law well enough to know that there are different interpretations of it. So he introduces into the conversation the resurrection as the point of his arrest and appearance before the Sanhedrin. This causes another riot, this time among the members of the Sanhedrin. Clever son of a gun!

That having been said, we should look at how historically implausible Luke's whole story is. It is unlikely that the commander would have recourse to the Sanhedrin. It is doubtful that he had any authority to convene that body and set its agenda. Paul could not have been ignorant of the identity of the high priest.

However, Luke's point is not exact history. He is showing the connection between Paul's arraignment before the Sanhedrin and that of Jesus in his Gospel (22:63-71), of Paul's and John's (Acts 4:5-22), and of the apostles (Acts 5:26-40).

The vision Paul has of Jesus speaking to him furthers Luke's theology-by-geography: Jesus must get to Rome, the ends of the earth, in the person of his Apostle Paul.

### 23:12-35 - To Caesarea

12When day came, the Jews made a plot and bound themselves by oath not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul. 13There were more than forty who formed this conspiracy. 14They went to the chief priests and elders and said, "We have bound ourselves by a solemn oath to taste nothing until we have killed Paul. 15You, together with the Sanhedrin, must now make an official request to the commander to have him bring him down to you, as though you meant to investigate his case more thoroughly. We on our part are prepared to kill him before he arrives." 16The son of Paul's sister, however, heard about the ambush; so he went and entered the compound and reported it to Paul. 17Paul then called one of the centurions and requested, "Take this young man to the commander; he has something to report to him." 18So he took him and brought him to the commander and explained, "The prisoner Paul called me and asked that I bring this young man to you; he has something to say to you." 19The commander took him by the hand, drew him aside, and asked him privately, "What is it you have to report to me?" 20He replied, "The Jews have conspired to ask you to bring Paul down to the Sanhedrin tomorrow, as though they meant to inquire about him more thoroughly, 21but do not believe them. More than forty of them are lying in wait for him; they have bound themselves by oath not to eat or drink until they have killed him. They are now ready and only wait for your consent." 22As the commander dismissed the young man he directed him, "Tell no one that you gave me this information."

23Then he summoned two of the centurions and said, "Get two hundred soldiers ready to go to Caesarea by nine o'clock tonight, along with seventy horsemen and two hundred auxiliaries. 24Provide mounts for Paul to ride and give him safe conduct to Felix the governor." 25Then he wrote a letter with this content: 26"Claudius Lysias to his excellency the governor Felix, greetings. 27This man, seized by the Jews and about to be murdered by them, I rescued after intervening with my troops when I learned that he was a Roman citizen. 28I wanted to learn the reason for their accusations against him so I brought him down to their Sanhedrin. 29I discovered that he was accused in matters of controversial questions of their law and not of any charge deserving death or imprisonment. 30Since it was brought to my attention that there will be a plot against the man, I am sending him to you at once, and have also notified his accusers to state (their case) against him before you."

31So the soldiers, according to their orders, took Paul and escorted him by night to Antipatris. 32The next day they returned to the compound, leaving the horsemen to complete the journey with him. 33When they arrived in Caesarea they delivered the letter to the governor and presented Paul to him. 34When he had read it and asked to what province he belonged, and learned that he was from Cilicia, 35he said, "I shall hear your case when your accusers arrive." Then he ordered that he be held in custody in Herod's praetorium.

Basically, this is just a great description of events. How Paul's nephew got knowledge of the plot is not reported. Some surmise that he was one of the rigorous Jews who might have become privy to the plot because he was a member of the group. One commentator concerned himself with the lot of those who vowed not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul; they must have gotten pretty hungry.

The number of guards required to transport Paul is astounding.

From other sources we learn that Felix was a freedman. His past was not all that luxurious. He was known to be unkind to the Jews. But, finding that Paul did come under his jurisdiction, he agreed to hear the case when his accusers arrived in Caesarea.

### 24:1-23 - Trial before Felix

1Five days later the high priest Ananias came down with some elders and an advocate, a certain Tertullus, and they presented formal charges against Paul to the governor. 2When he was called, Tertullus began to accuse him, saying, "Since we have attained much peace through you, and reforms have been accomplished in this nation through

your provident care, 3we acknowledge this in every way and everywhere, most excellent Felix, with all gratitude. 4But in order not to detain you further, I ask you to give us a brief hearing with your customary graciousness. 5We found this man to be a pest; he creates dissension among Jews all over the world and is a ringleader of the sect of the Nazoreans. 6He even tried to desecrate our temple, but we arrested him. [7] 8If you examine him you will be able to learn from him for yourself about everything of which we are accusing him.” 9The Jews also joined in the attack and asserted that these things were so.

10Then the governor motioned to him to speak and Paul replied, “I know that you have been a judge over this nation for many years and so I am pleased to make my defense before you. 11As you can verify, not more than twelve days have passed since I went up to Jerusalem to worship. 12Neither in the temple, nor in the synagogues, nor anywhere in the city did they find me arguing with anyone or instigating a riot among the people. 13Nor can they prove to you the accusations they are now making against me. 14But this I do admit to you, that according to the Way, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our ancestors and I believe everything that is in accordance with the law and written in the prophets. 15I have the same hope in God as they themselves have that there will be a resurrection of the righteous and the unrighteous. 16Because of this, I always strive to keep my conscience clear before God and man. 17After many years, I came to bring alms for my nation and offerings. 18While I was so engaged, they found me, after my purification, in the temple without a crowd or disturbance. 19But some Jews from the province of Asia, who should be here before you to make whatever accusation they might have against me—20or let these men themselves state what crime they discovered when I stood before the Sanhedrin, 21unless it was my one outcry as I stood among them, that ‘I am on trial before you today for the resurrection of the dead.’” 22Then Felix, who was accurately informed about the Way, postponed the trial, saying, “When Lysias the commander comes down, I shall decide your case.”

23He gave orders to the centurion that he should be kept in custody but have some liberty, and that he should not prevent any of his friends from caring for his needs.

Luke is again drawing a parallel between Paul’s trials and those of Jesus, back and forth between Jewish and Roman courts.

Is one allowed to be amused at the classical way both Tertullus and Paul introduce their remarks before the court? Sort of buttering Felix up.

In verses 14 and 15, Luke again points to a continuity in Paul’s life between his Jewish faith and his Christian belief, demonstrating again – at least to his satisfaction – that the conflict between the two is not inherent in their positions, but due entirely to Jewish opposition.

We finally learn that the commanders name is Lysias.

#### 24:24-27 - Paul detained

24Several days later Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish. He had Paul summoned and listened to him speak about faith in Christ Jesus. 25But as he spoke about righteousness and self-restraint and the coming judgment, Felix became frightened and said, “You may go for now; when I find an opportunity I shall summon you again.” 26At the same time he hoped that a bribe would be offered him by Paul, and so he sent for him very often and conversed with him. 27Two years passed and Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus. Wishing to ingratiate himself with the Jews, Felix left Paul in prison.

Felix’s marriage was adulterous. Although he liked to listen to Paul, when Paul spoke about righteousness and self-restraint and the coming judgment, Felix got disturbed. But he kept inviting Paul for more talks, hoping Paul would eventually offer him a bribe, but Paul didn’t. Felix was moved in two years, but he left Paul in prison. Very little is known about Felix’s successor, Forcius Festus.

## 25:1-12 - Interrogated by Festus

1 Three days after his arrival in the province, Festus went up from Caesarea to Jerusalem 2 where the chief priests and Jewish leaders presented him their formal charges against Paul. They asked him 3 as a favor to have him sent to Jerusalem, for they were plotting to kill him along the way. 4 Festus replied that Paul was being held in custody in Caesarea and that he himself would be returning there shortly. 5 He said, "Let your authorities come down with me, and if this man has done something improper, let them accuse him."

6 After spending no more than eight or ten days with them, he went down to Caesarea, and on the following day took his seat on the tribunal and ordered that Paul be brought in. 7 When he appeared, the Jews who had come down from Jerusalem surrounded him and brought many serious charges against him, which they were unable to prove. 8 In defending himself Paul said, "I have committed no crime either against the Jewish law or against the temple or against Caesar." 9 Then Festus, wishing to ingratiate himself with the Jews, said to Paul in reply, "Are you willing to go up to Jerusalem and there stand trial before me on these charges?" 10 Paul answered, "I am standing before the tribunal of Caesar; this is where I should be tried. I have committed no crime against the Jews, as you very well know. 11 If I have committed a crime or done anything deserving death, I do not seek to escape the death penalty; but if there is no substance to the charges they are bringing against me, then no one has the right to hand me over to them. I appeal to Caesar." 12 Then Festus, after conferring with his council, replied, "You have appealed to Caesar. To Caesar you will go."

Even after two years, the Jerusalem Jews are still trying to kill Paul. Many of the details of this exchange among the Jewish leaders, Festus and Paul are historically implausible. That is also true of some of the details in the following section. But Luke is showing a comparison between Paul's treatment and that of Jesus, being shuttled back and forth between Jewish and Roman courts.

After Festus hears the case against Paul, he offers to move the trial to Jerusalem, where Festus would oversee the trial by the Sanhedrin. Paul objects because he is standing before a Roman court, and he will accept the verdict of no other. So he appeals to Caesar.

Historically, the only reason Paul would have appealed to Caesar is if Festus had found Paul guilty of some charge. But Luke is presenting the Roman court system as an ally of Paul's against the Jews.

## 25:13-27 - Before king Agrippa

13 When a few days had passed, King Agrippa and Bernice arrived in Caesarea on a visit to Festus. 14 Since they spent several days there, Festus referred Paul's case to the king, saying, "There is a man here left in custody by Felix. 15 When I was in Jerusalem the chief priests and the elders of the Jews brought charges against him and demanded his condemnation. 16 I answered them that it was not Roman practice to hand over an accused person before he has faced his accusers and had the opportunity to defend himself against their charge. 17 So when (they) came together here, I made no delay; the next day I took my seat on the tribunal and ordered the man to be brought in. 18 His accusers stood around him, but did not charge him with any of the crimes I suspected. 19 Instead they had some issues with him about their own religion and about a certain Jesus who had died but who Paul claimed was alive. 20 Since I was at a loss how to investigate this controversy, I asked if he were willing to go to Jerusalem and there stand trial on these charges. 21 And when Paul appealed that he be held in custody for the Emperor's decision, I ordered him held until I could send him to Caesar." 22 Agrippa said to Festus, "I too should like to hear this man." He replied, "Tomorrow you will hear him." 23 The next day Agrippa and Bernice came with great ceremony and entered the audience hall in the company of cohort commanders and the prominent men of the city and, by command of Festus, Paul was brought in. 24 And Festus said, "King Agrippa and all you here present with us, look at this man about whom the whole Jewish populace petitioned me here and in Jerusalem, clamoring that he should live no longer. 25 I found, however, that he had done nothing deserving death, and so when he appealed to the Emperor, I

decided to send him. 26But I have nothing definite to write about him to our sovereign; therefore I have brought him before all of you, and particularly before you, King Agrippa, so that I may have something to write as a result of this investigation. 27For it seems senseless to me to send up a prisoner without indicating the charges against him.”

King Agrippa’s and his sister, Bernice’s visit to Festus was a courtesy call on the occasion of Festus’ having become the newly appointed representative of the Roman government in Caesarea. Festus asks Agrippa’s opinion about the case of Paul, and the following day Paul is brought in for examination by Agrippa. The king and his sister were Jewish, and Festus thought perhaps they might be able to assist Festus in describing the case to the Emperor. King Agrippa is really Herod Agrippa, son of Herod the Great. This mimics Jesus being shuttled back and forth between Pilate and Herod.

### 26:1-23 - King Agrippa hears Paul

1Then Agrippa said to Paul, “You may now speak on your own behalf.” So Paul stretched out his hand and began his defense. 2“I count myself fortunate, King Agrippa, that I am to defend myself before you today against all the charges made against me by the Jews, 3especially since you are an expert in all the Jewish customs and controversies. And therefore I beg you to listen patiently. 4My manner of living from my youth, a life spent from the beginning among my people and in Jerusalem, all [the] Jews know. 5They have known about me from the start, if they are willing to testify, that I have lived my life as a Pharisee, the strictest party of our religion. 6But now I am standing trial because of my hope in the promise made by God to our ancestors. 7Our twelve tribes hope to attain to that promise as they fervently worship God day and night; and on account of this hope I am accused by Jews, O king. 8Why is it thought unbelievable among you that God raises the dead? 9I myself once thought that I had to do many things against the name of Jesus the Nazorean, 10and I did so in Jerusalem. I imprisoned many of the holy ones with the authorization I received from the chief priests, and when they were to be put to death I cast my vote against them.

11Many times, in synagogue after synagogue, I punished them in an attempt to force them to blaspheme; I was so enraged against them that I pursued them even to foreign cities.

12“On one such occasion I was traveling to Damascus with the authorization and commission of the chief priests. 13At midday, along the way, O king, I saw a light from the sky, brighter than the sun, shining around me and my traveling companions. 14We all fell to the ground and I heard a voice saying to me in Hebrew, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goad.’ 15And I said, ‘Who are you, sir?’ And the Lord replied, ‘I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. 16Get up now, and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness of what you have seen [of me] and what you will be shown. 17I shall deliver you from this people and from the Gentiles to whom I send you, 18to open their eyes that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may obtain forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been consecrated by faith in me.’

19“And so, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision. 20On the contrary, first to those in Damascus and in Jerusalem and throughout the whole country of Judea, and then to the Gentiles, I preached the need to repent and turn to God, and to do works giving evidence of repentance. 21That is why the Jews seized me [when I was] in the temple and tried to kill me. 22But I have enjoyed God’s help to this very day, and so I stand here testifying to small and great alike, saying nothing different from what the prophets and Moses foretold, 23that the Messiah must suffer and that, as the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles.”

Both Festus and Agrippa are audience for Paul’s speech. But Paul is addressing Agrippa particularly, because he is Jewish, and can understand the expectations of Israel regarding a messiah.

Paul’s recounting, for the third time, his experience on the road to Damascus is embellished over the last two times. This has to be a Lukan embellishment, because Luke was

not there for the speech. Since it is Luke's writing each time we hear Paul tell his story, how is it that each time it is a bit different?

### 26:24-32 - Reaction to Paul's speech

24While Paul was so speaking in his defense, Festus said in a loud voice, "You are mad, Paul; much learning is driving you mad." 25But Paul replied, "I am not mad, most excellent Festus; I am speaking words of truth and reason. 26The king knows about these matters and to him I speak boldly, for I cannot believe that [any] of this has escaped his notice; this was not done in a corner. 27King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you believe." 28Then Agrippa said to Paul, "You will soon persuade me to play the Christian." 29Paul replied, "I would pray to God that sooner or later not only you but all who listen to me today might become as I am except for these chains."

30Then the king rose, and with him the governor and Bernice and the others who sat with them. 31And after they had withdrawn they said to one another, "This man is doing nothing [at all] that deserves death or imprisonment." And Agrippa said to Festus, "This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar."

Festus, the Gentile, didn't understand all that Paul said about his observance of the Jewish traditions. He interrupts in a way which objects to all this theology. Paul insists he is not mad, and appeals to King Agrippa, the Jew, to validate what he has said. Agrippa's flippant remark about being persuaded to play the Christian, evinces from Paul a sincere desire that his persuasion would do so.

In verse 26, Paul quotes a Greek proverb about these things not being done in a corner. Luke is again saying that all these things can be believed, because they are well-known and can therefore be believed with certainty. This verse provides closure with the beginning of Luke's Gospel where he assured Theophilus that he could believe with certainty all that Luke was going to write.

For a third time the authorities decide that there is no case against Paul. But since he has appealed to Caesar, their hands are tied. They cannot release him. It's ironic that it Paul's own appeal, not the charges of the Jews, which prevent his release.

### 27:1-5 - Departure for Rome

1When it was decided that we should sail to Italy, they handed Paul and some other prisoners over to a centurion named Julius of the Cohort Augusta. 2We went on board a ship from Adramyttium bound for ports in the province of Asia and set sail. Aristarchus, a Macedonian from Thessalonica, was with us. 3On the following day we put in at Sidon where Julius was kind enough to allow Paul to visit his friends who took care of him. 4From there we put out to sea and sailed around the sheltered side of Cyprus because of the headwinds, 5and crossing the open sea off the coast of Cilicia and Pamphylia we came to Myra in Lycia.

The cohort Augusta was prestigious; Luke is highlighting Paul's importance. Aristarchus was one of those we read about in 20:4, who was one of Paul's companions who helped with the collection for Jerusalem. The assumption by most would be that Paul and the other prisoners would have been kept in chains below deck. But there are several incidents related about the journey to Rome which suggest otherwise, at least for Paul.

## 27:6-44 - At sea

6There the centurion found an Alexandrian ship that was sailing to Italy and put us on board. 7For many days we made little headway, arriving at Cnidus only with difficulty, and because the wind would not permit us to continue our course we sailed for the sheltered side of Crete off Salmone. 8We sailed past it with difficulty and reached a place called Fair Havens, near which was the city of Lasea.

9Much time had now passed and sailing had become hazardous because the time of the fast had already gone by, so Paul warned them, 10“Men, I can see that this voyage will result in severe damage and heavy loss not only to the cargo and the ship, but also to our lives.” 11The centurion, however, paid more attention to the pilot and to the owner of the ship than to what Paul said. 12Since the harbor was unfavorably situated for spending the winter, the majority planned to put out to sea from there in the hope of reaching Phoenix, a port in Crete facing west-northwest, there to spend the winter.

13A south wind blew gently, and thinking they had attained their objective, they weighed anchor and sailed along close to the coast of Crete. 14Before long an offshore wind of hurricane force called a “Northeaster” struck. 15Since the ship was caught up in it and could not head into the wind we gave way and let ourselves be driven. 16We passed along the sheltered side of an island named Cauda and managed only with difficulty to get the dinghy under control. 17They hoisted it aboard, then used cables to undergird the ship. Because of their fear that they would run aground on the shoal of Syrtis, they lowered the drift anchor and were carried along in this way. 18We were being pounded by the storm so violently that the next day they jettisoned some cargo, 19and on the third day with their own hands they threw even the ship’s tackle overboard. 20Neither the sun nor the stars were visible for many days, and no small storm raged. Finally, all hope of our surviving was taken away.

21When many would no longer eat, Paul stood among them and said, “Men, you should have taken my advice and not have set sail from Crete and you would have avoided this disastrous loss. 22I urge you now to keep up your courage; not one of you will be lost, only the ship. 23For last night an angel of the God to whom (I) belong and whom I serve stood by me 24and said, ‘Do not be afraid, Paul. You are destined to stand before Caesar; and behold, for your sake, God has granted safety to all who are sailing with you.’ 25Therefore, keep up your courage, men; I trust in God that it will turn out as I have been told. 26We are destined to run aground on some island.”

27On the fourteenth night, as we were still being driven about on the Adriatic Sea, toward midnight the sailors began to suspect that they were nearing land. 28They took soundings and found twenty fathoms; a little farther on, they again took soundings and found fifteen fathoms. 29Fearing that we would run aground on a rocky coast, they dropped four anchors from the stern and prayed for day to come. 30The sailors then tried to abandon ship; they lowered the dinghy to the sea on the pretext of going to lay out anchors from the bow. 31But Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, “Unless these men stay with the ship, you cannot be saved.” 32So the soldiers cut the ropes of the dinghy and set it adrift.

33Until the day began to dawn, Paul kept urging all to take some food. He said, “Today is the fourteenth day that you have been waiting, going hungry and eating nothing. 34I urge you, therefore, to take some food; it will help you survive. Not a hair of the head of anyone of you will be lost.” 35When he said this, he took bread, gave thanks to God in front of them all, broke it, and began to eat. 36They were all encouraged, and took some food themselves. 37In all, there were two hundred seventy-six of us on the ship. 38After they had eaten enough, they lightened the ship by throwing the wheat into the sea.

39When day came they did not recognize the land, but made out a bay with a beach. They planned to run the ship ashore on it, if they could. 40So they cast off the anchors and abandoned them to the sea, and at the same time they unfastened the lines of the rudders, and hoisting the foresail into the wind, they made for the beach. 41But they struck a sandbar and ran the ship aground. The bow was wedged in and could not be moved, but the stern began to break up under the pounding [of the waves]. 42The soldiers planned to kill the prisoners so that none might swim away and escape, 43but the centurion wanted to save Paul and so kept them from carrying out their plan. He ordered those who could swim to jump overboard first and get to the shore, 44and then the rest, some on planks, others on debris from the ship. In this way, all reached shore safely.

Deducing that Luke’s narrative is modeled on a pre-existing sea-going story, one commentator’s words sums up this whole section: “The description of the journey’s toils points

to its origin in literature rather than experience.” But it’s a good story, nonetheless. In verses 24 and 25 Luke records Paul’s dream assuring him that he will reach his destination (and the book’s destination), Rome. The terrors of the sea which Luke describes serve only to highlight the invincible divine plan that directs his journey.

The mention in verse 9 that “the time of the fast [Day of Atonement] had already gone by” indicates that the time is late September or early October, at which time sea navigation came to an end for the winter.

The soldiers’ plan to kill the prisoners would have protected them from disgrace had the prisoners run away.

The rest of the story sort of takes care of itself.

## 28 ;1-10 - Malta

1Once we had reached safety we learned that the island was called Malta. 2The natives showed us extraordinary hospitality; they lit a fire and welcomed all of us because it had begun to rain and was cold. 3Paul had gathered a bundle of brushwood and was putting it on the fire when a viper, escaping from the heat, fastened on his hand. 4When the natives saw the snake hanging from his hand, they said to one another, “This man must certainly be a murderer; though he escaped the sea, Justice has not let him remain alive.” 5But he shook the snake off into the fire and suffered no harm. 6They were expecting him to swell up or suddenly to fall down dead but, after waiting a long time and seeing nothing unusual happen to him, they changed their minds and began to say that he was a god. 7In the vicinity of that place were lands belonging to a man named Publius, the chief of the island. He welcomed us and received us cordially as his guests for three days. 8It so happened that the father of Publius was sick with a fever and dysentery. Paul visited him and, after praying, laid his hands on him and healed him. 9After this had taken place, the rest of the sick on the island came to Paul and were cured. 10They paid us great honor and when we eventually set sail they brought us the provisions we needed.

Like surviving the shipwreck, surviving the snakebite is a literary device designed to indicate that Paul’s destiny is in Rome, and nothing will keep that divine destiny from coming to fruition. Publius is a Roman emissary and therefore the first citizen of Malta. The cure as Luke describes it is a reprise of Jesus first miracle in Luke’s Gospel, the curing of Peter’s mother-in-law. As it was after the cure of Peter’s mother-in-law, so here the people brought others to be healed by Paul.

## 28:11-16 - Arrival in Rome

11Three months later we set sail on a ship that had wintered at the island. It was an Alexandrian ship with the Dioscuri as its figurehead. 12We put in at Syracuse and stayed there three days, 13and from there we sailed round the coast and arrived at Rhegium. After a day, a south wind came up and in two days we reached Puteoli. 14There we found some brothers and were urged to stay with them for seven days. And thus we came to Rome. 15The brothers from there heard about us and came as far as the Forum of Appius and Three Taverns to meet us. On seeing them, Paul gave thanks to God and took courage. 16When he entered Rome, Paul was allowed to live by himself, with the soldier who was guarding him.

The stay in Malta was for the winter. Come Spring, the journey toward Rome continued. The name “Dioscuri” as the figurehead refers to the twin sons of Zeus. The last legs of the journey to Rome are mentioned. There are already Christian communities in the area, and Paul is welcomed by them. Paul was not considered dangerous, so he lived in his own quarters with a Roman soldier to guard him.

## 28:17-31 - To the Jews of Rome

17Three days later he called together the leaders of the Jews. When they had gathered he said to them, “My brothers, although I had done nothing against our people or our ancestral customs, I was handed over to the Romans as a prisoner from Jerusalem. 18After trying my case the Romans wanted to release me, because they found nothing against me deserving the death penalty. 19But when the Jews objected, I was obliged to appeal to Caesar, even though I had no accusation to make against my own nation. 20This is the reason, then, I have requested to see you and to speak with you, for it is on account of the hope of Israel that I wear these chains.” 21They answered him, “We have received no letters from Judea about you, nor has any of the brothers arrived with a damaging report or rumor about you. 22But we should like to hear you present your views, for we know that this sect is denounced everywhere.”

23So they arranged a day with him and came to his lodgings in great numbers. From early morning until evening, he expounded his position to them, bearing witness to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus from the law of Moses and the prophets. 24Some were convinced by what he had said, while others did not believe. 25Without reaching any agreement among themselves they began to leave; then Paul made one final statement. “Well did the holy Spirit speak to your ancestors through the prophet Isaiah, saying:

26‘Go to this people and say:  
You shall indeed hear but not understand.  
You shall indeed look but never see.  
27Gross is the heart of this people;  
they will not hear with their ears;  
they have closed their eyes,  
so they may not see with their eyes  
and hear with their ears  
and understand with their heart and be converted,  
and I heal them.’

28Let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.” [29] 30He remained for two full years in his lodgings. He received all who came to him, 31and with complete assurance and without hindrance he proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul begins his conversation with the Jews of Rome in order to find out if word about him has traveled to Rome, and if the local Jewish congregation is prejudiced against him. It is not. But it seems to be prejudiced against the sect, Christianity.

Verses 23 to 28 represent Luke’s reprise of his whole writing in Acts. It’s Paul’s last speech in which he gives voice to Luke’s intent in writing: salvation promised in the Hebrew Scriptures, accomplished by Jesus, and offered first to Israel, has now been offered to and accepted by the Gentiles.

Paul waited two full years in his lodgings, welcoming all who came, to whom he proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ.

### Thereafter

There are theories about Paul’s life after he arrived in Rome. We are told he was there for two full years. But what after that? Tradition tells us that Paul was martyred in Rome under the Emperor Nero; it does not assure us that that martyrdom took place at the end of the two years Luke tells us about. Paul had intended to go west toward Spain. Some think he was released from his imprisonment in Rome and traveled to Spain and then back to Rome. Quite frankly, Luke didn’t care. He wanted only to show in his Gospel that the Good News traveled from Galilee to Jerusalem, the center of the Jewish world, and in his Acts of the Apostles that the Good News

traveled to the ends of the earth, Rome (1:8). Having accomplished that task, he was uninterested in answering our further questions.



A Reflection on  
the Gospel  
according to  
John



## **Introduction to John's Gospel**

### **Stages of development of the Gospel**

We would probably be correct in seeing the Gospel of John as the product of several disciples, each of whom contributed something to the formation of the Gospel as we know it. This development occurred in stages.

**Stage 1:** Material circulated within the Johannine community about the words and works of Jesus, similar to, but distinct from, the material which circulated and which formed the basis for the synoptic gospels. Much of this material came from the eye-witness of the events, namely, the disciple whom Jesus loved. (Between 40 and 60 AD)

**Stage 2:** This material was adapted into stories and discourses by the thinking, preaching and teaching (oral tradition) of someone (the disciple whom Jesus loved?) within the Johannine community. During this period the pattern of sign followed by interpretative discourse was developed.

**Stage 3:** The first edition of the written gospel was composed, almost certainly by the teacher and preacher who was dominant in Stage 2. This figure becomes "the evangelist," although he may have had a scribe who did the actual writing. (Between 75 and 85 AD)

**Stage 4:** The same evangelist edited his previous work, possibly several times over several years.

**Stage 5:** A redactor (editor), probably a friend and disciple of the evangelist, did the final editing of the gospel as it comes down to us. This final editor is responsible for including in the Gospel materials which were available since Stage 2, but which "the evangelist" had not included in his first edition, nor in his subsequent revisions. These later additions by the redactor are the reason Jesus seems to repeat himself frequently in the Gospel of John. The redactor probably added the final chapter of the gospel also. (Between 90 and 100 AD)

### **Who is this "evangelist?"**

One who has customarily been identified as John, the son of Zebedee, but who has also been identified as "the disciple whom Jesus loved." This person certainly was a disciple of Jesus during Jesus' ministry, and he certainly was within the Johannine community; he may have been the one around whom the community formed. Was it the actual apostle, John, the son of Zebedee? Scholars disagree. But it really doesn't make a lot of difference whether the disciple

whom Jesus loved, John the Apostle and John the Evangelist were one and the same person. That's a matter of *history* which seems not yet to have been satisfactorily determined. The answer to that question does not affect the *mystery* that the author wants to convey.

### **The Johannine Community**

So, what was this Johannine community? It was located in or near Palestine, made up of Jews, perhaps some of them disciples of John the Baptist, who accepted Jesus as the Davidic messiah. Other Jews who were anti-temple and who were probably Samaritans accepted Jesus against a Mosaic background, as contrasted to a Davidic background. They helped crystalize the very high christology of Jesus coming down from God as Moses had come down the mountain after having been with God. This pre-existence of Jesus with the Father brought the community into conflict with other Jews in the synagogue who thought the community was abandoning monotheism and introducing a second God. Because of this these Jews had the Christians expelled from the synagogue, because of which John's Gospel seems hostile to "the Jews" (more on this shortly).

The "Moses-based" believers emphasized the divine nature of Jesus, who like Moses came down from God. They neglected the human nature of Jesus, and were uninterested in the moral conduct of their members, because in their opinion, all that was necessary for salvation was to believe in this divine Jesus. These soon broke with the "David-based community."

The "David-based" believers believed also in the reality of the humanity of Jesus and the efficacy of his life, death and resurrection for human salvation. They emphasized the importance of a moral life. These identified themselves with the "the disciple whom Jesus loved." From this community came the Johannine writings, both the gospel and the letters. After the division of the Christian community between Moses-based and David-based, the David-based may have moved from Palestine to Ephesus, where the gospel took its final shape.

### **Why and for whom was the Gospel written?**

The basic reason the Gospel was written was *to preserve and encourage the tradition and insights of the Johannine community*, which were based on the testimony of the disciple whom Jesus loved. There may have been secondary reasons which gave shape to the Gospel, but these should not be exaggerated. Perhaps John's Gospel is not as directed to specific groups or issues as Matthew's was. Matthew penned his Gospel with two things in mind: the embarrassment he felt because of what he found and did not find in Mark's Gospel, and the attitudes of the members of "their synagogue" who pestered Matthew's community. Nonetheless, there are in the formation of the Gospel of John some discernable further influences.

Perhaps an influence on the writing of the Gospel of John was *a refutation of a sectarian group of followers of John the Baptist*. John's Gospel makes clear in many places that Jesus, not John the Baptist, is the messiah.

While Matthew in his writing was arguing with the members of "their synagogue," John's Gospel is even stronger in this regard. Clearly this was not all the outlook of the evangelist only; Jesus himself was at odds with the leaders of the synagogue and temple. *John's emphasis on Jesus as the messiah and the anointed one of God in the first half of the Gospel shows how Jesus*

*is the replacement of many of the Jewish institutions* like ritual purification, the temple, worship in Jerusalem, and many Jewish feasts like Sabbath, Tabernacles, Passover and Dedication. The use of the term “the Jews” is almost a technical title for the religious authorities, particularly those in Jerusalem, who are hostile to Jesus.

So is John’s Gospel anti-Semitic? Not really. The Gospel speaks many times of “the Jews” when it is a designation of one’s ethnic origin only. At other times it is used to designate the people described in the Synoptic Gospels as Sadducees, Herodians, Zealots, tax collectors, etc., all of whom have disappeared from the scene and the consciousness of John’s audience, because they disappeared with the destruction of the temple. They are all lumped together and referred to as “the Jews.” The distinction between the two uses is sometimes obvious, as when an ethnic Jew refers to “the Jews.” For instance, the former cripple in 5:15, himself a Jew, informs “the Jews” that Jesus was his benefactor. The only Jewish authorities who appear in John’s Gospel are the chief priests and the Pharisees.

By the time John’s Gospel had been written, Jesus had been preached to Jews and Gentiles. The Jews who accepted Jesus were now thought of simply as Christians; those who rejected Jesus were known simply as “the Jews.” The evangelist is not anti-Semitic; he is condemning not a race or a people, but opposition of Jesus.

To answer further the question posed in the title of this section: the gospel was written also *as an appeal to those Jews who believed in Jesus, but who also remained true to synagogue worship in the diaspora*. In the year 90 AD there was added to the prayers in the synagogue a petition for the destruction of the heretics who believed in Jesus. This made it very difficult for the Jews who believed in Jesus to continue with their synagogue worship. John’s chapter 9, about the man born blind who argued with the Jewish authorities about who Jesus was, seems designed especially as an invitation to this audience.

### **When and where was the Gospel written?**

As we saw earlier there were stages in the composition of the Gospel of John. Here we are talking about the final version, including Chapter 21, stage 5 in what is written above. And we reiterate that it occurred between 90 and 100 AD. The best candidate for the place in which the final form of the Gospel was written is Ephesus.

### **Who is the author of the Fourth Gospel?**

In my own imagination, I envision that the disciple whom Jesus loved moved to Ephesus. He had some kind of a dwelling there, and in that dwelling was a room he used for writing. He wrote and discarded several versions of sections of his Gospel. He finished what he thought was his final version, and then he died. His disciples entered that room, and they found John’s finished manuscript. But they also found a lot of papyrus pages scattered around the room – fragments of earlier versions of his writings which he had changed and discarded. A disciple of his who was the final editor, finding these writings which the disciple whom Jesus loved had discarded, decided that they should not be lost, so he inserted them in places where he thought they fit the disciple’s narrative.

Right off the bat, then, we need to distinguish the *author* from the *writer or writers*. The author is the person whose ideas are expressed in the work, no matter who finally put those thoughts to papyrus. The writer, at least of the final document, is sometimes referred to as the *redactor*. Without any guarantee of certainty, the understanding which seemed to dominate critical scholarly research up to fifty years ago would identify John, the son of Zebedee and the brother of James, as “the disciple whom Jesus loved,” and as the *author* of the Fourth Gospel, and admit of perhaps several *writers* of the Gospel as it has come down to us. Further scholarship in the later 20th Century has raised new doubts about the authorship. It now seems that the *author* of the Gospel is “the disciple whom Jesus loved,” who is not Zebedee’s son. The *writer(s)* of the Gospel are probably many, with the *Redactor* or final editor in stage 5 as the writer of the final document as we receive it.

Once one distinguishes John the Apostle and the son of Zebedee as a person separate from “the disciple whom Jesus loved,” a discrepancy is introduced into our minds: if John the Apostle is not “the disciple whom Jesus loved,” there were more people at the last supper than only the apostles as we have usually supposed. Which, of course, affects only our understanding of the *history* behind the gospel, not the *mystery* which the gospel was written to reveal.

### **Relation of John to the synoptic gospels**

John seems not to be dependent on the synoptic gospels. However, we will give the cross references to the synoptics for each section of John’s Gospel.

### **So What?**

All this background may help readers of the Gospel better understand the situations which gave rise to its writing. However, this is all about the *history* of how the gospel came to be. The writings themselves are about *mystery*. That is the focus of the gospel, and it will be the focus of these reflections. The *history* behind the writings may give us insight into the reasons why and how the *mystery* was proclaimed. However it was formed, and by however many hands it took to shape it, the Gospel of John comes to us as a document of faith, from whose message we can gain life.

### **Format of these reflections**

In the treatment of the synoptic gospels, the assumption has been that the reader would read the text of the scriptures before reading the commentary. With John’s Gospel the assumption has changed. It is suggested that one read the commentary prior to reading the scripture text. John’s Gospel is so complex and compact with theological teachings that it may be helpful for the reader to be alerted to what to look for in reading the text. So, read the commentary in preparation for reading and understanding the text of scripture.

## The Prologue - 1:1-18

This prologue to the Gospel is thought to have existed as a hymn to Jesus prior to being appended to the rest of the Gospel. If that is the case, it has been reworked a bit by the author of the Gospel, and has had some non-poetic statements inserted. It can be regarded as sort of an overture stating the themes found in the rest of the Gospel. It tells us poetically and succinctly about what will be amplified throughout the rest of the Gospel:

- The Word's (Jesus') pre-existence with God
- The Word *is* God
- All things came to be through the Word
- What came to be through the Word was life
- This life was the light of the human race
- This light shines in the darkness
- The darkness cannot overcome it

The poetry is interrupted at verse 6 to tell of John the Baptist's origin ("sent by God") and mission ("for testimony, to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to testify to the light. The true light which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.") This was a required statement, because there were some disciples of John the Baptist who wanted to consider John the light.

- The Word was in the world, which was made by him, but the world didn't know him
- He came to what was his own, but his own people did not accept him

Again the poetry is interrupted a verse 12 to tell of those who did accept him. (The Word "gave power to become children of God to those who believed in his name, who were born not by natural generation nor by human choice nor by a man's decision but of God")

- The Word became flesh and made his dwelling [pitched his tent] among us
- And we saw his glory, the glory as of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth.

This time the prologue seems to be interrupted by verse 15, which more obviously belongs after verse 30. The train of thought continues more smoothly with verse 16: From his fullness we have all received, grace in place of grace, for while the law was given through Moses (grace), grace and truth came through Jesus Christ (the grace in place of the previous grace of the Law.)

It seems now that the poetic prologue continues prosaically with the final verse: No one has ever seen God. The only Son, God, who is at the Father's side, has revealed him.

1 In the beginning was the Word,  
and the Word was with God,  
and the Word was God.

2 He was in the beginning with God.

3 All things came to be through him,  
and without him nothing came to be.

What came to be 4 through him was life,  
and this life was the light of the human race;

5 the light shines in the darkness,  
and the darkness has not overcome it.

6 A man named John was sent from God. 7 He came for testimony, 6 to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. 8 He was not the light, but came to testify to the light.

9 The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

10 He was in the world,  
and the world came to be through him,  
but the world did not know him.

11 He came to what was his own,  
but his own people did not accept him.

12 But to those who did accept him he gave power to become children of God, to those who believe in his name, 13 who were born not by natural generation nor by human choice nor by a man's decision but of God.

14 And the Word became flesh  
and made his dwelling among us,  
and we saw his glory,  
the glory as of the Father's only Son,  
full of grace and truth.

15 John testified to him and cried out, saying, "This was he of whom I said, "The one who is coming after me ranks ahead of me because he existed before me." 16 From his fullness we have all received, grace in place of grace, 17 because while the law was given through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. 18 No one has ever seen God. The only Son, God, who is at the Father's side, has revealed him.

## The Book of Signs - 1:19-12:50

The Gospel of John is divided into four segments: the Prologue (1:1-18), the Book of Signs (1:19-12:50), the Book of Glory (13:1-20:31), the Epilogue (21:1-25). Prominent scripture scholars have divided the Book of Signs into four sections, which will be followed here.

What follows here are commentary and reflection on the scripture. But the style of stories is captivating, and they need to be read just for the pleasure of reading them.

Some phrases or sentences will be starred (\*) and *italicized* throughout these reflections, although the reason for that will not be obvious until chapter 20, at which point the passages will be gathered together into a coherent revelation which is peculiar to John's Gospel.

### Section One: First Week of the New Creation - 1:19-2:11

This first section is a very clever introduction of Jesus under several of his titles. John wants to tell us right away who Jesus is. He uses this part of Chapter 1 to introduce very cleverly many of the titles for Jesus that the other evangelists scatter throughout their gospels, thus doing at the beginning of his Gospel what the other evangelists did only by the end of theirs. This will be indicated in the text in ***bold and italicize*** words in the text. It's almost as if John's Gospel takes up where the others left off. Those titles are: Lamb of God, one sent by God, God's chosen one (or Son), teacher, Messiah, Son of God, King of Israel, Son of Man.

1:19-34 - John's testimony [Luke 3:15]

Some Jews from Jerusalem sent priests and Levites (they would have been Sadducees, although in John's Gospel they are never identified that way) to ask John who he was. John admitted immediately that he was not the Messiah. They asked specifically if he were Elijah (who was expected to return prior to the arrival of the Messiah), and John said he was not; and they asked if he were the Prophet (Moses) and he said he was not. He quoted Isaiah by saying that he was the voice of one crying in the desert "Make straight the way of the Lord."

Some Pharisees were also sent to ask John why he was baptizing if he weren't the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet. He said that he baptized with water, but a greater than he was coming.

The next day, John saw Jesus coming toward him, and he said, "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." This could refer to the Paschal lamb, or to the Suffering Servant who was led to slaughter like a lamb. John said that he had not known him, but that Jesus was the one he was sent to make known, because he saw the Spirit descending upon him, and he had been told that the one on whom he saw the Spirit descending was the one who was going to *\*baptize with the Holy Spirit*. He added, "Now I have seen and testified that he is the Son of God."

19 And this is the testimony of John. When the Jews from Jerusalem sent priests and Levites (to him) to ask him, "Who are you?" 20 he admitted and did not deny it, but admitted, "I am not the Messiah." 21 So they asked him, "What are you then? Are you Elijah?" 16 And he said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" He answered, "No." 22 So they said to him, "Who are you, so we can give an answer to those who sent us? What do you have to say for

yourself?" 23 He said: "I am 'the voice of one crying out in the desert, "Make straight the way of the Lord,'" as Isaiah the prophet said." 24 Some Pharisees were also sent. 25 They asked him, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Messiah or Elijah or the Prophet?" 26 John answered them, "I baptize with water; but there is one among you whom you do not recognize, 27 the one who is coming after me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to untie." 28 This happened in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing. 29 The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Behold, the **Lamb of God**, who takes away the sin of the world. 30 He is the one of whom I said, 'A man is coming after me who ranks ahead of me because he existed before me.' 31 I did not know him, but the reason why I came baptizing with water was that he might be made known to Israel." 32 John testified further, saying, *"I saw the Spirit come down like a dove from the sky and remain upon him. 33 I did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'On whomever you see the Spirit come down and remain, he is the one who will baptize with the holy Spirit.'* 34 Now I have seen and testified that he is the **Son of God**."

1:35-51 - The first disciples [Mark 1:16-20; Matthew 4:18-22; Luke 5:1-11]

The following day, John was again baptizing and he watched Jesus walk by, and again he said, "Behold the Lamb of God." [This or the previous story may be an example of a duplicate story of the same event, which a final editor found in a fragment among the writings, and wanted it not to be lost, so stuck it in here.]

Two of John's disciples heard what the Baptist had said and followed Jesus. One of them was Andrew, the brother of Peter. The other disciple is never identified, but tradition has identified him as John, the son of Zebedee. Andrew gets his brother, Peter. Jesus sees them coming and asks, "What are you looking for?" (‡) They asked where Jesus was staying, and he said, "Come and you will see." (‡)

"The next day" Jesus decided to go to Galilee where he saw and called Philip. John's theology is definitely profound, but his sense of time and location lacks something. One cannot go from Judea to Galilee in one day, and be back in Judea the next day. How Jesus called Peter and Andrew while he was in Judea is a mystery, because, like Philip, Peter and Andrew were from the Galilean town of Bethsaida. But geography is not what John is trying to teach.

Philip found Nathaniel and told him that they had found the one written about in the Law, and told him that this one they found was from Nazareth, to which Nathaniel said, "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" Philip said, "Come and see." When Jesus saw Nathaniel coming toward him, he said, "Here is a true Israelite. There is no duplicity in him," which of course startled Nathaniel, who asked, "How do you know me?" And Jesus' reply startled him even more, because Jesus said he had seen Nathaniel under the fig tree before Philip called him. And Nathaniel replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God, the King of Israel." To which Jesus said basically, "You ain't seen nothing yet!" The angels descending and ascending is an allusion to Jacob's ladder in Genesis 28:12.

35 The next day John was there again with two of his disciples, 36 and as he watched Jesus walk by, he said, "Behold, the **Lamb of God**." 37 The two disciples 27 heard what he said and followed Jesus. 38 Jesus turned and saw them following him and said to them, "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "Rabbi" (which translated means **Teacher**), "where are you staying?" 39 He said to them, "Come, and you will see." So they went and saw where he was staying, and they stayed with him that day. It was about four in the afternoon. 40 Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter, was one of the two who heard John and followed Jesus. 41 He first found his own brother Simon and told him, "We have found the **Messiah**" 29 (which is translated Anointed). 42 Then he brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, "You are Simon the son of John; 30 you will be called Kephas" (which is translated Peter).

43 The next day he decided to go to Galilee, and he found Philip. And Jesus said to him, "Follow me." 44 Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the town of Andrew and Peter. 45 Philip found Nathanael and told him, "We have found the one about whom Moses wrote in the law, and also the prophets, Jesus, son of Joseph, from Nazareth." 46 But Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." 47 Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, "Here is a true Israelite. 32 There is no duplicity in him." 48 Nathanael said to him, "How do you know me?" Jesus answered and said to him, "Before Philip called you, I saw you under the fig tree." 49 Nathanael answered him, "Rabbi, you are the *Son of God*; 34 you are the *King of Israel*." 50 Jesus answered and said to him, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than this." 51 And he said to him, "Amen, amen, I say to you, you will see the sky opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the *Son of Man*."

## 2:1-13 - Water into wine at Cana (First sign)

In John's Gospel, "sign" is either a miracle or a prediction by Jesus of future events. John calls them "signs" rather than "works of power," as the other evangelists do, because John wants to direct his readers' attention, not only to the miracle or the prediction itself, but to what lies beyond the miracle or prediction, to what it symbolizes.

The water in the jars was to be used for the Jewish purification rites. The sign of the water changing into wine symbolizes Jesus' replacing of the Jewish purification rites with the water of baptism. And the wine is so good that the head waiter wonders why it wasn't served earlier. The wonderful wine is a symbol of the revelation and wisdom Jesus brings from God. It fulfills the prophecy of Amos 9:13-14:

The mountains shall drip with the juice of the grapes,  
and all the hills shall run with it.  
I shall restore my people Israel,  
they shall . . . plant vineyards and drink the wine.

Mary's role and her interaction with Jesus set a precedent for the second Cana sign. Jesus at first rebuff's Mary's request that he do something about the shortage of wine, because his *hour* has not yet come. Jesus' *hour* is his glorification by his passion, death and resurrection. But she persists by telling the servants to do whatever Jesus tells them to do. The only other time Mary appears in the Gospel of John is at the foot of the cross, when Jesus' *hour* has come and Jesus gives her to the disciple whom Jesus loves as his mother.

In the second Cana sign, the same pattern will reappear: it is the royal official who is at first rebuffed by Jesus, but he too persists in his plea.

1 On the third day there was a wedding 2 in Cana 3 in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. 2 Jesus and his disciples were also invited to the wedding. 3 When the wine ran short, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." 4 (And) Jesus said to her, "Woman, how does your concern affect me? My hour has not yet come." 5 His mother said to the servers, "Do whatever he tells you." 6 Now there were six stone water jars there for Jewish ceremonial washings, each holding twenty to thirty gallons. 7 Jesus told them, "Fill the jars with water." So they filled them to the brim. 8 Then he told them, "Draw some out now and take it to the headwaiter." So they took it. 9 And when the headwaiter tasted the water that had become wine, without knowing where it came from (although the servers who had drawn the water knew), the headwaiter called the bridegroom 10 and said to him, "Everyone serves good wine first, and then when people have drunk freely, an inferior one; but you have kept the good wine until now." 11 Jesus did this as the beginning of his signs in Cana in Galilee and so revealed his glory, and his disciples began to believe in him. 12 After this, he and his mother, (his) brothers, and his disciples went down to Capernaum and stayed there only a few days.

## Section Two: Replacing Jewish Institutions - 2:13-4:54

2:13-25 - Cleansing of the temple [Mark 11:15-17; Matthew 21:12-13; Luke 19:45-46]

The other evangelists place this scene at the end of their gospels; John has it at Jesus' first visit to Jerusalem. (But then, the other evangelists narrate only one visit of Jesus to Jerusalem; John has three visits.)

The story is straightforward enough. It's the dialogue between Jesus and "the Jews" which contains the message John wants to give. In that dialogue "the Jews" want to know by what authority Jesus is messing up the temple practices. Jesus replies, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up." Note that Jesus says, *You* destroy this temple and *I* will raise it up. John, the narrator, intervenes in verse 21 and says that Jesus was speaking of the temple of his body. In John's Gospel, unlike the synoptics where it is always said that God raised Jesus from the dead, Jesus says that he will rise. This is so because in 10:30, Jesus will say that "The Father and I are one."

Coming to belief in Jesus is a gradual thing. John tells us that people saw what Jesus did, and they *began* to believe in him; but their faith does not go beyond what they can see. The deeper meaning of the events escapes them. The disciples saw what Jesus did, but John tells us that it was after the resurrection that they remembered what Jesus had said, and then they came to believe.

The point John is making here is that Jesus in his own body *replaces the temple* as the holy place where God resides. This also implies that the Church replaces temple, because the Church is the body of Christ. So now, Jesus has replaced the ritual purification rites and the temple.

13 Since the Passover of the Jews was near, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. 14 He found in the temple area those who sold oxen, sheep, and doves, as well as the money-changers seated there. 15 He made a whip out of cords and drove them all out of the temple area, with the sheep and oxen, and spilled the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables, 16 and to those who sold doves he said, "Take these out of here, and stop making my Father's house a marketplace." 17 His disciples recalled the words of scripture, "Zeal for your house will consume me." 18 At this the Jews answered and said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" 19 Jesus answered and said to them, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up." 20 The Jews said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, 16 and you will raise it up in three days?" 21 But he was speaking about the temple of his body. 22 Therefore, when he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they came to believe the scripture and the word Jesus had spoken.

23 While he was in Jerusalem for the feast of Passover, many began to believe in his name when they saw the signs he was doing. 24 But Jesus would not trust himself to them because he knew them all, and did not need anyone to testify about human nature. He himself understood it well.

3:1-15 - Nicodemus

Here's an example of one who has *begun* to believe. At least he believes enough to come to Jesus at night (from out of the dark, for John a symbol of evil or ignorance) and admits that he believes Jesus is a teacher who has "come from God," by which he means "raised up by God." Of course, John's readers know of a deeper meaning of what Nicodemus says, because they know that Jesus actually came from God. Nicodemus' faith came this far because of the signs

Jesus has performed. Through the dialogue from this straight forward story, John weaves a complex and profound message.

Jesus' response to Nicodemus' statement is, "No one can see the kingdom of God without being born *from above*." Nicodemus misunderstands what Jesus means, and so he asks incredulously, "How can a person once grown old be born *again*?" It's no wonder Nicodemus misunderstands, because the Greek word which is used can mean either "from above" or "again." This is the first play on words in the dialogue. (Although it's not an exact parallel, probably the closest we can get in English is the word "over," which can mean "again" and "above." One who is born "over" could possibly mean one who is born again and one who is born above, as in "over the store.")

Jesus continues the dialogue with a formal pronouncement, "Amen, amen, I say to you, "No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of flesh is flesh and what is born of spirit is spirit." Being born into the community of Israel (being born of the flesh) was considered to make one a child of God, because Israel was God's child. That is flesh born of flesh. The real children of God are those born of the Spirit. So Jesus tells Nicodemus, "Do not be amazed that I told you, 'You must be born from above.'" In effect, Jesus is saying that being born a descendent of Abraham is no longer sufficient; you must be born from above. Jesus is replacing the privileged position of being a member of God's chosen people.

In a second play on words, Jesus says, "The wind blows where it wills and you can hear the sound it makes, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes; so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." "Wind" and "spirit" both translate the single Greek word *Pneuma*, which is used here. This is the second play on words.

Nicodemus asks, "How can this happen?" After chiding Nicodemus for being a teacher who does not understand these things, Jesus begins a monologue, "If I tell you about earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has gone up to heaven except the one who has come down from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life."

"Lifted up" also has two meanings. It means Jesus' being lifted up on the cross, as the serpent was lifted on a pole by Moses, so that whoever looked on the serpent was saved. It also means Jesus being lifted up in his resurrection.

1 Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. 2 He came to Jesus at night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these signs that you are doing unless God is with him." 3 Jesus answered and said to him, "Amen, amen, I say to you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." 4 Nicodemus said to him, "How can a person once grown old be born again? Surely he cannot reenter his mother's womb and be born again, can he?" 5 Jesus answered, "Amen, amen, I say to you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. 6 What is born of flesh is flesh and what is born of spirit is spirit. 7 Do not be amazed that I told you, 'You must be born from above.' 8 The wind blows where it wills, and you can hear the sound it makes, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes; so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." 9 Nicodemus answered and said to him, "How can this happen?" 10 Jesus answered and said to him, "You are the teacher of Israel and you do not understand this? 11 Amen, amen, I say to you, we speak of what we know and we testify to what we have seen, but you people do not accept our testimony. 12 If I tell you about earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? 13 No one has gone up to heaven except the one who has come down from heaven, the Son of Man. 14 And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life."

### 3:16-21 - John addresses his readers

There's really not much that needs to be said by way of commentary, except to direct our attention back to 1:2-3. In the body of the Gospel, this is the first assertion of Jesus' mission from the Father. Some people prefer the darkness to the light, because their deeds are evil. If they remain in darkness, Jesus will not need to condemn them, because by their choice of darkness, they condemn themselves. But 1:2-3 assures us that the darkness does not overcome the light.

16 For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. 18 Whoever believes in him will not be condemned, but whoever does not believe has already been condemned, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. 19 And this is the verdict, that the light came into the world, but people preferred darkness to light, because their works were evil. 20 For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come toward the light, so that his works might not be exposed. 21 But whoever lives the truth comes to the light, so that his works may be clearly seen as done in God.

### 3:22-30 - Final witness of John the Baptist

Here it says that Jesus was baptizing, although it says in 4:2 that Jesus was not baptizing, only his disciples were. There is evidence into the late 2nd Century that there were still followers of John the Baptist who claimed that John was the messiah, not Jesus. This reiteration of the Baptist's witness to Jesus may stem from that same reality in the late 1st Century. If the message of the relative importance of Jesus and John were still in doubt, this passage could have put an end to the discussion once and for all.

22 After this, Jesus and his disciples went into the region of Judea, where he spent some time with them baptizing. 23 John was also baptizing in Aenon near Salim, because there was an abundance of water there, and people came to be baptized, 24 for John had not yet been imprisoned. 25 Now a dispute arose between the disciples of John and a Jew about ceremonial washings. 26 So they came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, the one who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you testified, here he is baptizing and everyone is coming to him." 27 John answered and said, "No one can receive anything except what has been given him from heaven. 28 You yourselves can testify that I said (that) I am not the Messiah, but that I was sent before him. 29 The one who has the bride is the bridegroom; the best man, who stands and listens for him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. So this joy of mine has been made complete. 30 He must increase; I must decrease."

### 3:31-36 - John addresses his readers again

If it weren't for the quotation marks closing the previous section, this could be understood as a continuation of the witness of John the Baptist. But this is John the Evangelist addressing his readers again. This is also one of those sections which most likely was added by the final redactor. The things said here have already been said in 3:7, 11-13, 15-18.

31 The one who comes from above is above all. The one who is of the earth is earthly and speaks of earthly things. But the one who comes from heaven (is above all). 32 He testifies to what he has seen and heard, but no one

accepts his testimony. 33 Whoever does accept his testimony certifies that God is trustworthy. 34 For the one whom God sent speaks the words of God. He does not ration his gift of the Spirit. 35 The Father loves the Son and has given everything over to him. 36 Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God remains upon him.

#### 4:1-3 - Transition

The redactor is correcting the impression given earlier in 3:22 that Jesus was baptizing; it was only the disciples who were baptizing. The baptism which the disciples were administering was not baptism of the Spirit, but probably in imitation of John's baptism. For whatever reason, Jesus left Judea and returned to Galilee.

1 Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John 2 (although Jesus himself was not baptizing, just his disciples), 3 he left Judea and returned to Galilee.

#### 4:4-42 - The Samaritan woman

On his way back to Galilee, Jesus passed through Samaria. This is John's theological, not geographical, necessity; most times Jews bypassed Samaria by going by a route beyond the Jordan.

4 He had to pass through Samaria. 5 So he came to a town of Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of land that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. 6 Jacob's well was there. Jesus, tired from his journey, sat down there at the well. It was about noon.

Samaritan women were regarded by the Jews as unclean; therefore Jesus would have been forbidden to drink from a vessel handled by such a woman. Jesus says to the woman, "If you knew who is saying to you . . ." Jesus himself is the gift of God. The next "misunderstanding" is over "living water." The woman understands "flowing water," which was better than the stagnant water of a well. The Christian readers would probably see this as a symbol of baptism. The woman addresses Jesus as "Sir." The Greek word is "Kyrie," meaning "Lord." It is the Greek translation of the Hebrew, "Adonai," which was the word always used by Jews in place of the sacred name for God, "YHWH." So John's use of the word here has theological meaning: the woman is addressing Jesus as God, as she will again in verse 19, but she doesn't know what she is saying. When the woman asks Jesus if he is greater than Jacob who gave them the well, the question is again full of irony; the woman doesn't think Jesus is greater, but he is! All she really wants is some of this "living" water which would mean she wouldn't have to come to the well every day.

7 A woman of Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." 8 His disciples had gone into the town to buy food. 9 The Samaritan woman said to him, "How can you, a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink?" (For Jews use nothing in common with Samaritans.) 10 Jesus answered and said to her, "If you knew the gift of God and who is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him and he would have given you living water." 11 (The woman) said to him, "Sir, you do not even have a bucket and the cistern is deep; where then can you get this living water? 12 Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us this cistern and drank from it himself with his children and his flocks?" 13 Jesus answered and said to her, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again; 14 but whoever drinks the water I shall give will never thirst; the water I shall give will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." 15 The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may not be

thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

Jesus abruptly changes the subject by telling the woman to call her husband, to which she responds that she doesn't have a husband, to which Jesus says, "You're right!" Having been invited by Jesus to consider the morality of her behavior, she decided it was time to begin a theological discussion instead (‡): where is the right place to worship God? The days are coming when neither Jerusalem, where the Jews worshiped, nor Mount Gerizim, where the Samaritans worshiped, will be the place of God's dwelling. The claims of both places are refuted: Jesus is the place where God resides.

Verse 25 is a little strange because the Samaritans did not look for a messiah, but for a prophet like Moses. Perhaps John is deliberately "making this mistake" because he is directing his writing to people who would not know of Samaritan beliefs.

Part of the beauty and the irony which John builds into the conversation is that Jesus (whom the woman calls "Lord" and therefore "God") and the woman are discussing where one ought to worship God. Jesus' ultimate revelation to the woman, which she is not expected to understand, and in fact doesn't, is when Jesus says in verse 26, "I am he." In Greek that is "ego emi," the name God gave himself when speaking to Moses.

16 Jesus said to her, "Go call your husband and come back." 17 The woman answered and said to him, "I do not have a husband." Jesus answered her, "You are right in saying, 'I do not have a husband.'" 18 For you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true." 19 The woman said to him, "Sir, I can see that you are a prophet. 20 Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain; 8 but you people say that the place to worship is in Jerusalem." 21 Jesus said to her, "Believe me, woman, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. 22 You people worship what you do not understand; we worship what we understand, because salvation is from the Jews. 23 But the hour is coming, and is now here, when true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and truth; and indeed the Father seeks such people to worship him. 24 God is Spirit, and those who worship him must worship in Spirit and truth." 25 The woman said to him, "I know that the Messiah is coming, the one called the Anointed; when he comes, he will tell us everything." 26 Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking with you."

The disciples also lack understanding about the food Jesus has, namely to do the will of his Father, and they talk about harvest. The sower and the reaper will rejoice together, not having to wait four months between sowing and reaping. The woman sowed the seed in the hearts of the townsfolk, and they believed; they were ready for harvesting.

By going back into town to tell the folks what she has experienced, the woman becomes the evangelizer of the town. And the townsfolk respond at least to the point of going out to see for themselves.

27 At that moment his disciples returned, and were amazed that he was talking with a woman, but still no one said, "What are you looking for?" or "Why are you talking with her?" 28 The woman left her water jar and went into the town and said to the people, 29 "Come see a man who told me everything I have done. Could he possibly be the Messiah?" 30 They went out of the town and came to him. 31 Meanwhile, the disciples urged him, "Rabbi, eat." 32 But he said to them, "I have food to eat of which you do not know." 33 So the disciples said to one another, "Could someone have brought him something to eat?" 34 Jesus said to them, "My food is to do

the will of the one who sent me and to finish his work. 35 Do you not say, 'In four months the harvest will be here'? I tell you, look up and see the fields ripe for the harvest. 36 The reaper is already receiving his payment and gathering crops for eternal life, so that the sower and reaper can rejoice together. 37 For here the saying is verified that 'One sows and another reaps.' 38 I sent you to reap what you have not worked for; others have done the work, and you are sharing the fruits of their work."

Because of the evangelization of the woman many townsfolk began to believe. But they went to experience Jesus for themselves, and they ended up professing their faith in Jesus.

39 Many of the Samaritans of that town began to believe in him because of the word of the woman who testified, "He told me everything I have done." 40 When the Samaritans came to him, they invited him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. 41 Many more began to believe in him because of his word, 42 and they said to the woman, "We no longer believe because of your word; for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the savior of the world."

4:43-45 - Continuing on to Galilee [Mark 6:4; Matthew 13:57; Luke 4:24]

John reports that Jesus said that a prophet has no honor in his native place suggests that this saying was widespread in Christian circles. All four evangelists make reference to it. But it is thought that John did not have copies of any of the other evangelists while he was writing.

43 After the two days, he left there for Galilee. 44 For Jesus himself testified that a prophet has no honor in his native place. 45 When he came into Galilee, the Galileans welcomed him, since they had seen all he had done in Jerusalem at the feast; for they themselves had gone to the feast.

4:46-54 - Cure of official's son [Mark 7:24-30; Matthew 8:5-13; Luke 7:1-10] (second sign)

This is the second sign to take place in Cana of Galilee. This is perhaps the culmination of the two preceding stories. Nicodemus (a Jew) didn't make it to faith in the "being born from above by water and the spirit." The Samaritans (half-Jews) came to believe. And now a royal official (a gentile, perhaps) comes to believe.

As in the first sign in Cana, when Jesus rebuffed Mary's initial petition, but responded because of her perseverance, so in this sign, Jesus rebuffs the royal official initial request, but rewards his persistence by granting his request.

46 Then he returned to Cana in Galilee, where he had made the water wine. Now there was a royal official whose son was ill in Capernaum. 47 When he heard that Jesus had arrived in Galilee from Judea, he went to him and asked him to come down and heal his son, who was near death. 48 Jesus said to him, "Unless you people see signs and wonders, you will not believe." 49 The royal official said to him, "Sir, come down before my child dies." 50 Jesus said to him, "You may go; your son will live." The man believed what Jesus said to him and left. 51 While he was on his way back, his slaves met him and told him that his boy would live. 52 He asked them when he began to recover. They told him, "The fever left him yesterday, about one in the afternoon." 53 The father realized that just at that time Jesus had said to him, "Your son will live," and he and his whole household came to believe. 54 (Now) this was the second sign Jesus did when he came to Galilee from Judea.

This concludes Section 2 of John's Book of Signs. We have seen Jesus replace the temple as the place where God resides, the Jewish purification rites (with Baptism), the importance of natural birth into the Chosen People. He now moves on to replace important Jewish feasts.

### Section Three: Replacing Jewish Feasts - 5:1-10:42

Besides the major theme of replacing Jewish feasts, there are two other motifs in this section: the theme of life in Chapters 5-6, and the theme of light in Chapters 7-10.

#### The Life Motif

5:1-47 - Jesus heals (gives life) on the Sabbath (Replacing the Sabbath) (third sign)

As is typical of John's Book of Signs, we have here a miracle (sign) followed by discourse. The sign is curing the man on the Sabbath. That in itself was breaking the traditions of the elders about working on the Sabbath. Worse still, Jesus commands the cured man to take up his bed and go; carrying a bed on the Sabbath was also against the traditions of the elders. Could it get any worse? Of course. In the dialogue which follows, Jesus claims to be God! That really got them upset, and it led them to want to kill him.

1 After this, there was a feast of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. 2 Now there is in Jerusalem at the Sheep (Gate) a pool called in Hebrew Bethesda, with five porticoes. 3 In these lay a large number of ill, blind, lame, and crippled. [4 is no longer included] 5 One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. 6 When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been ill for a long time, he said to him, "Do you want to be well?" 7 The sick man answered him, "Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; while I am on my way, someone else gets down there before me." 8 Jesus said to him, "Rise, take up your mat, and walk." 9 Immediately the man became well, took up his mat, and walked.

Now that day was a Sabbath. 10 So the Jews said to the man who was cured, "It is the Sabbath, and it is not lawful for you to carry your mat." 11 He answered them, "The man who made me well told me, 'Take up your mat and walk.'" 12 They asked him, "Who is the man who told you, 'Take it up and walk?'" 13 The man who was healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had slipped away, since there was a crowd there. 14 After this Jesus found him in the temple area and said to him, "Look, you are well; do not sin any more, so that nothing worse may happen to you." 15 The man went and told the Jews that Jesus was the one who had made him well. 16 Therefore, the Jews began to persecute Jesus because he did this on a Sabbath. 17 But Jesus answered them, "My Father is at work until now, so I am at work." 18 For this reason the Jews tried all the more to kill him, because he not only broke the Sabbath but he also called God his own father, making himself equal to God.

In his discourse, Jesus claims to work on the Sabbath because his Father works on the Sabbath. That the Father works on the Sabbath is obvious because people are born and die on the Sabbath; so the Father gives life and judges those who die on the Sabbath. The Son, who can do only as he sees the Father doing, also works on the Sabbath to give life. Jesus claims that even the work of judging has been given over to the Son. This draws on the presumption that between the Father and the Son there is a master/apprentice relationship. Since the Son is the one who does the judging, people had better believe in the one who sent the Son, because it is through believing in him that they will have eternal life and not come to judgment. Just as the Father gives life on the Sabbath, so the Son gives life to whomever he wishes.

And the Father has given all judgment over to the Son. The days are coming when the dead will come out of their graves to be judged; those who have done good will enter the resurrection to eternal life, but those who have done evil will enter into a resurrection of condemnation.

This is what really stuck in the craw of the Jewish leaders: Jesus was clearly claiming equality with God. And that seemed to fly in the face of the most basic tenet of the Jewish faith, namely: "The Lord our God is one."

19 Jesus answered and said to them, "Amen, amen, I say to you, a son cannot do anything on his own, but only what he sees his father doing; for what he does, his son will do also. 20 For the Father loves his Son and shows him everything that he himself does, and he will show him greater works than these, so that you may be amazed. 21 For just as the Father raises the dead and gives life, so also does the Son give life to whomever he wishes. 22 Nor does the Father judge anyone, but he has given all judgment to his Son, 23 so that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him. 24 Amen, amen, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes in the one who sent me has eternal life and will not come to condemnation, but has passed from death to life. 25 Amen, amen, I say to you, the hour is coming and is now here when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. 26 For just as the Father has life in himself, so also he gave to his Son the possession of life in himself. 27 And he gave him power to exercise judgment, because he is the Son of Man. 28 Do not be amazed at this, because the hour is coming in which all who are in the tombs will hear his voice 29 and will come out, those who have done good deeds to the resurrection of life, but those who have done wicked deeds to the resurrection of condemnation.

30 "I cannot do anything on my own; I judge as I hear, and my judgment is just, because I do not seek my own will but the will of the one who sent me.

It was Jewish law that specified that one whose only testimony was his/her own was not sufficient. There had to be two other witnesses who corroborated that individual's testimony. Jesus claims to have two such witnesses. The first is John the Baptist who testified to Jesus. But the second witness is even greater: the Father. The works that the Father gave Jesus to do testify that it is the Father who sent him. Why? Because Jesus' works are, among other things, to give life, as the Father gives life. The Jews don't have life, Jesus says, because they don't believe in the one whom the Father has sent. And they even have the scriptures which testify to him, but they still don't believe.

Jesus says that the Jewish authorities accept praise from one another, but that he, Jesus, has need of no such praise. His praise comes from the Father. Jesus says further that he will not be the one to condemn them; Moses already condemns them, because Moses wrote about Jesus, and "if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?"

So Jesus has five witnesses who testify for him: God, John the Baptist, the works that Jesus is doing, the scripture, and Moses.

31 "If I testify on my own behalf, my testimony cannot be verified. 32 But there is another who testifies on my behalf, and I know that the testimony he gives on my behalf is true. 33 You sent emissaries to John, and he testified to the truth. 34 I do not accept testimony from a human being, but I say this so that you may be saved. 35 He was a burning and shining lamp, 13 and for a while you were content to rejoice in his light. 36 But I have testimony greater than John's. The works that the Father gave me to accomplish, these works that I perform testify on my behalf that the Father has sent me. 37 Moreover, the Father who sent me has testified on my behalf. But you have never heard his voice nor seen his form, 38 and you do not have his word remaining in you, because you do not believe in the one whom he has sent. 39 You search the scriptures, because you think you have eternal life through them; even they testify on my behalf. 40 But you do not want to come to me to have life.

41 "I do not accept human praise; 42 moreover, I know that you do not have the love of God in you. 43 I came in the name of my Father, but you do not accept me; yet if another comes in his own name, you will accept him. 44 How can you believe, when you accept praise from one another and do not seek the praise that comes from the only God? 45 Do not think that I will accuse you before the Father: the one who will accuse you is Moses, in

whom you have placed your hope. 46 For if you had believed Moses, you would have believed me, because he wrote about me. 47 But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?"

6:1-71 - Loaves (Replacing Passover) [Mark 6:34-52; Matthew 14:13-33; Luke 9:10-17] (fourth and fifth signs)

In verses 1 to 21, John narrates two signs which Jesus performed: multiplication of loaves and walking on the water. The combination of eating bread and walking on the water is reflective of the stories of Moses, who after the first Passover, experienced the manna in the desert and the crossing of the Red Sea.

John obviously intended this section of his Gospel to have eucharistic meaning. When he says that Jesus "gave thanks," the Greek word is "*eucharisteo*," the root meaning of the Christian celebration of the Eucharist. When Jesus says that the disciples should gather up the fragments, the Greek word for fragments is "*klasma*," which in earliest Christianity is the word for "host."

Jesus' walking on the sea may be a further teaching on the mysterious presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. The command, "It is I; do not be afraid" is again Jesus' use of God's name, *ego emi*.

1 After this, Jesus went across the Sea of Galilee (of Tiberias). 2 A large crowd followed him, because they saw the signs he was performing on the sick. 3 Jesus went up on the mountain, and there he sat down with his disciples. 4 The Jewish feast of Passover was near. 5 When Jesus raised his eyes and saw that a large crowd was coming to him, he said to Philip, "Where can we buy enough food for them to eat?" 6 He said this to test him, because he himself knew what he was going to do. 7 Philip answered him, "Two hundred days' wages worth of food would not be enough for each of them to have a little (bit)." 8 One of his disciples, Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter, said to him, 9 "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish; but what good are these for so many?" 10 Jesus said, "Have the people recline." Now there was a great deal of grass in that place. So the men reclined, about five thousand in number. 11 Then Jesus took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed them to those who were reclining, and also as much of the fish as they wanted. 12 When they had had their fill, he said to his disciples, "Gather the fragments left over, so that nothing will be wasted." 13 So they collected them, and filled twelve wicker baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves that had been more than they could eat. 14 When the people saw the sign he had done, they said, "This is truly the Prophet, the one who is to come into the world." 15 Since Jesus knew that they were going to come and carry him off to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain alone.

16 When it was evening, his disciples went down to the sea, 17 embarked in a boat, and went across the sea to Capernaum. It had already grown dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them.

18 The sea was stirred up because a strong wind was blowing. 19 When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they began to be afraid. 20 But he said to them, "It is I. Do not be afraid." 21 They wanted to take him into the boat, but the boat immediately arrived at the shore to which they were heading.

From verse 22 to verse 71, John records Jesus' discourse concerning the meaning of the signs. It's a constant theme in John that people see the sign and begin to believe, but don't see the deeper meaning beyond the sign, and when Jesus speaks of that, many fall away. In this case, after eating their fill of physical bread, they want to make Jesus king. But after Jesus' discourse on the meaning of the bread, many walk away.

22 The next day, the crowd that remained across the sea saw that there had been only one boat there, and that Jesus had not gone along with his disciples in the boat, but only his disciples had left. 23 Other boats came from

Tiberias near the place where they had eaten the bread when the Lord gave thanks. 24 When the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into boats and came to Capernaum looking for Jesus. 25 And when they found him across the sea they said to him, "Rabbi, when did you get here?" 26 Jesus answered them and said, "Amen, amen, I say to you, you are looking for me not because you saw signs but because you ate the loaves and were filled. 27 Do not work for food that perishes but for the food that endures for eternal life, 15 which the Son of Man will give you. For on him the Father, God, has set his seal." 28 So they said to him, "What can we do to accomplish the works of God?" 29 Jesus answered and said to them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in the one he sent." 30 So they said to him, "What sign can you do, that we may see and believe in you? What can you do? 31 Our ancestors ate manna in the desert, as it is written: 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" 32 So Jesus said to them, "Amen, amen, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave the bread from heaven; my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. 33 For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."

That Jesus is nourishment for the world is shown in two ways. First in verses 34 to 51, Jesus is the Bread of Life in the sense that his revelation constitutes teaching by God (wisdom), so one must believe in the Son in order to have eternal life. Even the note in verse 41 that some disciples murmured is reminiscent of the people murmuring about the manna during their desert trek.

34 So they said to him, "Sir, give us this bread always." 35 Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst. 36 But I told you that although you have seen (me), you do not believe. 37 Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and I will not reject anyone who comes to me, 38 because I came down from heaven not to do my own will but the will of the one who sent me. 39 And this is the will of the one who sent me, that I should not lose anything of what he gave me, but that I should raise it (on) the last day. 40 For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in him may have eternal life, and I shall raise him (on) the last day."

41 The Jews murmured about him because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven," 42 and they said, "Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph? Do we not know his father and mother? Then how can he say, 'I have come down from heaven?'" 43 Jesus answered and said to them, "Stop murmuring among yourselves. 44 No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draw him, and I will raise him on the last day. 45 It is written in the prophets: 'They shall all be taught by God.' Everyone who listens to my Father and learns from him comes to me. 46 Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. 47 Amen, amen, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life. 48 I am the bread of life. 49 Your ancestors ate the manna in the desert, but they died; 50 this is the bread that comes down from heaven so that one may eat it and not die. 51 I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world."

Second, in verses 52-58, Jesus says that people must feed on his flesh and blood in order to have eternal life (Eucharist). When Jesus says, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world," this is John's description of the Eucharist in which is said, "This is my body; this is my blood."

52 The Jews quarreled among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us (his) flesh to eat?" 53 Jesus said to them, "Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you. 54 Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day. 55 For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. 56 Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him. 57 Just as the living Father sent me and I have life because of the Father, so also the one who feeds on me will have life because of me. 58 This is the bread that came down from heaven. Unlike your ancestors who ate and still died, whoever eats this bread will live forever." 59 These things he said while teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum.

Remember, John has no institution narrative in his description of the Last Supper. These two sections – first, the discourse on how Jesus is food because he gives the wisdom of God (34-51), and second how he will give his flesh for the life of the world) – make up what we now know as the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist in the Catholic Mass.

Verses 60 to 67 are probably also reflective of what happened in the Johannine community, when, after the Christians broke off from the Synagogue, some members of the community broke off from the rest.

60 Then many of his disciples who were listening said, "This saying is hard; who can accept it?" 61 Since Jesus knew that his disciples were murmuring about this, he said to them, "Does this shock you? 62 What if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? 63 It is the spirit that gives life, while the flesh is of no avail. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and life. 64 But there are some of you who do not believe." Jesus knew from the beginning the ones who would not believe and the one who would betray him. 65 And he said, "For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by my Father."

66 As a result of this, many (of) his disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied him. 67 Jesus then said to the Twelve, "Do you also want to leave?" 68 Simon Peter answered him, "Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. 69 We have come to believe and are convinced that you are the Holy One of God." 70 Jesus answered them, "Did I not choose you twelve? Yet is not one of you a devil?" 71 He was referring to Judas, son of Simon the Iscariot; it was he who would betray him, one of the Twelve,

### **The Light Motif**

7:1-52 - Replacing the Feast of Tabernacles (Light and water)

During the feast of Tabernacles, the Court of the Women in the temple was lit up very brightly with four immense torches. The light theme will not be taken up strongly in a discourse until Chapter 8, but the light celebration during the Feast of Tabernacles may be the inspiration for what follows from here through Chapter 10.

There is no sign worked here before the discourse begins, but rather a sort of verbal skirmish between Jesus and "his brothers," who are probably his relatives rather than his disciples, about going up to Jerusalem in order to bring his deeds into the light. Those "brothers" of Jesus are named in Matthew 13:55: James, Joseph, Simon and Judas. But Jesus declined, because "the Jews" wanted to kill him, and his time was not yet. The time (Greek *kairos*) for Jesus is the time appointed by the Father for his glorification by his passion, death and resurrection. But the time is always right for his brothers, because they are paying no attention to what the Father wills.

In verse 5 John interrupts the dialogue between Jesus and "his brothers" to tell his audience that they did not believe in him. They had seen some signs, but they failed to see beyond the signs to their deeper meaning.

1 After this, Jesus moved about within Galilee; but he did not wish to travel in Judea, because the Jews were trying to kill him. 2 But the Jewish feast of Tabernacles was near. 3 So his brothers said to him, "Leave here and go to Judea, so that your disciples also may see the works you are doing. 4 No one works in secret if he wants to be known publicly. If you do these things, manifest yourself to the world." 5 For his brothers did not believe in him. 6 So Jesus said to them, "My time is not yet here, but the time is always right for you. 7 The world cannot hate you, but

it hates me, because I testify to it that its works are evil. 8 You go up to the feast. I am not going up to this feast, because my time has not yet been fulfilled." 9 After he had said this, he stayed on in Galilee.

Jesus did go up to Jerusalem secretly, but after a few days he began teaching in the temple to the amazement of the people; they wondered about his grasp of scripture, even though he had not studied with rabbis. All Jewish males were taught to read by using the scriptures for their text. But unless one had studied with a rabbi, he was not thought capable of preaching. They also debated about what kind of a person Jesus was. Some thought he was good, others thought he was just stirring up the people. But no one spoke about him openly because they were afraid.

10 But when his brothers had gone up to the feast, he himself also went up, not openly but (as it were) in secret. 11 The Jews were looking for him at the feast and saying, "Where is he?" 12 And there was considerable murmuring about him in the crowds. Some said, "He is a good man," (while) others said, "No; on the contrary, he misleads the crowd." 13 Still, no one spoke openly about him because they were afraid of the Jews.

Jesus himself sort of provokes the next controversy. Jesus says that he performed one work – curing the paralytic on the Sabbath in Chapter 5 – because of which they are trying to kill him. But Jesus draws the parallel between what he had done on the Sabbath and the fact that in order to keep the Law of Moses people are circumcised on the Sabbath. Jesus goes on to announce his departure at the appointed time (verses 32 to 35).

14 When the feast was already half over, Jesus went up into the temple area and began to teach. 15 The Jews were amazed and said, "How does he know scripture without having studied?" 16 Jesus answered them and said, "My teaching is not my own but is from the one who sent me. 17 Whoever chooses to do his will shall know whether my teaching is from God or whether I speak on my own. 18 Whoever speaks on his own seeks his own glory, but whoever seeks the glory of the one who sent him is truthful, and there is no wrong in him. 19 Did not Moses give you the law? Yet none of you keeps the law. Why are you trying to kill me?" 20 The crowd answered, "You are possessed! 8 Who is trying to kill you?" 21 Jesus answered and said to them, "I performed one work and all of you are amazed 22 because of it. Moses gave you circumcision - not that it came from Moses but rather from the patriarchs - and you circumcise a man on the Sabbath. 23 If a man can receive circumcision on a Sabbath so that the law of Moses may not be broken, are you angry with me because I made a whole person well on a Sabbath? 24 Stop judging by appearances, but judge justly."

25 So some of the inhabitants of Jerusalem said, "Is he not the one they are trying to kill? 26 And look, he is speaking openly and they say nothing to him. Could the authorities have realized that he is the Messiah? 27 But we know where he is from. When the Messiah comes, no one will know where he is from." 28 So Jesus cried out in the temple area as he was teaching and said, "You know me and also know where I am from. Yet I did not come on my own, but the one who sent me, whom you do not know, is true. 29 I know him, because I am from him, and he sent me." 30 So they tried to arrest him, but no one laid a hand upon him, because his hour had not yet come. 31 But many of the crowd began to believe in him, and said, "When the Messiah comes, will he perform more signs than this man has done?"

32 The Pharisees heard the crowd murmuring about him to this effect, and the chief priests and the Pharisees sent guards to arrest him. 33 So Jesus said, "I will be with you only a little while longer, and then I will go to the one who sent me. 34 You will look for me but not find (me), and where I am you cannot come." 35 So the Jews said to one another, "Where is he going that we will not find him? Surely he is not going to the dispersion among the Greeks to teach the Greeks, is he? 36 What is the meaning of his saying, 'You will look for me and not find (me), and where I am you cannot come?'"

Besides the brilliant torches in the Court of the Women, the feast of Tabernacles was celebrated by drawing water from the pool of Siloam and pouring it over the temple altar. This

was the yearly ritual performed as a petition for Fall rains to nourish the soil. So Jesus cries out, "Let anyone who thirsts come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as scripture says: 'Rivers of living water will flow from within him.'" Grammatically, the structure of the sentence would indicate that the water will flow from within the one who believes, but some interpret the saying to mean that the living water will flow from Jesus. In either case, John writes that he was speaking of the Holy Spirit, "*\*There was, of course, no Spirit yet, because Jesus had not yet been glorified.*"

Some in the crowd thought Jesus was the Messiah, others thought not, because the Messiah would come from David's town of Bethlehem. Perhaps this is John's sense of irony. If he knew that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, that's sort of ironic. If he didn't know that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, it's still ironic because it didn't make any difference, because John is telling his readers that Jesus came from God.

The Pharisees sent guards to arrest Jesus, but the guards came back saying that they had never heard anyone speak as Jesus did. The Pharisees said in disgust, "Have you also been deceived?" So an argument broke out among the Pharisees. Nicodemus argued with them about condemning someone without first hearing him out, so they turned on Nicodemus as well.

37 On the last and greatest day of the feast, Jesus stood up and exclaimed, "Let anyone who thirsts come to me and drink. 38 Whoever believes in me, as scripture says: 'Rivers of living water will flow from within him.'" 39 He said this in reference to the Spirit that those who came to believe in him were to receive. (*\*) There was, of course, no Spirit yet, because Jesus had not yet been glorified.*

40 Some in the crowd who heard these words said, "This is truly the Prophet." 41 Others said, "This is the Messiah." But others said, "The Messiah will not come from Galilee, will he? 42 Does not scripture say that the Messiah will be of David's family and come from Bethlehem, the village where David lived?" 43 So a division occurred in the crowd because of him. 44 Some of them even wanted to arrest him, but no one laid hands on him.

45 So the guards went to the chief priests and Pharisees, who asked them, "Why did you not bring him?" 46 The guards answered, "Never before has anyone spoken like this one." 47 So the Pharisees answered them, "Have you also been deceived? 48 Have any of the authorities or the Pharisees believed in him? 49 But this crowd, which does not know the law, is accursed." 50 Nicodemus, one of their members who had come to him earlier, said to them, 51 "Does our law condemn a person before it first hears him and finds out what he is doing?" 52 They answered and said to him, "You are not from Galilee also, are you? Look and see that no prophet arises from Galilee." 53 Then each went to his own house,

## 8:1-11 - The woman caught in adultery

This story seems to have been inserted into John's Gospel by an editor. It was a story circulating among the Christian communities independent of any of the evangelists. For some reason the editor decided to insert it here. The discourse on the theme of light will continue after this story.

This is another of those "trap" stories, akin to the story about the coin in Mark 12:13-17, when the Pharisees and Herodians asked Jesus if it were lawful to pay tribute to Caesar. Here the question is about the contrast between Jewish and Roman law. According to Jewish law, the woman caught in adultery was to be stoned, beginning with her accusers throwing the first stones. Roman law forbade the Jews from executing anyone under Jewish law. So when they asked Jesus if they should follow the Jewish law and stone the woman, they knew if he said

“yes” he would be violating Roman law, and if he said “no” he would violate Jewish law. His response was both pointed and evasive at the same time. They who had sought to condemn the woman on legal grounds left her standing there with Jesus who said he would not condemn her on moral grounds either; just don’t sin any more.

1 While Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. 2 But early in the morning he arrived again in the temple area, and all the people started coming to him, and he sat down and taught them. 3 Then the scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery and made her stand in the middle. 4 They said to him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. 5 Now in the law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?" 6 They said this to test him, so that they could have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and began to write on the ground with his finger. 7 But when they continued asking him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." 8 Again he bent down and wrote on the ground. 9 And in response, they went away one by one, beginning with the elders. So he was left alone with the woman before him. 10 Then Jesus straightened up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" 11 She replied, "No one, sir." Then Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go, (and) from now on do not sin any more."

#### 8:12-59 - Replacing the Feast of Tabernacles (Light and Water) (continues)

Jesus continues his discourse on light, claiming, “I am the light of the world.” Remember this discourse is taking place at the Feast of Tabernacles, when four giant torches illumined the Courtyard of the Women in the temple. Jesus, as the light of the world, brings to the world the revelation of the Father. That theme runs throughout this discourse. Twice Jesus makes that revelation of the Father by using for himself the name of God “I AM.” He is the revelation of the Father to the world.

12 Jesus spoke to them again, saying, "*I am* the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." 13 So the Pharisees said to him, "You testify on your own behalf, so your testimony cannot be verified." 14 Jesus answered and said to them, "Even if I do testify on my own behalf, my testimony can be verified, because I know where I came from and where I am going. But you do not know where I come from or where I am going. 15 You judge by appearances, 7 but I do not judge anyone. 16 And even if I should judge, my judgment is valid, because I am not alone, but it is I and the Father who sent me. 17 Even in your law it is written that the testimony of two men can be verified. 18 I testify on my behalf and so does the Father who sent me." 19 So they said to him, "Where is your father?" Jesus answered, "You know neither me nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also." 20 He spoke these words while teaching in the treasury in the temple area. But no one arrested him, because his hour had not yet come.

Much of this discourse could be characterized by the difference in the perspectives of Jesus and “the Jews.” Jesus is speaking of something beyond the physical and material world; the Pharisees cannot get beyond the physical and the material, and so they remain at loggerheads with Jesus. Jesus points this out in verses 14 and 15: “I know where I come from and where I am going. But you do not know where I come from or where I am going. You judge by appearances.” By doing so, they remain in the darkness and avoid the light.

This whole dialogue is cast in the form of a legal dispute, where two witnesses are required in order to prove a case. Jesus claims that there are two witnesses, himself and his Father. So they ask him where is his Father, to which Jesus replies that whoever sees him sees

the Father also.

There is irony when Jesus says he is going away, and the Pharisees ask if he is planning to kill himself. They are the ones planning to kill him. No, he will not kill himself, but he will lay down his life for others.

21 He said to them again, "I am going away and you will look for me, but you will die in your sin. Where I am going you cannot come." 22 11 So the Jews said, "He is not going to kill himself, is he, because he said, 'Where I am going you cannot come?'" 23 He said to them, "You belong to what is below, I belong to what is above. You belong to this world, but I do not belong to this world. 24 That is why I told you that you will die in your sins. For if you do not believe that I AM, you will die in your sins." 25 So they said to him, "Who are you?" Jesus said to them, "What I told you from the beginning. 26 I have much to say about you in condemnation. But the one who sent me is true, and what I heard from him I tell the world." 27 They did not realize that he was speaking to them of the Father. 28 So Jesus said (to them), "When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I AM, and that I do nothing on my own, but I say only what the Father taught me. 29 The one who sent me is with me. He has not left me alone, because I always do what is pleasing to him." 30 Because he spoke this way, many came to believe in him.

In verse 31 Jesus addresses some Jews who believed in him. Jesus told them that if they listened to his words they would be truly free. There is again irony in their response, "We have never been enslaved to anyone." They are speaking on two entirely different planes. They were thinking only of political freedom, and even there they were occupied by Roman forces. Jesus was speaking about a different kind of slavery – to sin – and a different kind of freedom – from sin. These Jews who had begun to believe in Jesus, lose what little faith they had. John may have had in mind some members of his own community who departed because they couldn't go along with where that community was going.

31 Jesus then said to those Jews who believed in him, "If you remain in my word, you will truly be my disciples, 32 and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." 33 They answered him, "We are descendants of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How can you say, 'You will become free?'" 34 Jesus answered them, "Amen, amen, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave of sin. 35 A slave does not remain in a household forever, but a son 17 always remains. 36 So if a son frees you, then you will truly be free. 37 I know that you are descendants of Abraham. But you are trying to kill me, because my word has no room among you. 38 I tell you what I have seen in the Father's presence; then do what you have heard from the Father."

39 They answered and said to him, "Our father is Abraham." Jesus said to them, "If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing the works of Abraham. 40 But now you are trying to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God; Abraham did not do this. 41 You are doing the works of your father!" (So) they said to him, "We are not illegitimate. We have one Father, God." 42 Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and am here; I did not come on my own, but he sent me. 43 Why do you not understand what I am saying? Because you cannot bear to hear my word. 44 You belong to your father the devil and you willingly carry out your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in truth, because there is no truth in him. When he tells a lie, he speaks in character, because he is a liar and the father of lies. 45 But because I speak the truth, you do not believe me. 46 Can any of you charge me with sin? If I am telling the truth, why do you not believe me? 47 Whoever belongs to God hears the words of God; for this reason you do not listen, because you do not belong to God."

Another part of the drama of the discourse is the Jewish tradition of regarding the Law of Moses as the light for the world. Jesus claims that he is the light of the world and to have existed before Moses; even Abraham rejoiced to see Jesus' day.

Jesus challenges even their claim that they are children of Abraham and that they have God as their Father. They do not do the works either of Abraham or of God. Jesus' final

statement indicates his profound identity, “Before Abraham came to be, I AM” – the name for God.

48 The Jews answered and said to him, "Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and are possessed?" 49 Jesus answered, "I am not possessed; I honor my Father, but you dishonor me. 50 I do not seek my own glory; there is one who seeks it and he is the one who judges. 51 Amen, amen, I say to you, whoever keeps my word will never see death." 52 (So) the Jews said to him, "Now we are sure that you are possessed. Abraham died, as did the prophets, yet you say, 'Whoever keeps my word will never taste death.' 53 Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? Or the prophets, who died? Who do you make yourself out to be?" 54 Jesus answered, "If I glorify myself, my glory is worth nothing; but it is my Father who glorifies me, of whom you say, 'He is our God.' 55 You do not know him, but I know him. And if I should say that I do not know him, I would be like you a liar. But I do know him and I keep his word. 56 Abraham your father rejoiced to see my day; he saw it and was glad. 57 So the Jews said to him, "You are not yet fifty years old and you have seen Abraham?" 58 Jesus said to them, "Amen, amen, I say to you, before Abraham came to be, I AM." 59 So they picked up stones to throw at him; but Jesus hid and went out of the temple area.

### 9:1-41 - Cure of the blind man (sixth sign)

The theme of light is taken up again in the cure of the man born blind. Keep in mind that light allows people to see; it makes things visible.

In the minds of Jesus' contemporaries, prosperity was thought to be a gift from God to those who were morally good; and affliction was thought to be a curse from God on those who were morally bad. So the question about who sinned, the blind man or his parents would make sense to Jesus' contemporaries, even though they could not imagine how an unborn child could have sinned. Jesus denies that there is any connection between sin and affliction. He says that neither the blind man nor his parents have sinned. The blind man's affliction will serve to make visible the works of God. There's an ironic twist here: blindness will serve to make visible. How? Because Jesus is the light of the world and he will make God's work visible.

1 As he passed by he saw a man blind from birth. 2 His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" 3 Jesus answered, "Neither he nor his parents sinned; it is so that the works of God might be made visible through him. 4 We have to do the works of the one who sent me while it is day. Night is coming when no one can work. 5 While I am in the world, I am the light of the world."

Jesus spits on the ground and makes a paste and anoints the man's eyes with it. (Some see in this a sign of baptism, in whose ceremony eyes are anointed.) This was a dangerous move on Jesus' part; it was against the traditions of the elders to make paste on the Sabbath. Jesus sends the man off to wash the paste off in the pool of Siloam, which John translates for us; Siloam means "Sent." And Jesus is the one who is sent. During the Feast of Tabernacles, it was from the pool of Siloam that water was drawn in order to wash the temple altar. In Christian baptism people are baptized into Christ, the one who was sent. [In the catacombs there are murals of the healing of the blind man as a sign of baptism.]

6 When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made clay with the saliva, and smeared the clay on his eyes, 7 and said to him, "Go wash 3 in the Pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). So he went and washed, and came back able to see.

The formerly blind man shows up in public, and he is interrogated three times: by his neighbors, by the Pharisees and by Jesus. He answers his neighbors question by saying all he knows is that the man was called Jesus. To the Pharisees' question he says that the man who healed him is a prophet. And finally, when Jesus finds him after his has been kicked out of the synagogue, he says he believes in the Son of Man, and he worships Jesus.

Interspersed among these interrogations John has placed some more ironies, most of them demonstrating that Jesus' works of God bring about a division among people. The neighbors are divided as to whether this is the man born blind or not. John narrates the "some" of the Pharisees, not all, decided that this man is not from God because he does not keep the Sabbath. Even the man's parents are cautious. They testify that this is indeed their son and that yes indeed, he was born blind, but they don't know how he gained his sight; the Pharisees should ask him, because he's old enough to testify on his own behalf. And John tells us that they were afraid to testify on their son's behalf, because the Pharisees had already decided that anyone who confessed that Jesus was the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue.

When the Pharisees questioned the man a second time, the man asked if they, too, wanted to become this man's disciple. The Pharisees chose deliberate blindness to the revelation of the works of God performed by Jesus and threw the man out of the synagogue. When the man found Jesus, Jesus asked if he believed in the Son of Man. This may have been the question candidates for baptism were asked prior to receiving the sacrament.

8 His neighbors and those who had seen him earlier as a beggar said, "Isn't this the one who used to sit and beg?" 9 Some said, "It is," but others said, "No, he just looks like him." He said, "I am." 10 So they said to him, "(So) how were your eyes opened?" 11 He replied, "The man called Jesus made clay and anointed my eyes and told me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' So I went there and washed and was able to see." 12 And they said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I don't know." 13 They brought the one who was once blind to the Pharisees. 14 Now Jesus had made clay 4 and opened his eyes on a Sabbath. 15 So then the Pharisees also asked him how he was able to see. He said to them, "He put clay on my eyes, and I washed, and now I can see." 16 So some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, because he does not keep the Sabbath." (But) others said, "How can a sinful man do such signs?" And there was a division among them. 17 So they said to the blind man again, "What do you have to say about him, since he opened your eyes?" He said, "He is a prophet." 18 Now the Jews did not believe that he had been blind and gained his sight until they summoned the parents of the one who had gained his sight. 19 They asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How does he now see?" 20 His parents answered and said, "We know that this is our son and that he was born blind. 21 We do not know how he sees now, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him, he is of age; he can speak for him self." 22 His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews, for the Jews had already agreed that if anyone acknowledged him as the Messiah, he would be expelled from the synagogue. 23 For this reason his parents said, "He is of age; question him." 24 So a second time they called the man who had been blind and said to him, "Give God the praise! We know that this man is a sinner." 25 He replied, "If he is a sinner, I do not know. One thing I do know is that I was blind and now I see." 26 So they said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" 27 He answered them, "I told you already and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples, too?" 28 They ridiculed him and said, "You are that man's disciple; we are disciples of Moses! 29 We know that God spoke to Moses, but we do not know where this one is from." 30 The man answered and said to them, "This is what is so amazing, that you do not know where he is from, yet he opened my eyes. 31 We know that God does not listen to sinners, but if one is devout and does his will, he listens to him. 32 It is unheard of that anyone ever opened the eyes of a person born blind. 33 If this man were not from God, he would not be able to do anything." 34 They answered and said to him, "You were born totally in sin, and are you trying to teach us?" Then they threw him out. 35 When Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, he found him and said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" 36 He answered and said, "Who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?" 37 Jesus said to him, "You have seen him and the one speaking with you is he." 38 He said, "I do

believe, Lord," and he worshiped him.

The episode ends with Jesus pronouncement: "I came into this world for judgment, so that those who do not see might see, and so that those who do see may become blind." The Pharisees heard this and denied that they were blind. To which Jesus said, "If you were blind you would have no sin; but now you are saying 'We see,' so your sin remains."

The story began by denying that physical blindness was caused by sin. The story ends by declaring that spiritual blindness is a sin.

39 Then Jesus said, "I came into this world for judgment, so that those who do not see might see, and those who do see might become blind." 40 Some of the Pharisees who were with him heard this and said to him, "Surely we are not also blind, are we?" 41 Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would have no sin; but now you are saying, 'We see,' so your sin remains."

### 10:1-21 - Shepherd teachings

This section may seem somewhat unconnected with the previous sections which have to do with the Feast of Tabernacles. But it really is not unconnected. The previous section ended with Jesus convicting the Pharisees of blindness, yet they were the leaders of the synagogue. This section contrasts leadership of the blind guides with the leadership of Jesus who is the light of the world, thus maintaining the connection with the theme of light celebrated in the Feast of Tabernacles. The last verse shows that this is still connected with the cure of the blind man, and therefore with the Feast of Tabernacles.

The synoptic gospels speak of the qualities of a good shepherd in the sense of the pastors of the church; for John, Jesus alone is the ideal shepherd. John uses three metaphors to demonstrate Jesus' relationship with the sheep. First, Jesus says that he is the gate of the sheepfold. Because he is the gate, only those who are authentically pastors of the flock can enter. All others who try to get in are thieves who come only to fleece the sheep. And Jesus is the gate, because only through him can anyone come into the fold.

1 "Amen, amen, I say to you, whoever does not enter a sheepfold through the gate but climbs over elsewhere is a thief and a robber. 2 But whoever enters through the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. 3 The gatekeeper opens it for him, and the sheep hear his voice, as he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. 4 When he has driven out all his own, he walks ahead of them, and the sheep follow him, because they recognize his voice. 5 But they will not follow a stranger; they will run away from him, because they do not recognize the voice of strangers." 6 Although Jesus used this figure of speech, 4 they did not realize what he was trying to tell them. 7 So Jesus said again, "Amen, amen, I say to you, I am the gate for the sheep. 8 All who came [before me] are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. 9 I am the gate. Whoever enters through me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. 10 A thief comes only to steal and slaughter and destroy; I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly.

And Jesus is the good shepherd. He loves his sheep enough to lay down his life for his sheep. Hired hands (the Pharisees) run away when something endangers the sheep. The good shepherd knows his sheep, and his sheep listen to his voice. And he has other sheep he must lead, those who do not yet fully believe in him. For these too Jesus will lay down his life. And he insists that he lays his life down, no one takes it from him. Through all he is about to suffer Jesus

remains in control of his destiny.

The statement in 10:16 that Jesus has other sheep who do not belong to his fold, and his expressed desire that there be one flock and one shepherd, may represent the sentiments of a divided Johannine community, from which some members have broken off.

The profound meaning in this discourse is the parallel Jesus makes between the mutual love between him and the Father, and the mutual love between Jesus and his sheep.

The Pharisees were listening to what Jesus said, but they were not hearing the message. So division occurred in the crowd, some saying that because of what Jesus said, he was possessed by a demon. Others said, referring back to the end of Chapter 9, that someone possessed could not open the eyes of a man born blind.

11 I am the good shepherd. A good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 12 A hired man, who is not a shepherd and whose sheep are not his own, sees a wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away, and the wolf catches and scatters them. 13 This is because he works for pay and has no concern for the sheep. 14 I am the good shepherd, and I know mine and mine know me, 15 just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I will lay down my life for the sheep. 16 I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. These also I must lead, and they will hear my voice, and there will be one flock, one shepherd. 17 This is why the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. 18 No one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own. I have power to lay it down, and power to take it up again. This command I have received from my Father." 19 Again there was a division among the Jews because of these words. 20 Many of them said, "He is possessed and out of his mind; why listen to him?" 21 Others said, "These are not the words of one possessed; surely a demon cannot open the eyes of the blind, can he?"

This wraps up the discourse on the Feast of Tabernacles.

#### 10:22-42 -The Feast of Dedication (Hanukkah)

This scene would have taken place about three months after the previous story. It is winter. The feast commemorated the rededication of the temple in 164 BC, after the Maccabees had defeated the Syrian king, and removed from the temple sanctuary the altar which the Syrian king had erected there. The altar was re-consecrated and rededicated. When Syria had first conquered the territory and set up the altar in the temple, some of the Jews had gone along with the Syrians, and adopted their lifestyle. The commemoration of the Israelite victory was a time to rededicate the people to the true worship of the true God.

The argument with "the Jews" is over the fact that Jesus claims to be the one consecrated and sent into the world by the Father. (Remember that the Feast of Dedication involved celebrating the "consecrating" of the altar in the temple.) "How long will you keep us in suspense," they ask; "If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." Earlier they had debated among themselves whether or not Jesus had the credentials of the Messiah. Now they ask him directly. And Jesus tells them. The Jews call this blasphemy and want to stone Jesus. But by his declaration, Jesus announces that he fulfills and surpasses what is being celebrated in the Feast of Dedication. Prophets, like Samuel, were called gods because the word of God had come to them. So, Jesus' argument goes, why can't the Word made flesh claim the same title?

22 The feast of the Dedication was then taking place in Jerusalem. It was winter. 23 And Jesus walked about in the temple area on the Portico of Solomon. 24 So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, "How long

are you going to keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." 25 Jesus answered them, "I told you and you do not believe. The works I do in my Father's name testify to me. 26 But you do not believe, because you are not among my sheep. 27 My sheep hear my voice; I know them, and they follow me. 28 I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish. No one can take them out of my hand. 29 My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one can take them out of the Father's hand. 30 The Father and I are one." 31 The Jews again picked up rocks to stone him. 32 Jesus answered them, "I have shown you many good works from my Father. For which of these are you trying to stone me?" 33 The Jews answered him, "We are not stoning you for a good work but for blasphemy. You, a man, are making yourself God." 34 Jesus answered them, "Is it not written in your law, 'I said, "You are gods"?' 35 If it calls them gods to whom the word of God came, and scripture cannot be set aside, 36 can you say that the one whom the Father has consecrated and sent into the world blasphemes because I said, 'I am the Son of God'?" 37 If I do not perform my Father's works, do not believe me; 38 but if I perform them, even if you do not believe me, believe the works, so that you may realize (and understand) that the Father is in me and I am in the Father."

The Jews will have nothing of this, and they tried to arrest him. It is only Jesus' sheep who hear his voice; the Jews do not. But he went across the Jordan where John had been baptizing. There were still some of John's disciples there, and they bore witness that Jesus was everything John had said of him.

39 (Then) they tried again to arrest him; but he escaped from their power. 40 He went back across the Jordan to the place where John first baptized, and there he remained. 41 Many came to him and said, "John performed no sign, but everything John said about this man was true." 42 And many there began to believe in him.

#### **Section four: From Death to Life and from Life to death (11:1-12:36)**

11:1-45- Lazarus (seventh sign)

This is the last and the greatest of Jesus' signs. The pattern has been that Jesus performs a sign, which is followed by a discourse or dialogue which interprets the sign. In this case, part of the discourse (in the form of a dialogue with Martha) occurs prior to his working of the sign.

In verse 3, John introduces the two sisters, Mary and Martha and their brother, Lazarus. He identifies Mary as the one "who had anointed the Lord with perfumed oil, and dried his feet with her hair." However, that incident will not be narrated until Chapter 12.

When Jesus is told of Lazarus' illness, he says that "this illness will not end in death, but is for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it." He did not say that Lazarus would not die; he said it would not *end* in death. However, Lazarus' coming back to life is a *resuscitation* not a *resurrection*. It is, however, a *sign* of the resurrection.

When word reaches Jesus that Lazarus is ill, he deliberately remains in the Jordan valley for two more days. This is important to John, because he wants to make sure that the raising of Lazarus cannot be interpreted in any way other than in the way it happened. There is so much irony in this story. The disciples are chagrined that Jesus wants to go back to Judea, because of the real danger that he might get killed. But Jesus is going in to give life, not only to Lazarus, but to all of humanity by his own death – getting killed – and resurrection. Jesus' reply to the disciples' concern is that there are twelve hours of daylight, and only after they have run their course can darkness descend. It's another statement that his hour has not yet come; but it is surely on the way.

Jesus says that Lazarus is asleep and he will go wake him. The disciples say that if

Lazarus is asleep, he'll be all right, so Jesus says plainly that Lazarus is dead. But Jesus says, "Let us go to him." Good ol' Thomas says in effect, "Sure, why not? Let's go and get killed with him."

1 Now a man was ill, Lazarus from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. 2 Mary was the one who had anointed the Lord with perfumed oil and dried his feet with her hair; it was her brother Lazarus who was ill. 3 So the sisters sent word to him, saying, "Master, the one you love is ill." 4 When Jesus heard this he said, "This illness is not to end in death, 2 but is for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it." 5 Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. 6 So when he heard that he was ill, he remained for two days in the place where he was. 7 Then after this he said to his disciples, "Let us go back to Judea." 8 The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just trying to stone you, and you want to go back there?" 9 Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours in a day? If one walks during the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. 10 But if one walks at night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him." 11 He said this, and then told them, "Our friend Lazarus is asleep, but I am going to awaken him." 12 So the disciples said to him, "Master, if he is asleep, he will be saved." 13 But Jesus was talking about his death, while they thought that he meant ordinary sleep. 14 So then Jesus said to them clearly, "Lazarus has died. 15 And I am glad for you that I was not there, that you may believe. Let us go to him." 16 So Thomas, called Didymus, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go to die with him."

They go to Bethany and find that Lazarus has been in the tomb for four days. Friends had come to console Mary and Martha. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him. The dialogue between Martha and Jesus begins the interpretation of the sign Jesus is about to perform.

The dialogue is a story of growth in faith. It begins with Martha's profession of faith that if Jesus had been there her brother would not have died. But even though he died, Martha says that she believes that whatever one asks of God will be given by God. So, there's some faith there. And she goes even further and responds to Jesus' assurance that her brother will rise again, professing that she believes he will rise again on the last day. Jesus invites her to go even further by saying that he is the resurrection and the life, and Martha says that she believes that Jesus is the messiah.

Verse 33 says that Jesus became "perturbed." The verb indicates anger or disappointment. The basis for his perturbation is the focus of all the participants in the scene: they're all weeping. They are focusing on death, not on Jesus as the giver of life. One commentator suggests that Jesus' weeping (verse 35) was not that of a mourner for the death of a loved one, but deep sadness that no one is catching on to the fact that Jesus is present to give life. [Who knows?]

In verse 37 the people remember that Jesus opened the eyes of the blind, and they wonder that he could not do something for Lazarus. In narrating this, John brings together the themes of Jesus as light and Jesus as life.

17 When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. 18 Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, only about two miles 5 away. 19 And many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them about their brother. 20 When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went to meet him; but Mary sat at home. 21 Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. 22 (But) even now I know that whatever you ask of God, God will give you." 23 Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise." 24 Martha said to him, "I know he will rise, in the resurrection on the last day." 25 Jesus told her, "I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live, 26 and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" 27 She said to him, "Yes, Lord. I have come to believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of

God, the one who is coming into the world."

28 When she had said this, she went and called her sister Mary secretly, saying, "The teacher is here and is asking for you." 29 As soon as she heard this, she rose quickly and went to him. 30 For Jesus had not yet come into the village, but was still where Martha had met him. 31 So when the Jews who were with her in the house comforting her saw Mary get up quickly and go out, they followed her, presuming that she was going to the tomb to weep there. 32 When Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." 33 When Jesus saw her weeping and the Jews who had come with her weeping, he became perturbed and deeply troubled, 34 and said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Sir, come and see." 35 And Jesus wept. 36 So the Jews said, "See how he loved him." 37 But some of them said, "Could not the one who opened the eyes of the blind man have done something so that this man would not have died?"

Then Jesus invites to faith Mary and all those who had come to mourn with her. After Jesus has interpreted the sign he was going to perform, he performs the sign. He commands that the stone in front of the cave be removed, and he calls Lazarus to come forth. And the dead man comes out of the tomb. And they all believed in him.

One added little touch by John is the mention that Lazarus comes out of the tomb with his burial garments about him. This is a resuscitation, not a resurrection. Lazarus will die again, and have need of the burial garments. When Jesus is risen from the dead, the burial cloths remain in the tomb.

38 So Jesus, perturbed again, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay across it. 39 Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the dead man's sister, said to him, "Lord, by now there will be a stench; he has been dead for four days." 40 Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believe you will see the glory of God?" 41 So they took away the stone. And Jesus raised his eyes and said, "Father, I thank you for hearing me. 42 I know that you always hear me; but because of the crowd here I have said this, that they may believe that you sent me." 43 And when he had said this, he cried out in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" 44 The dead man came out, tied hand and foot with burial bands, and his face was wrapped in a cloth. So Jesus said to them, "Untie him and let him go." 45 Now many of the Jews who had come to Mary and seen what he had done began to believe in him.

11:45-57 - The plot [Matthew 26:3-5; Luke 22:2]

For some reason part of the group who gathered around Martha and Mary go to the Pharisees and report what Jesus has done in raising Lazarus. So the chief priest and the Pharisees convened the Sanhedrin (sort of the supreme court made up of priests, lay leaders and Pharisees). The dialogue which takes place there is a masterful construction by John.

Caiaphas, the chief priest, speaks disdainfully to the group, and utters an unwitting prophesy. It was considered a normal thing for the high priest to be inspired to utter prophesy. He said, "'You know nothing, nor do you consider that it is better for you that one man should die instead of (Greek *uper*) the people. John describes the irony of the statement, because the Greek word "*uper*" means "instead of" and "for." John further comments that Jesus would die, not only for the people of Israel, but for all people.

So they planned to kill Jesus. This is the irony: because Jesus gave life, he is condemned to die. But Jesus made himself scarce.

45 Now many of the Jews who had come to Mary and seen what he had done began to believe in him. 46 But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. 47 So the chief priests and the Pharisees convened the Sanhedrin and said, "What are we going to do? This man is performing many signs. 48 If we leave him

alone, all will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our land and our nation." 49 But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing, 50 nor do you consider that it is better for you that one man should die instead of the people, so that the whole nation may not perish." 51 He did not say this on his own, but since he was high priest for that year, he prophesied that Jesus was going to die for the nation, 52 and not only for the nation, but also to gather into one the dispersed children of God. 53 So from that day on they planned to kill him.

54 So Jesus no longer walked about in public among the Jews, but he left for the region near the desert, to a town called Ephraim, and there he remained with his disciples.

55 Now the Passover of the Jews was near, and many went up from the country to Jerusalem before Passover to purify themselves. 56 They looked for Jesus and said to one another as they were in the temple area, "What do you think? That he will not come to the feast?" 57 For the chief priests and the Pharisees had given orders that if anyone knew where he was, he should inform them, so that they might arrest him.

## 12:1-11 - Anointing [Mark 14:3-9; Matthew 26:6-13; Luke 7:36-50]

The Lazarus miracle occasions the Pharisees' hatred which will lead to Jesus' death, and it occasions Mary's act of love in the anointing for his burial.

There are four anointing stories in the gospels. Mark and Matthew tell of an anointing by a woman in the house of Simon the Leper in Judea two days prior to the Passover. Luke narrates an anointing by a sinful woman in Galilee earlier in the gospel. Here John has an anointing by Mary in Bethany of Judea six days before the Passover. Only in John is the woman named. And she is not the sinful woman, nor is she Mary Magdalen. In the process of oral transmission the details of the stories have become confused and intermingled. Much Christian art has portrayed the anointing by Mary, and identified that Mary as Mary Magdalen, who is also identified as the sinful woman. Perhaps there were two anointings, one by the sinful woman, and one by Mary of Bethany.

The note that "*\*the house was filled with the fragrance of the oil*" has great significance as a symbol of what takes place at the moment of Jesus' death. We'll save that till later.

Alms-giving was regarded as an act of justice in Jesus' time, and care for the burial of the dead was regarded as an act of love, a higher virtue than an act of justice.

Mark writes that "some" were indignant at the waste of the ointment, Matthew writes that "the disciples" were indignant, Luke has no one indignant, and John says it was Judas who was indignant about the waste of precious ointment, and adds that he was the holder of the purse and a thief.

The large crowd which gathered aggravated the chief priests because Jesus' popularity was an affront to their plan to kill him. They decided they had to kill Lazarus, too.

1 Six days before Passover Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. 2 They gave a dinner for him there, and Martha served, while Lazarus was one of those reclining at table with him. 3 Mary took a liter of costly perfumed oil made from genuine aromatic nard and anointed the feet of Jesus and dried them with her hair; the house was filled with the fragrance of the oil. 4 Then Judas the Iscariot, one [of] his disciples, and the one who would betray him, said, 5 "Why was this oil not sold for three hundred days' wages and given to the poor?" 6 He said this not because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief and held the money bag and used to steal the contributions. 7 So Jesus said, "Leave her alone. Let her keep this for the day of my burial. 8 You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

9 [The] large crowd of the Jews found out that he was there and came, not only because of Jesus, but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. 10 And the chief priests plotted to kill Lazarus too, 11 because many of the Jews were turning away and believing in Jesus because of him.

12:12-19 - Entry into Jerusalem [Mark 11:1-10; Matthew 21:1-11; Luke 19:28-40]

In John it is the crowds who come out to welcome Jesus, because they either witnessed or heard about his raising Lazarus from the tomb. In the synoptics it is the disciples who form the triumphant procession. The raising of Lazarus has prompted the people's praise and the chief priest's wrath. The crowd's expectation is that they are welcoming the messiah, the King of Israel. Only John mentions the palm branches, which recalls the victory of the Maccabees. Jesus is seated on an ass. The whole scene resembles a political triumph. As a corrective to that interpretation, John draws on two Old Testament passages to describe the scene, one from Zechariah and one from Isaiah. Zechariah's prophesy described a king coming to bring peace and salvation. The non-political nature of Jesus' kingdom will not become clear until his glorification, that is, until his death and resurrection.

The Pharisees' agitation has reached fever pitch. The disciples are caught up in the excitement of the moment, and only after Jesus has been raised from the dead do they recall that all that happened this day had been prophesied.

12 On the next day, when the great crowd that had come to the feast heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem, 13 they took palm branches and went out to meet him, and cried out: "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, (even) the king of Israel." 14 Jesus found an ass and sat upon it, as is written: 15 "Fear no more, O daughter Zion; see, your king comes, seated upon an ass's colt." 16 His disciples did not understand this at first, but when Jesus had been glorified they remembered that these things were written about him and that they had done this for him. 17 So the crowd that was with him when he called Lazarus from the tomb and raised him from death continued to testify. 18 This was (also) why the crowd went to meet him, because they heard that he had done this sign. 19 So the Pharisees said to one another, "You see that you are gaining nothing. Look, the whole world has gone after him."

12:20-36 - The hour approaches

The last thing the Pharisees said in the previous story of his entry into Jerusalem was: "The whole world has gone after him." In fulfillment of that statement, some Greeks who had come up to Jerusalem for the feast show up. These were either Gentile converts to Judaism or proselytes or Greek-speaking Jews from the diaspora. In any case, they represent the world beyond Judaism.

The Greeks approach Philip and Andrew, perhaps because these two were from Bethsaida, a predominantly Gentile area. Jesus greets the Greeks with an acclamation that mission to Israel is complete, and his work is accomplished. His passion and death are *\*the hour of his glorification*. The seed planted in the hearts of the Gentiles will ripen and bear fruit. Jesus' disciples must follow Jesus in the dying which brings life, both to themselves and to others.

Verses 25-36 portray the agony which Jesus undergoes in accepting even death. The synoptics portray this in the agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, an event not narrated in John. In Mark Jesus prays to be delivered from this hour if it is possible. John has Jesus praying that God glorify God's name, not unlike "your will be done." A voice from heaven says that God has glorified God's name, and will glorify it further. People ask if an angel had spoken to him. In Luke, an angel comes to Gethsemane to comfort Jesus. Here Jesus says that the voice came for

the benefit of the people, not for himself, so the people might see the closeness of Jesus to the Father.

Jesus' statement "When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself" is understood correctly by the crowd, namely that Jesus will be crucified. The crowd objected because the messiah is supposed to remain forever. Jesus' response is that the light will be among them for just a little while; walk in the light while the light is still with you. Darkness is coming, and you can't walk in the dark. "Believe in the light, so that you may become children of light."

There is irony in the final statement of John: "After he had said this, Jesus left and hid from them." The light hid.

20 Now there were some Greeks among those who had come up to worship at the feast. 21 They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and asked him, "Sir, we would like to see Jesus." 22 Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. 23 Jesus answered them, *"The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.* 24 Amen, amen, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit. 25 Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life. 26 Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there also will my servant be. The Father will honor whoever serves me.

27 "I am troubled now. Yet what should I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? But it was for this purpose that I came to this hour. 28 Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it and will glorify it again." 29 The crowd there heard it and said it was thunder; but others said, "An angel has spoken to him." 30 Jesus answered and said, "This voice did not come for my sake but for yours. 31 Now is the time of judgment on this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. 32 And when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself." 33 He said this indicating the kind of death he would die. 34 So the crowd answered him, "We have heard from the law that the Messiah remains forever. Then how can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man?" 35 Jesus said to them, "The light will be among you only a little while. Walk while you have the light, so that darkness may not overcome you. Whoever walks in the dark does not know where he is going. 36 While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of the light." After he had said this, Jesus left and hid from them.

#### 12:37-43 - John's assessment of Jesus' work

John sees in the unbelief of many of the Jews the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah. God hardened their hearts against belief in Jesus. Yet, some of them believed, but were too faint of heart to profess publicly their belief, lest they be thrown out of the synagogue. John may have had in mind some believers in his own time who refused to profess publicly what they believed in their hearts. Those who refused to believe were thinking only of "this world," the horizontal realities of their belief in the Law of Moses. They couldn't see the vertical intrusion of God into the world in the person of Jesus.

37 Although he had performed so many signs in their presence they did not believe in him, 38 in order that the word which Isaiah the prophet spoke might be fulfilled: "Lord, who has believed our preaching, to whom has the might of the Lord been revealed?" 39 For this reason they could not believe, because again Isaiah said: 40 "He blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, so that they might not see with their eyes and understand with their heart and be converted, and I would heal them." 41 Isaiah said this because he saw his glory 22 and spoke about him. 42 Nevertheless, many, even among the authorities, believed in him, but because of the Pharisees they did not acknowledge it openly in order not to be expelled from the synagogue. 43 For they preferred human praise to the glory of God.

## 12:44-50 - Jesus' summary of his own work

John presents one final discourse of Jesus, every verse of which has been heard before.

- Whoever believes in Jesus believes in the one who sent him.
- Whoever sees Jesus sees the one who sent him
- Jesus came as light so people would not have to sit in darkness
- Jesus does not condemn those who hear his words but do not believe
- Jesus came to save, not to condemn
- The word which Jesus spoke will condemn those who do not believe
- Jesus did not speak on his own behalf, but only what the Father had commanded him to speak

44 Jesus cried out and said, "Whoever believes in me believes not only in me but also in the one who sent me, 45 and whoever sees me sees the one who sent me. 46 I came into the world as light, so that everyone who believes in me might not remain in darkness. 47 And if anyone hears my words and does not observe them, I do not condemn him, for I did not come to condemn the world but to save the world. 48 Whoever rejects me and does not accept my words has something to judge him: the word that I spoke, it will condemn him on the last day, 49 because I did not speak on my own, but the Father who sent me commanded me what to say and speak. 50 And I know that his commandment is eternal life. So what I say, I say as the Father told me."

## **The Book of Glory - 13:1-20:31**

There are noticeable differences between this second half of John's Gospel and the first half. In Chapters 1 to 12, most of Jesus' teaching is directed to a wider audience, provoking a crisis of faith: some came to believe, others did not. In this second half, the discourses are directed mostly to "his own" who had come to believe in him. The Book of Signs anticipated what Jesus would do for humankind when he was glorified. The Book of Glory describes the hour in which Jesus entered into his glory and would accomplish for humankind what was promised in the Book of Signs.

### **Section One: The Last Supper - 13:1-17:26**

Scholars have debated for decades about the exact date and day of the week that the Last Supper took place. We won't enter into that debate.

We will divide the events of the Last Supper into the events and Jesus' words in Chapter 13, and then consider the major discourse found in Chapters 14 through 17.

### **Opening action and pronouncements - 13:1-38**

13:1-17 - Jesus washes his disciples' feet

Jesus knew that his hour had come, and John tells us that he "loved his own in the world, and he loved them to the end." That has two meanings: he loved them to the end of his life, and his love for them was uttermost. Judas has already decided to betray him, and has already made arrangements to do so. Mark and Matthew attribute Judas' actions to avarice, he loved money. John and Luke attribute his actions to the work of the devil within Judas.

Even the lowliest of Jewish slaves were not obliged to wash people's dirty feet. Jesus' humility is shown in this gesture. The use of water and Jesus' statement to Peter that if he does not wash him he "will have no inheritance with me" are symbolic references to baptism. The word for "bathe" is the standard New Testament word for baptism. And if one's feet are washed, Jesus tells Peter, there is no need for further washing. This may be an answer to the early Christians' wondering about the need for re-baptizing one who had fallen away and later returned to the community.

Jesus statement, "If you understand this (these things), blessed are you if you do it (them)" may have Eucharistic meaning as a parallel with the synoptics "Do this in memory of me."

1 Before the feast of Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to pass from this world to the Father. He loved his own in the world and he loved them to the end. 2 The devil had already induced 4 Judas, son of Simon the Iscariot, to hand him over. So, during supper, 3 fully aware that the Father had put everything into his power and that he had come from God and was returning to God, 4 he rose from supper and took off his outer garments. He took a towel and tied it around his waist. 5 Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and dry them with the towel around his waist. 6 He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Master, are you going to wash my feet?" 7 Jesus answered and said to him, "What I am doing, you do not understand now, but you will understand later." 8 Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered him, "Unless I wash you, you will have no

inheritance with me." 9 Simon Peter said to him, "Master, then not only my feet, but my hands and head as well." 10 Jesus said to him, "Whoever has bathed has no need except to have his feet washed, for he is clean all over; so you are clean, but not all." 11 For he knew who would betray him; for this reason, he said, "Not all of you are clean."

12 So when he had washed their feet (and) put his garments back on and reclined at table again, he said to them, "Do you realize what I have done for you? 13 You call me 'teacher' and 'master,' and rightly so, for indeed I am. 14 If I, therefore, the master and teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another's feet. 15 I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do. 16 Amen, amen, I say to you, no slave is greater than his master nor any messenger greater than the one who sent him. 17 If you understand this, blessed are you if you do it.

### 13:18-30 - Betrayal

This is possibly a fusion of two accounts which the final editor put together. In verses 18 and 19 Jesus reveals to the gathered disciples that he knows that one will betray him. He is telling them ahead of time so that they will know that "I AM," that he is God. In verses 20 to 30 we have the second prediction of the betrayal by Judas. When Jesus says, "What you are going to do, do quickly," it shows Jesus knowledge and that he is in control of his destiny. There's poetry in John's writing that after Judas took the morsel and went out, "And it was night." The darkness is moving in.

18 I am not speaking of all of you. I know those whom I have chosen. But so that the scripture might be fulfilled, 'The one who ate my food has raised his heel against me.' 19 From now on I am telling you before it happens, so that when it happens you may believe that I AM. 20 Amen, amen, I say to you, whoever receives the one I send receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me." 21 When he had said this, Jesus was deeply troubled and testified, "Amen, amen, I say to you, one of you will betray me." 22 The disciples looked at one another, at a loss as to whom he meant. 23 One of his disciples, the one whom Jesus loved, was reclining at Jesus' side. 24 So Simon Peter nodded to him to find out whom he meant. 25 He leaned back against Jesus' chest and said to him, "Master, who is it?" 26 Jesus answered, "It is the one to whom I hand the morsel after I have dipped it." So he dipped the morsel and (took it and) handed it to Judas, son of Simon the Iscariot. 27 After he took the morsel, Satan entered him. So Jesus said to him, "What you are going to do, do quickly." 28 (Now) none of those reclining at table realized why he said this to him. 29 Some thought that since Judas kept the money bag, Jesus had told him, "Buy what we need for the feast," or to give something to the poor. 30 So he took the morsel and left at once. And it was night.

### 13:31-35 - Introduction to the last discourse

As Jesus faces his destiny of death, he speaks of God glorifying himself and *\*glorifying Jesus in himself*. Jesus' farewell gift to his disciples is the new commandment, although it is not really new, because in Leviticus the same commandment was given. They are to love one another. "As I have loved you, so you are to love one another."

33 My children, I will be with you only a little while longer. You will look for me, and as I told the Jews, 'Where I go you cannot come,' so now I say it to you. 34 I give you a new commandment: 12 love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another. 35 This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

### 13:36-38 - Peter's denial predicted

Peter's impetuous boast that he will lay down his life for Jesus is met by Jesus' prediction that Peter will deny him. Peter's heart is in the right place, and despite his denial the office of shepherd will not be taken from him.

36 Simon Peter said to him, "Master, where are you going?" Jesus answered (him), "Where I am going, you cannot follow me now, though you will follow later." 37 Peter said to him, "Master, why can't I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you." 38 Jesus answered, "Will you lay down your life for me? Amen, amen, I say to you, the cock will not crow before you deny me three times."

### Part One of the Last Discourse 14:1-31

This discourse is made up of what the disciples remembered of Jesus' discourse at the Last Supper, and from other times in his ministry. It's a compilation of Jesus' teachings woven together by the editor of the Gospel into a beautiful discourse. The final editor had at his disposal the writings of the author, the disciple whom Jesus loved, and other fragments of written material to which he had access, possibly also written by the beloved disciple, who had decided not to include the material in his final draft because he had re-written it. If it seems that Jesus repeats himself several times, it is because the final editor inserted some of those fragments into the Gospel where he thought they fit the context of the author's already completed work.

### 14:1-14 - Jesus' imminent departure

Quite different from the other discourses, this whole discourse is directed only to "his own." Despite Jesus' impending departure, he tells his disciples not to be troubled. This separation is only temporary. The responses of Thomas and Philip to Jesus' opening words give the chance for Jesus to discourse on the unity between him and his Father.

Thomas wonders where Jesus is going, and therefore wonders how the disciples could possibly know the way. Jesus responds that he is the *way* to the Father, because he is the incarnate *truth* about the Father and gives *life* from above to human beings.

Philip wants Jesus to show them the Father, which gives Jesus the occasion to speak at some length about the unity of the Father and the Son, and the promise that if they ask anything in his name he will give it to them. This is found only in John. Usually Jesus has said that if the disciples ask in Jesus' name, the Father will give what is asked.

1 "Do not let your hearts be troubled. You have faith in God; have faith also in me. 2 In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If there were not, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? 3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back again and take you to myself, so that where I am you also may be. 4 Where (I) am going you know the way." 5 Thomas said to him, "Master, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?" 6 Jesus said to him, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. 7 If you know me, then you will also know my Father. 6 From now on you do know him and have seen him." 8 Philip said to him, "Master, show us the Father, 7 and that will be enough for us." 9 Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you for so long a time and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? 10 Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I speak to you I do not speak on my own. The Father who dwells in me is doing his works.

11 Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else, believe because of the works themselves. 12 Amen, amen, I say to you, whoever believes in me will do the works that I do, and will do greater ones than these, because I am going to the Father. 13 And whatever you ask in my name, I will do, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. 14 If you ask anything of me in my name, I will do it.

### 14:15-31 - The Trinity

The following part of the discourse is profound. Notice how all three Persons of the Trinity are mentioned. Everything which Jesus promises is contingent on the disciples' loving him. If they do that, *Jesus* will ask the *Father* to give them another *Advocate, the Spirit of truth*. The world cannot receive that Spirit, because the world does not know that Spirit. But the disciples know the Spirit because it remains with them and is in them. And to love Jesus means to keep his commandments. What we have come to call "the indwelling of the Trinity" is articulated by Jesus. Read the passage with awe.

Jesus gives his gift of peace to his followers. Because the Spirit will be present to the disciples, they can be at peace. Even though he is going away, he promises to return. And his going is a good thing, because Jesus is returning to the Father. Even though the "ruler of this world" is coming, he is not in charge. Jesus is going to do what his Father has commanded, because that way the world will know that Jesus loves the Father.

The final verse includes the words, "Get up. Let us go," suggesting that the author considered this the end of the discourse. Was the rest added by the editor? Probably. The discourse could most easily be understood if this section were connected with 18:1. But it isn't. So we will deal with the following three chapters as an addition to the original intent of the author.

15 If you love me, you will keep my commandments. 16 And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you always, 17 the Spirit of truth, which the world cannot accept, because it neither sees nor knows it. But you know it, because it remains with you, and will be in you. 18 I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you. 19 In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me, because I live and you will live. 20 On that day you will realize that I am in my Father and you are in me and I in you. 21 Whoever has my commandments and observes them is the one who loves me. And whoever loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and reveal myself to him." 22 Judas, not the Iscariot, 11 said to him, "Master, (then) what happened that you will reveal yourself to us and not to the world?" 23 Jesus answered and said to him, "Whoever loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our dwelling with him. 24 Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; yet the word you hear is not mine but that of the Father who sent me.

25 "I have told you this while I am with you. 26 The Advocate, the holy Spirit that the Father will send in my name - he will teach you everything and remind you of all that (I) told you. 27 Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give it to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid. 28 You heard me tell you, 'I am going away and I will come back to you.' If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father; for the Father is greater than I. 29 And now I have told you this before it happens, so that when it happens you may believe. 30 I will no longer speak much with you, for the ruler of the world is coming. He has no power over me, 31 but the world must know that I love the Father and that I do just as the Father has commanded me.

Get up, let us go."

What Jesus told his disciples is a profound mystery of God's presence within us. We will never fully wrap our minds around that mystery. However, we can use our imagination to get in touch with this mystery which is so real. Allow me to show you how.

- Allow your body to find a position which is relaxed but alert.
- Concentrate on your breathing. Other thoughts may come, and they will. But let them go, and concentrate just on your breathing.
- Now, in imagination drop down into that most private, personal place within you, your heart, and find God waiting there for you. Greet God.
- Spent some time giving God a tour of your heart as it is today. God already knows what's there, but let God know *from you* what's in your heart today.
- Now, invite into your heart all those people whom you love and who love you. As they come into focus one-by-one, with God look on them and love them.
- After you've loved each one individually, let them fade. Keep on loving them but let them fade, and be still for just a moment and *enjoy God's loving you*.

We're going to proceed on the assumption that Chapters 15 to 17 were earlier drafts that the original author, the disciple whom Jesus loved, had re-written and set aside in favor of his revision which he included in his manuscript. The final editor may have found them and inserted them into the Gospel. The church has accepted as inspired the Gospel as it now stands.

### **Part two of the Last Discourse - 15:1-16:4**

15:1-11 - The vine and the branches (Abide/remain)

The focus here is on the abiding/remaining of the branches in the vine. (In case you doubt that, I will italicize the word each time it appears in the gospel text.) Jesus says he is the "true" vine, presumably contrasting himself with Israel which has many times in the Hebrew scriptures been compared to a vine which God plants and tends, but which produces sour fruit. The Father continues to be the vine-dresser, now of this true vine. Those branches which abide in the vine and produce fruit are pruned so they can bear more fruit; those who do not bear fruit are cut off. (This is possibly an oblique reference to the division within the Johannine community.)

The love relationship between Jesus and the Father is the model and cause of the relationship between Jesus and the disciples, and among the disciples themselves.

1 "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. 2 He takes away every branch in me that does not bear fruit, and everyone that does he prunes so that it bears more fruit. 3 You are already pruned because of the word that I spoke to you. 4 *Remain* in me, as I *remain* in you. Just as a branch cannot bear fruit on its own unless it *remains* on the vine, so neither can you unless you *remain* in me. 5 I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever *remains* in me and I in him will bear much fruit, because without me you can do nothing. 6 Anyone who does not *remain* in me will be thrown out like a branch and wither; people will gather them and throw them into a fire and they will be burned. 7 If you *remain* in me and my words *remain* in you, ask for whatever you want and it will be done for you. 8 By this is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. 9 As the Father loves me, so I also love you. *Remain* in my love. 10 If you keep my commandments, you will *remain* in my love, just

as I have kept my Father's commandments and *remain* in his love. 11 I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete.

### 15:12-17 - The commandment (Love)

Jesus' love for his disciples has established a new relationship between him and the disciples: they are now friends, not master and slaves or servants. That new relationship has consequences: the disciples are to love one another as Jesus has loved them. How deep is that love? No greater love can there be than to lay down one's life for one's friends. The disciples have been chosen to be recipients of that love and imitators of that love.

Here Jesus is not speaking of the love one should have for everyone, let alone the love of one's enemies, which Jesus enjoins in both Matthew and Luke. He is not speaking as God, who does nothing but love. The love Jesus is speaking about here is the human love that he has for his followers and that they must have for one another. This is a more intimate family affair.

But because Jesus is also God, those whom he loves and who love him are caught up into the life of love which exists within the Trinity. How awesome is that!

12 This is my commandment: love one another as I love you. 13 No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. 14 You are my friends if you do what I command you. 15 I no longer call you slaves, because a slave does not know what his master is doing. I have called you friends, because I have told you everything I have heard from my Father. 16 It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit that will remain, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name he may give you. 17 This I command you: love one another.

### 15:18-16:4 - The prediction (Hatred)

But the disciples' lives will not be a giant love feast; some will hate them precisely because of the mutual love existing among the disciples and Jesus and his Father. After all, the world hated Jesus enough to kill him. If the disciples belonged to the world, the world would love them. But because Jesus chose them out of the world, the world hates them. The world will hate them because the world does not know the Father whom Jesus revealed to his disciples. It's almost as though Jesus in his disciples has created a whole new world order, and everybody isn't going to like it. Jesus quotes Psalm 35:19: "They hated me without cause."

Jesus says that they will expel the disciples from the synagogue. He prophesies that people will kill them, all the time thinking they are offering worship to God.

But the Spirit whom Jesus will send will enable the disciples to testify on Jesus' behalf by their lives and their words.

18 "If the world hates you, realize that it hated me first. 19 If you belonged to the world, the world would love its own; but because you do not belong to the world, and I have chosen you out of the world, the world hates you. 20 Remember the word I spoke to you, 'No slave is greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours. 21 And they will do all these things to you on account of my name, because they do not know the one who sent me. 22 If I had not come and spoken to them, they would have no sin; but as it is they have no excuse for their sin. 23 Whoever hates me also hates my Father. 24 If I had not done works among them that no one else ever did, they would not have sin; but as it is, they have seen and hated both me and my Father. 25 But in order that the word written in their law might be fulfilled, 'They hated me without cause.'

26 "When the Advocate comes whom I will send you from the Father, the Spirit of truth that proceeds from the Father, he will testify to me. 27 And you also testify, because you have been with me from the beginning.

1 "I have told you this so that you may not fall away. 2 They will expel you from the synagogues; in fact, the hour is coming when everyone who kills you will think he is offering worship to God. 3 They will do this because they have not known either the Father or me. 4 I have told you this so that when their hour comes you may remember that I told you. "I did not tell you this from the beginning, because I was with you."

### **Duplicate of Part One of the Last Discourse - 16:4-33**

This section is a duplicate of Chapter 14. Probably the final editor found this earlier version of Chapter 14, which the author had rewritten and discarded, and the editor hated to have it lost, so he inserted it here. Again, that's why Jesus often seems to repeat himself.

Here are some slight differences.

In verse 7 Jesus says that he will send the Advocate. In Chapter 14, he says the Father will send the Advocate. This indicates that Jesus and the Father are one.

4 I have told you this so that when their hour comes you may remember that I told you. "I did not tell you this from the beginning, because I was with you. 5 But now I am going to the one who sent me, and not one of you asks me, 'Where are you going?' 6 But because I told you this, grief has filled your hearts. 7 But I tell you the truth, it is better for you that I go. For if I do not go, the Advocate will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you.

Verses 8-11 have no parallel in Chapter 14. The Advocate will convict the world on matters of sin and righteousness and condemnation. Perhaps the best commentary on this passage can be found in the New English Bible's translation: "When he comes he will confute the world, and show where wrong and right and judgement lie. He will convict them of *wrong*, by their refusal to believe in me; he will convince them that *right* was on my side, by showing that I go to the Father when I pass from your sight; and he will convince them of divine *judgement*, by showing that the Prince of this world stands condemned."

8 And when he comes he will convict the world in regard to sin and righteousness and condemnation: 9 sin, because they do not believe in me; 10 righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will no longer see me; 11 condemnation, because the ruler of this world has been condemned.

Verses 12-15 are a close parallel to Chapter 14: 25-26.

12 "I have much more to tell you, but you cannot bear it now. 13 But when he comes, the Spirit of truth, he will guide you to all truth. He will not speak on his own, but he will speak what he hears, and will declare to you the things that are coming. 14 He will glorify me, because he will take from what is mine and declare it to you. 15 Everything that the Father has is mine; for this reason I told you that he will take from what is mine and declare it to you.

Verses 16-22 also have no close parallel in Chapter 14. Jesus develops more fully the theme of his departure.

16 "A little while and you will no longer see me, and again a little while later and you will see me." 17 So some of his disciples said to one another, "What does this mean that he is saying to us, 'A little while and you will

not see me, and again a little while and you will see me,' and 'Because I am going to the Father?'" 18 So they said, "What is this 'little while' (of which he speaks)? We do not know what he means." 19 Jesus knew that they wanted to ask him, so he said to them, "Are you discussing with one another what I said, 'A little while and you will not see me, and again a little while and you will see me'? 20 Amen, amen, I say to you, you will weep and mourn, while the world rejoices; you will grieve, but your grief will become joy.

21 When a woman is in labor, she is in anguish because her hour has arrived; but when she has given birth to a child, she no longer remembers the pain because of her joy that a child has been born into the world. 22 So you also are now in anguish. But I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy away from you.

The remaining verses in the chapter are parallel to Chapter 14, with the exception of verses 25 and 29-32.

23 On that day you will not question me about anything. Amen, amen, I say to you, whatever you ask the Father in my name he will give you. 24 Until now you have not asked anything in my name; ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete.

25 "I have told you this in figures of speech. The hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures but I will tell you clearly about the Father. 26 On that day you will ask in my name, and I do not tell you that I will ask the Father for you. 27 For the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have come to believe that I came from God. 28 I came from the Father and have come into the world. Now I am leaving the world and going back to the Father." 29 His disciples said, "Now you are talking plainly, and not in any figure of speech. 30 Now we realize that you know everything and that you do not need to have anyone question you. Because of this we believe that you came from God." 31 Jesus answered them, "Do you believe now? 32 Behold, the hour is coming and has arrived when each of you will be scattered to his own home and you will leave me alone. But I am not alone, because the Father is with me. 33 I have told you this so that you might have peace in me. In the world you will have trouble, but take courage, I have conquered the world."

### **Part Three of the Last Discourse - 17:1-26**

The prayer of Jesus can be understood in three parts: a prayer for glory, a prayer for the disciples, and a prayer for those who will come to believe because of the preaching of the disciples.

17:1-8 - A prayer for glory

Jesus prays to return to the glory which was his prior to his coming among us as a human being. The prayer is not asking that the suffering on the horizon be avoided; it's a prayer for vindication through and after the suffering, because he has completed the work the Father gave him, namely to make God's name known.

Verse three is clearly the work of an editor, since Jesus never referred to himself as "Jesus Christ."

1 When Jesus had said this, he raised his eyes to heaven and said, "Father, the hour has come. Give glory to your son, so that your son may glorify you, 2 just as you gave him authority over all people, so that he may give eternal life to all you gave him. 3 Now this is eternal life, that they should know you, the only true God, and the one whom you sent, Jesus Christ. 4 I glorified you on earth by accomplishing the work that you gave me to do. 5 Now glorify me, Father, with you, with the glory that I had with you before the world began. 6 "I revealed your name to those whom you gave me out of the world. They belonged to you, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. 7 Now they know that everything you gave me is from you, 8 because the words you gave to me I have given

to them, and they accepted them and truly understood that I came from you, and they have believed that you sent me.

### 17:9-19 - Prayer for the disciples

Indicating that Jesus knows his work on earth is accomplished, and that he is returning to the Father, he says, “*I* am no longer in the world, but *they* are in the world.” It is, therefore, all right for Jesus to depart; the disciples will continue his mission. This is an incredible mission given to the disciples. What Jesus came to do, the disciples will now do, because Jesus is about to be glorified. As we will see in 19:30, in his glorification Jesus will hand over the Spirit to fill the whole church. In the power of that Spirit, the disciples will continue Jesus’ mission.

Jesus is, among other things, the truth, the revelation of God the Father. Jesus prays that his disciples will be consecrated in that truth.

9 I pray for them. I do not pray for the world but for the ones you have given me, because they are yours, 10 and everything of mine is yours and everything of yours is mine, and I have been glorified in them. 11 And now I will no longer be in the world, but they are in the world, while I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one just as we are. 12 When I was with them I protected them in your name that you gave me, and I guarded them, and none of them was lost except the son of destruction, in order that the scripture might be fulfilled. 13 But now I am coming to you. I speak this in the world so that they may share my joy completely. 14 I gave them your word, and the world hated them, because they do not belong to the world any more than I belong to the world. 15 I do not ask that you take them out of the world but that you keep them from the evil one. 16 They do not belong to the world any more than I belong to the world. 17 Consecrate them in the truth. Your word is truth. 18 As you sent me into the world, so I sent them into the world. 19 And I consecrate myself for them, so that they also may be consecrated in truth.

### 17:20-26 - Prayer for those who will come to believed

Jesus’ prayer that the disciples be one as Jesus and the Father are one suggests that perhaps, even at the time the Gospel was being written, the Christians were not one. Jesus’ prayer is that the disciples be so caught up into the life of Jesus and his Father that their unity among themselves might be a reflection of the unity within the Trinity. If the disciples’ unity in love is a mirror of the life of the Trinity, their witness to the world will be compelling.

The final sentence is a show-stopper. “That the love with which you loved me may be in them, and I may be in them.” Could this mean that the Christian can love others with the very love of God, can give God’s love also to whomever they give their love?

20 "I pray not only for them, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, 21 so that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me. 22 And I have given them the glory you gave me, so that they may be one, as we are one, 23 I in them and you in me, that they may be brought to perfection as one, that the world may know that you sent me, and that you loved them even as you loved me. 24 Father, they are your gift to me. I wish that where I am 7 they also may be with me, that they may see my glory that you gave me, because you loved me before the foundation of the world. 25 Righteous Father, the world also does not know you, but I know you, and they know that you sent me. 26 I made known to them your name and I will make it known, 8 that the love with which you loved me may be in them and I in them."

## Section Two: Trial and Death - 18:1-19:42

In this section John is closer to the synoptic gospels than is usually the case. Possibly the reason is that the oral transmission of the passion narrative was the first part of the tradition to be circulated and to become widely known. There are changes in the details, but the overall outline follows Mark closely: arrest in the garden, interrogation by the high priest, trial before Pilate, crucifixion and burial.

The outlook of this whole section is a portrayal of Jesus as the one in control of his destiny, a reflection of what he had said in 10:18: "No one takes it [my life] from me, but I lay it down on my own. I have power to lay it down, and power to take it up again."

18:1-12 - Arrest in the garden [Mark 14:43-44; Matthew 26:47-51; Luke 22:47]

John has no narrative of Jesus' agony in the garden. The focus is on the arrest. Judas appears with both a band of Roman soldiers and guards from the high priests. Jesus "knowing everything that was going to happen to him" went out to meet them (he's in charge). When he asks whom they seek and they tell him, "Jesus the Nazorean." Jesus says, "I AM," the name for God, at which the arresting party falls to the ground. Their falling to the ground is a theological statement by John, not necessarily a historical report.

Impetuous Peter attempts to thwart God's plan by use of force. Jesus stops him. Because both Peter and Malchus are named, this may be accurate history. Jesus reprimands Peter, showing again that he is in charge.

1 When he had said this, Jesus went out with his disciples across the Kidron valley to where there was a garden, into which he and his disciples entered. 2 Judas his betrayer also knew the place, because Jesus had often met there with his disciples. 3 So Judas got a band of soldiers 3 and guards from the chief priests and the Pharisees and went there with lanterns, torches, and weapons. 4 Jesus, knowing everything that was going to happen to him, went out and said to them, "Whom are you looking for?" 5 They answered him, "Jesus the Nazorean." He said to them, "I AM." Judas his betrayer was also with them. 6 When he said to them, "I AM," they turned away and fell to the ground. 7 So he again asked them, "Whom are you looking for?" They said, "Jesus the Nazorean." 8 Jesus answered, "I told you that I AM. So if you are looking for me, let these men go." 9 This was to fulfill what he had said, "I have not lost any of those you gave me." 10 Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it, struck the high priest's slave, and cut off his right ear. The slave's name was Malchus. 11 Jesus said to Peter, "Put your sword into its scabbard. Shall I not drink the cup that the Father gave me?" 12 So the band of soldiers, the tribune, and the Jewish guards seized Jesus, bound him,

18:13-14, 19-24 - Inquiry by Annas [Mark 14:53-54; Matthew 26:57-58; Luke 22:54-55]

Here's a little history, not from the gospel accounts, but from Josephus, the historian. Annas was the patriarch of a high priestly family. He had held the office from 6 to 15 A.D. He had five sons, a grandson, and a son-in-law who held the office after him. At the time Jesus was arrested, Caiaphas, his son-in-law, was high priest. He held the office from 18 to 36 A.D. In 36 A.D., Pilate was removed from the office of Roman Procurator and recalled to Rome, and Caiaphas was removed from his office as high priest, leading many to speculate that there had been some kind of collusion between them. The whole family was notoriously corrupt.

Jesus is brought to Annas first, where he was questioned about his disciples and his doctrine, and abused by a temple guard. Then Jesus was sent off to Caiaphus. [Peter's first denial comes in the middle of the Annas narrative.]

13 and brought him to Annas first. He was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, who was high priest that year. 14 It was Caiaphas who had counseled the Jews that it was better that one man should die rather than the people. Simon Peter and another disciple followed Jesus. Now the other disciple was known to the high priest, and he entered the courtyard of the high priest with Jesus. 16 But Peter stood at the gate outside. So the other disciple, the acquaintance of the high priest, went out and spoke to the gatekeeper and brought Peter in.

[Peter's first denial is treated below.]

19 The high priest questioned Jesus about his disciples and about his doctrine. 20 Jesus answered him, "I have spoken publicly to the world. I have always taught in a synagogue or in the temple area 10 where all the Jews gather, and in secret I have said nothing. 21 Why ask me? Ask those who heard me what I said to them. They know what I said." 22 When he had said this, one of the temple guards standing there struck Jesus and said, "Is this the way you answer the high priest?" 23 Jesus answered him, "If I have spoken wrongly, testify to the wrong; but if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?" 24 Then Annas sent him bound to Caiaphas the high priest.

18:15-18, 25-27 -Peter's denials [Mark 14:54, 66-68; Matthew 26:58, 69-70; Luke 22:54-57]

We're looking at Peter's denials together, even though they are reported in the Gospel with an interval of the scene with Annas.

This represents an uncomplimentary tribute to Peter's importance, offering hope and reconciliation to all disciples who would subsequently fall away.

17 Then the maid who was the gatekeeper said to Peter, "You are not one of this man's disciples, are you?" He said, "I am not." 18 Now the slaves and the guards were standing around a charcoal fire that they had made, because it was cold, and were warming themselves. Peter was also standing there keeping warm.

25 Now Simon Peter was standing there keeping warm. And they said to him, "You are not one of his disciples, are you?" He denied it and said, "I am not." 26 One of the slaves of the high priest, a relative of the one whose ear Peter had cut off, said, "Didn't I see you in the garden with him?" 27 Again Peter denied it. And immediately the cock crowed.

18:28-19:16a -Trial before Pilate [Mark 15:1-5; Matthew 27:1-2,11-25 Luke 23:1-5]

In John's description of Jesus' encounter with Pilate – with Pilate's outside speaking to the Jews, then inside speaking with Jesus, and then out again, and then in again, and then outside again – John has in effect put Pilate on trial for the indecisive way he refuses to listen to the truth. There are actually seven scenes in this episode.

18:28-32 - Scene one—outside

It's early Friday morning. The Passover will begin at sunset. The scene takes place outside, because the Jews could not enter the house without becoming unclean, and therefore not able to celebrate Passover. They don't give Pilate the reason for their charge against Jesus, and when Pilate tells them to settle this religious matter among themselves, they make it clear that their desire is to kill Jesus, not to settle some religious matter.

28 Then they brought Jesus from Caiaphas to the praetorium. It was morning. And they themselves did not enter the praetorium, in order not to be defiled so that they could eat the Passover. 29 So Pilate came out to them and said, "What charge do you bring (against) this man?" 30 They answered and said to him, "If he were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you." 31 At this, Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves, and judge him according to your law." The Jews answered him, "We do not have the right to execute anyone," 32 in order that the word of Jesus might be fulfilled that he said indicating the kind of death he would die.

#### 18:33-38a - Scene two – inside

Pilate asks if Jesus is the King of the Jews, saying that he himself is not a Jew, and he knows only what others have told him. Jesus explains that his kingdom is not of this world, but Pilate fastens on Jesus' admission that he is a king. Jesus says basically, "You might say that." But he explains that he was born to testify to the truth. "What is truth?" will forever be Pilate's epitaph. He clearly couldn't recognize it even when it was standing right in front of him.

33 So Pilate went back into the praetorium and summoned Jesus and said to him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" 34 Jesus answered, "Do you say this on your own or have others told you about me?" 35 Pilate answered, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests handed you over to me. What have you done?" 36 Jesus answered, "My kingdom does not belong to this world. If my kingdom did belong to this world, my attendants (would) be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not here." 37 So Pilate said to him, "Then you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say I am a king. For this I was born and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." 38 Pilate said to him, "What is truth?"

#### 18:38b-40 - Scene three – outside

Pilate returns to the Jews and gives his "not guilty" verdict. But the Jews don't care, they just want Jesus crucified. There is no evidence outside of the gospels of the custom to release a prisoner. But the crowd calls for Barabbas.

When he had said this, he again went out to the Jews and said to them, "I find no guilt in him. 39 But you have a custom that I release one prisoner to you at Passover. Do you want me to release to you the King of the Jews?" 40 They cried out again, "Not this one but Barabbas!" Now Barabbas was a revolutionary.

#### 19:1-3 - Scene four – inside

Jesus is scourged and mocked. Scourging was for the Romans preliminary to crucifixion, in order to weaken the prisoner.

19:1 Then Pilate took Jesus and had him scourged. 2 And the soldiers wove a crown out of thorns and placed it on his head, and clothed him in a purple cloak, 3 and they came to him and said, "Hail, King of the Jews!" And they struck him repeatedly.

#### 19:4-8 - Scene five – outside

Pilate's "not guilty" verdict. The chief priests abandon all pretext that this trial is political; it is religious. Jesus' crime: he said he was the Son of God. When Pilate heard that he became *even more* afraid.

4 Once more Pilate went out and said to them, "Look, I am bringing him out to you, so that you may know that I find no guilt in him." 5 So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple cloak. And he said to them, "Behold, the man!" 6 When the chief priests and the guards saw him they cried out, "Crucify him, crucify him!" Pilate said to them, "Take him yourselves and crucify him. I find no guilt in him." 7 The Jews answered, "We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die, because he made himself the Son of God." 8 Now when Pilate heard this statement, he became even more afraid,

#### 19:9-12a - Scene six – inside

Jesus does not answer Pilate's question about where he came from. Pilate demands an answer, threatening Jesus with the power he has over Jesus – to release or crucify him. Jesus gives a more accurate statement about where the power lies. Pilate makes another attempt to release Jesus.

9 and went back into the praetorium and said to Jesus, "Where are you from?" Jesus did not answer him. 10 So Pilate said to him, "Do you not speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you and I have power to crucify you?" 11 Jesus answered (him), "You would have no power over me if it had not been given to you from above. For this reason the one who handed me over to you has the greater sin." 12 Consequently, Pilate tried to release him; but the Jews cried out, "If you release him, you are not a Friend of Caesar. Everyone who makes himself a king opposes Caesar."

#### 19:12b-16a - Scene seven – outside

There is almost cruel irony here. Pilate brought Jesus outside and "seated him on the judge's bench." Other translations seem to indicate that Pilate seated himself on the judge's bench, but he seated Jesus there. Who's judging whom? is John's question. His last futile effort to release Jesus was frustrated, when the chief priests repudiated Jesus as their king, and claimed that Caesar was their only king, thereby abandoning their birthright as God's Chosen People. Pilate acquiesced and gave over Jesus to be crucified. John writes that Pilate handed Jesus over to the chief priests, but obviously it was the Romans who had to carry out the death sentence.

13 When Pilate heard these words he brought Jesus out and seated him on the judge's bench in the place called Stone Pavement, in Hebrew, Gabbatha. 14 It was preparation day for Passover, and it was about noon. And he said to the Jews, "Behold, your king!" 15 They cried out, "Take him away, take him away! Crucify him!" Pilate said to them, "Shall I crucify your king?" The chief priests answered, "We have no king but Caesar." 16 Then he handed him over to them to be crucified. So they took Jesus,

#### 19:16b-30 - Jesus dies [Mark 15:21-26; Matthew 27:32-37; Luke 23:26-35]

John omits much of what the synoptics narrate about the crucifixion: Simon of Cyrene, the wailing women, the drugged potion, the verbal abuse of the onlookers, the darkness, the admiring centurion, the tearing of the Temple veil. He is interested in conveying the *mystery* rather than the *history* of the event.

Jesus carrying the cross for himself reveals that he is still in charge. Pilate's inscription naming Jesus "King of the Jews" is full of irony: a Gentile unwittingly declares that the Gentiles will uphold Jesus' kingship. Jesus' seamless tunic resembles what the historian, Josephus, describes as the high priestly vestment, suggesting that Jesus is not only king, but also priest.

John reports that four women and the disciple whom Jesus loved were standing at the foot of the cross: his mother (never named in John's Gospel), his mother's sister, Mary, the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene.

In response to Jesus words, "I thirst," a sponge soaked in common wine is raised to his lips on a "sprig of hyssop." That's not a very sturdy instrument. But the symbolism may be that the people were to smear the blood of the lamb on their door posts, using a sprig of hyssop to do so (Exodus 12:22); those lambs were being slaughtered at the very hour Jesus was crucified.

16 So they took Jesus, 17 and carrying the cross himself 7 he went out to what is called the Place of the Skull, in Hebrew, Golgotha. 18 There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, with Jesus in the middle. 19 Pilate also had an inscription written and put on the cross. It read, "Jesus the Nazorean, the King of the Jews." 20 Now many of the Jews read this inscription, because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek. 21 So the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, "Do not write 'The King of the Jews,' but that he said, 'I am the King of the Jews.'" 22 Pilate answered, "What I have written, I have written." 23 When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his clothes and divided them into four shares, a share for each soldier. They also took his tunic, but the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from the top down. 24 So they said to one another, "Let's not tear it, but cast lots for it to see whose it will be," in order that the passage of scripture might be fulfilled (that says): "They divided my garments among them, and for my vesture they cast lots." This is what the soldiers did. 25 Standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary of Magdala. 26 When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple there whom he loved, he said to his mother, "Woman, behold, your son." 27 Then he said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother." And from that hour the disciple took her into his home. 28 After this, aware that everything was now finished, in order that the scripture might be fulfilled, Jesus said, "I thirst." 29 There was a vessel filled with common wine. 13 So they put a sponge soaked in wine on a sprig of hyssop and put it up to his mouth. 30 When Jesus had taken the wine, he said, "It is finished\*." And bowing his head, he handed over the spirit.

\* The Greek word can be translated as "finished," but that means finished as in "completed," not as in "ended." A translation more favorable to the meaning here would be "accomplished."

### **19:30 - Death: Jesus is *GLORIFIED***

For John, the death of Jesus is his glorification. To understand the mystery which the evangelist is revealing here, we need to look back on the path along which he has led us from the beginning, in order to pick up the elements of this mystery which he has dropped on our path through his gospel way.

□ 1:14 - "The Word became flesh and pitched his tent among us."

The Eternal Word took on the human limitations of time and place: he could be only in one place at a time.

□ 1:33 - John the Baptist testified, "The one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'Upon whomever you see the Spirit come down and remain, he is the one who will *baptize with the holy Spirit.*'"

□ 7:37-39 - On the last and greatest day of the feast, Jesus stood up and exclaimed, "Let anyone who thirsts come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as scripture says: 'Rivers of living water will flow from within him.'" He said this in reference to the Spirit that those who came to believe in him were to receive. There was, of course, no Spirit yet, *because Jesus had not yet been glorified.*

□ 12:1-3 - Six days before Passover Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. They gave a dinner for him there, and Martha served, while Lazarus was one of those reclining at table with him. Mary took a liter of costly perfumed oil made from genuine aromatic nard and anointed the feet of Jesus and dried them with her hair; *the house was filled with the fragrance of the oil.*

□ 12:23, 27 - Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man *to be glorified*. . . What should I say, ‘Father, save me from this hour?’ But it was for this purpose that I came to this hour. Father, *glorify your name.*” Then a voice came from heaven, “*I have glorified it and will glorify it again.*”

□ 13:31-32 - When he [Judas] had left, Jesus said, “Now is the Son of Man *glorified*, and God is *glorified* in him. [If God is glorified in him,] God *will also glorify* him in himself, and will *glorify* him at once.

□ 17:1-5 - He [Jesus] raised his eyes to heaven and said, “Father, the hour has come. Give *glory* to your son, so that your son may *glorify* you, just as you gave him authority over all people, so that he may give eternal life to all you gave him. Now this is eternal life, that they should know you, the only true God, and the one whom you sent, Jesus Christ. I *glorified* you on earth by ***accomplishing the work that you gave me to do.*** Now *glorify* me, Father, with you, with the *glory* that I had with you before the world began.”

□ 19:30 - When Jesus had taken the wine, he said, “It is accomplished.” And bowing his head he handed over the Spirit. As the aroma of the ointment filled the whole house, the Spirit now fills the whole church.

John sees Jesus’ death as his glorification, his shedding of the human limitations he took upon himself in the incarnation. In his death he shed the human limitation of time and place. Through his Spirit he can now be present for all time in all places.

A note from Paul’s letter to the Romans, 6:3-4. “Are you unaware that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his *death*?” Our baptism is a commitment to live a life of shedding our human limitations of sin and selfishness. And from his second letter to the Corinthians, 5:14-15, “For the love of Christ impels us once we have come to the conviction that one died for all. Therefore, all have died. He indeed died for all, so that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died, and was raised.”

The conclusion: there is nothing which so radically excludes Christianity as doing something selfish. (‡)

19:31-37 - Blood and water

The very ones who wanted Jesus crucified now go to Pilate and ask that the bodies be removed, because of the feast of Passover which will begin at sunset. Breaking the crucified’s

legs would mean that the person would now hang only by his hands, and would die of asphyxiation. The legs of the other two are broken.

But Jesus is found to be already dead, so they don't break his legs. However for some unstated reason a soldier thrusts his lance into Jesus' side. Blood and water flow out. For John there is great symbolism here. Jesus is the living water. The combination of water and blood suggests baptism and the Eucharist.

31 Now since it was preparation day, in order that the bodies might not remain on the cross on the Sabbath, for the Sabbath day of that week was a solemn one, the Jews asked Pilate that their legs be broken and they be taken down. 32 So the soldiers came and broke the legs of the first and then of the other one who was crucified with Jesus. 33 But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs, 34 but one soldier thrust his lance into his side, and immediately blood and water flowed out. 35 An eyewitness has testified, and his testimony is true; he knows that he is speaking the truth, so that you also may (come to) believe. 36 For this happened so that the scripture passage might be fulfilled: "Not a bone of it will be broken." 37 And again another passage says: "They will look upon him whom they have pierced."

19:38-42 - The burial [Mark 15:42-46; Matthew 27:57-60; Luke 23:46-49]

The noteworthy aspect of the burial is that two timid Sanhedrin members take care of obtaining Jesus' body and preparing it for burial, Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea. Perhaps a sign that now that Jesus has been "lifted up," he is indeed drawing all to himself.

38 After this, Joseph of Arimathea, secretly a disciple of Jesus for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate if he could remove the body of Jesus. And Pilate permitted it. So he came and took his body. 39 Nicodemus, the one who had first come to him at night, also came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes weighing about one hundred pounds. 40 They took the body of Jesus and bound it with burial cloths along with the spices, according to the Jewish burial custom. 41 Now in the place where he had been crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb, in which no one had yet been buried. 42 So they laid Jesus there because of the Jewish preparation day; for the tomb was close by.

### Section Three: Resurrection Appearances - 20:1-31

The appearances of Jesus after his resurrection are not meant to prove something to people who otherwise would not believe. They are meant to reveal something to his disciples who had been prepared to believe because of their experience of Jesus before his death. As one commentator said, "If the resurrection was meant to prove something, one gets the impression that the whole thing was rather poorly handled!"

Despite the stained glass windows which show Roman guards falling back as Jesus floats out of the tomb, no one saw him rise; if they had, that might have proved something. Jesus did not appear to his enemies. That might have proved something. He might have appeared to Pilate on Sunday morning. That might have proved something. He didn't appear to all the people gathered in Jerusalem for the Passover. That might have proved something. But he didn't.

What do the appearances of Jesus after his resurrection reveal? Three things.

First, Jesus is *alive*! He who was dead – how dead? He was buried – How buried? For three days – but this same one is now alive. Jesus didn't come back to life; he was not resuscitated. He was raised to a new life.

Second, the appearances reveal that Jesus is alive in *a new and mysterious way*. The old familiarity is gone. There's always something eerie about his presence after his resurrection. The disciples fail to recognize him at first. They know it is the Lord, but are afraid to ask him who he is.

Third, we are never told how Jesus comes or goes (except at the end of Luke's Emmaus story, we are told he disappeared from their sight). *He is just present*. In all the gospel stories prior to the resurrection we are told things like: He left the synagogue and went to Simon Peter's house; he got into a boat and crossed to the other side; he and his disciples were walking through a field of standing grain. But after his resurrection, we are not told how he comes or goes: Mary turned around and there stood Jesus; morning came and Jesus stood on the shore; the doors of the room were locked and Jesus stood in their midst (it doesn't say he passed through locked doors).

In his death he was glorified; he shed his human limitations of time and place. Now he can be present for all time to all places.

20:1-10 - The empty tomb [Mark 16:1-11; Matthew 28:1-10; Luke 24:1-12]

Mary Magdalen finds the tomb open and empty. She tells Peter. Peter and John run to the tomb and find it as Mary had said. The disciple whom Jesus loved arrives first, but out of deference to Peter waits for him to enter first. But John tells us that the disciple whom Jesus loved came to believe. Not yet so for Peter.

1 On the first day of the week, Mary of Magdala came to the tomb early in the morning, while it was still dark, and saw the stone removed from the tomb. 2 So she ran and went to Simon Peter and to the other disciple whom Jesus loved, and told them, "They have taken the Lord from the tomb, and we don't know where they put him." 3 So Peter and the other disciple went out and came to the tomb. 4 They both ran, but the other disciple ran faster than Peter and arrived at the tomb first; 5 he bent down and saw the burial cloths there, but did not go in. 6 When Simon Peter arrived after him, he went into the tomb and saw the burial cloths there, 7 and the cloth that had covered his head, not with the burial cloths but rolled up in a separate place. 8 Then the other disciple also went in, the one who had arrived at the tomb first, and he saw and believed. 9 For they did not yet understand the scripture that he had to rise from the dead. 10 Then the disciples returned home.

## 20:11-18 - Mary still at the tomb

Neither the conversation between Mary and the two angels brings Mary to faith. Even when she sees “the gardener” and speaks with him, she doesn’t recognize the risen Lord. Only when he calls her by name does she recognize him and believe. [Back in 10:3-4 Jesus said that his sheep would recognize his voice and he would call each by name.] Jesus sends her to tell “my brothers” that he is “going to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.” He has never called them “my brothers” before. [Back in 1:12 John said that the Word empowered those who believe to become children of God.] Mary is sent as “the apostle to the apostles” bringing the Good News.

11 But Mary stayed outside the tomb weeping. And as she wept, she bent over into the tomb 12 and saw two angels in white sitting there, one at the head and one at the feet where the body of Jesus had been. 13 And they said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken my Lord, and I don't know where they laid him." 14 When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus there, but did not know it was Jesus. 15 Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" She thought it was the gardener and said to him, "Sir, if you carried him away, tell me where you laid him, and I will take him." 16 Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni," which means Teacher. 17 Jesus said to her, "Stop holding on to me, 10 for I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and tell them, 'I am going to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" 18 Mary of Magdala went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord," and what he told her.

## 20:19-23 - Appearance to the disciples [Mark 16:14-20; Matthew 28:16-20; Luke 24:33-49]

The doors are locked, and Jesus stood in their midst. “Peace be with you,” he said. And he gave the disciples the mission he had received from his Father. Jesus breathes on them and gives them the Holy Spirit and the power over sin.

19 On the evening of that first day of the week, when the doors were locked, where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them, "Peace be with you." 20 When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. The disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. 21 (Jesus) said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." 22 And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the holy Spirit. 23 Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained."

## 20:24-29 - Second appearance to the disciples

Thomas was not with the others when Jesus appeared the first time. Thomas gave the circumstances required for him to believe that Jesus was alive. When Jesus appeared, he called Thomas’ bluff. But Thomas did not take Jesus up on his offer, but believed, giving utterance to the highest christological confession in the Gospels, “My Lord and my God.” This profession of faith wraps the Gospel of John into a nice package, matching here at the end of the Gospel what was said at the beginning: The Word was God.

Jesus declares Thomas blessed for his profession of faith now that he has seen. And he blesses all generations to follow who believe without seeing. This must have rung joyfully in the ears of the members of the community, none of whom, except the disciple whom Jesus loved, had seen, but they had believed.

24 Thomas, called Didymus, one of the Twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 25 So the other disciples said to him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger into the nailmarks and put my hand into his side, I will not believe." 26 Now a week later his disciples were again inside and Thomas was with them. Jesus came, although the doors were locked, and stood in their midst and said, "Peace be with you." 27 Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands, and bring your hand and put it into my side, and do not be unbelieving, but believe." 28 Thomas answered and said to him, "My Lord and my God!" 29 Jesus said to him, "Have you come to believe because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed."

### **Ramifications for us**

In the Book of Revelation the author spells out the ramifications of this for all time. In Chapters 4 and 5 we read that there was a door opened in heaven and a trumpet-like voice called, "Come up here and I will show you what must happen hereafter." Then there is a description of what things look like "up there." The one who sits on the throne is God. In his right hand he is holding a scroll. And an angel asks who is worthy to take the scroll and break its seals and read it. But no one was found, so John says that he wept because no one was found worthy to open the scroll and read it. But one of the elders told him there is no need to cry, because the Lamb has won the right to open the scroll and read it. The Lamb is standing (alive) but he has on him the marks of slaughter (he had been dead). He could open the scroll and read it.

The scroll contained all the events of human history: "what will happen hereafter." No one can be present to all the events of human history except the risen Lord. He is alive in a new and mysterious way, in which he no longer comes and goes; he's just present.

And your reading this is an event of human history!

### 20:30-31 - Conclusion

At the outset of these reflections we noted that several people had a hand in the composition of this Gospel as it comes down to us. Someone penned this conclusion, stating that coming to faith is the purpose of the whole endeavor of writing the Good News of Jesus Christ according to John. Among other things this warns readers to avoid a literalist understanding of the text as though it were a biography or a *history* of Jesus. It has been written as a document of faith in the *mystery* of Jesus, and as such it is to be received.

30 Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of (his) disciples that are not written in this book. 31 But these are written that you may (come to) believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through this belief you may have life in his name.

## Epilogue: Appearances in Galilee - 21:1-25

The literary style of this chapter strongly suggests that it was *written* by a hand other than the one which produced the rest of the Gospel. Whether it was *authored* by someone other than the writer is not known. It's only imagination which pictures a room with writing materials on a large table, with pieces of parchment scattered on all the other furniture in the room, and after the death of the disciple whom Jesus loved, a disciple of his was finding scraps of narration which the original author had not included in his final draft. The final editor decided that some of the material he found was too good to be neglected, and so inserted it in several spots in the otherwise completed work of the evangelist. Clearly the last verse of the previous chapter was a conclusion of the work. But we have one more chapter with three more scenes and another conclusion.

### 21:1-14 - Let's go fishing

The episodes in this chapter take place in Galilee. In Matthew 26:32 Jesus tells the disciples that after he is raised up he will precede them to Galilee. The *history* is shaky, since the first experiences of the risen Lord were in Jerusalem, and the ascension took place there forty days later, it's a wonder that they all went back to Galilee in between the events. But history is not the author's intent.

Six of the disciples decide to accompany Peter on a fishing trip. They worked all night but caught nothing. Morning came and Jesus stood on the shore. [We're not told how he got there.] But the disciples didn't recognize him. [There's something eery about his presence, and they don't recognize him. He's alive in a new and mysterious way.] They respond to Jesus question by saying that they hadn't caught anything. He suggests they try it again, his way. They catch 153 fish. [No one knows what that number means.] Jesus has breakfast ready for them. They knew who he was, but they were afraid to ask him. [The old familiarity is gone.]

1 After this, Jesus revealed himself again to his disciples at the Sea of Tiberias. He revealed himself in this way. 2 Together were Simon Peter, Thomas called Didymus, Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, Zebedee's sons, and two others of his disciples. 3 Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We also will come with you." So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. 4 When it was already dawn, Jesus was standing on the shore; but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus. 5 Jesus said to them, "Children, have you caught anything to eat?" They answered him, "No." 6 So he said to them, "Cast the net over the right side of the boat and you will find something." So they cast it, and were not able to pull it in because of the number of fish. 7 So the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord." When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he tucked in his garment, for he was lightly clad, and jumped into the sea. 8 The other disciples came in the boat, for they were not far from shore, only about a hundred yards, dragging the net with the fish. 9 When they climbed out on shore, they saw a charcoal fire with fish on it and bread. 10 Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish you just caught." 11 So Simon Peter went over and dragged the net ashore full of one hundred fifty-three large fish. Even though there were so many, the net was not torn. 12 Jesus said to them, "Come, have breakfast." And none of the disciples dared to ask him, "Who are you?" because they realized it was the Lord. 13 Jesus came over and took the bread and gave it to them, and in like manner the fish. 14 This was now the third time Jesus was revealed to his disciples after being raised from the dead.

### 21:15-19 - Peter

Three times Jesus asks Peter if he loves him. The first two times, Jesus uses the word

*agapas*, which is the absolutely most gratuitous kind of love one can have. Peter response each time that he loves Jesus. He uses the word *philo* which is the kind of love between friends. The third time Jesus asks Peter if he loves him, Jesus used the word *phileis*, the kind of love between friends. Peter again responds with the word *philo*. The insistence of Jesus on asking this question could suggest the meaning that the third time his question was no longer “Do you *agapas* me?” but “Do you *even phileis* me?” Supposedly this getting Peter three times to declare his love is related to the three times Peter denied him.

The response of Jesus is that Peter is to feed his lambs and sheep. The lambs and the sheep continue to belong to Jesus, but Peter is to care for them.

Jesus quotes what was probably some kind of proverb about the difference between being young and independent and old and dependent. John writes that Jesus said this indicating the kind of death Peter would die. And Jesus’ final words to Peter are, “Follow me.” Possibly meaning to death. Of course, by the time this passage of the gospel was written, Peter had already been crucified in Rome; and so had thereby followed Jesus.

15 When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." He said to him, "Feed my lambs." 16 He then said to him a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." He said to him, "Tend my sheep." 17 He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter was distressed that he had said to him a third time, "Do you love me?" and he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." (Jesus) said to him, "Feed my sheep. 18 Amen, amen, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to dress yourself and go where you wanted; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go." 19 He said this signifying by what kind of death he would glorify God. And when he had said this, he said to him, "Follow me."

#### 21:20-23 - The disciple whom Jesus loved

Peter asks Jesus about the disciple whom Jesus loved. And Jesus’ reply is “Don’t worry about him; you follow me.” The exchange about “What if I want him to remain until I come?” and the writer’s explanation that Jesus didn’t say that the disciple would live until he came, was an answer to the community’s unmet expectation that they would all see Jesus before the disciple whom Jesus loved would die. He’s dead, and we haven’t seen Jesus.

20 Peter turned and saw the disciple following whom Jesus loved, the one who had also reclined upon his chest during the supper and had said, "Master, who is the one who will betray you?" 21 When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, "Lord, what about him?" 22 Jesus said to him, "What if I want him to remain until I come? What concern is it of yours? You follow me." 23 So the word spread among the brothers that that disciple would not die. But Jesus had not told him that he would not die, just "What if I want him to remain until I come? (What concern is it of yours?)"

#### 21:24-25 - Conclusion

The final editor put his own conclusion to what has already been written by several hands. This final editor wanted to verify that it was indeed an eye-witness to the events, and that his testimony is true.

24 It is this disciple who testifies to these things and has written them, 14 and we know that his testimony is true. 25 There are also many other things that Jesus did, but if these were to be described individually, I do not think the whole world would contain the books that would be written.

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I, Paul,  
write these things  
to you.

The Pauline and Catholic Epistles  
and the Book of Revelation

Keith Clark, Capuchin

## Foreword

Whether one reads Paul's letters in order to pray with them or to preach them, it is first necessary to understand what his letters *say*. Then one can consider what they might *say to the reader*. I've heard more than one homily, for instance, on the passage from the Letter to the Philippians where Paul writes "Their God their stomach" in which the homilist eschews gluttony. It's undoubtedly a good thing to be opposed to overeating, but that's not what Paul was writing about. Paul was actually objecting to the way some members of the community were making a fetish out of observing the Jewish dietary laws.

Another example is when Paul writes things which could be taken very piously, when he is being anything but pious, as in First Corinthians 1:4-7. Paul writes, "I give thanks to my God always on your account for the grace of God bestowed on you in Christ Jesus, that in him you are enriched in every way, with all discourse and all knowledge." Paul is actually being sarcastic, as will become obvious when he begins a long list of corrections he has to make in the Corinthians' faulty grasp of what Paul had taught them.

I present these reflections on Paul's letters having in mind the situation of one reading the letters in order to pray with them, and the situation of lectors reading the letters to a congregation within a liturgical setting, as well as homilists who preach their message. In all cases one needs to know what Paul intended to *say to the recipients of the letters* if one is to understand what the letters might say to today's readers or the congregations to which the letters are read, as well as to those who preach from the scripture text.

Don't think of me as a scripture scholar, which I am not. Think of me, rather, as a companion student who was able to attend lectures which you were unable to attend. Think of what I have written as the notes I brought home to you since you were not able to be at the lectures and take your own notes.

After reading and studying Paul's letters, I have arrived at the conclusion that Paul wrote in many different frames of mind and in several emotional states. When people read his letters privately or when lectors proclaim them in a liturgical setting, he often seems sort of bland. To get the flavor of what he is writing, one needs to recognize the emotion behind his words. He can be elated, angry, sad, worried, concerned, annoyed, exalted, and anything but bland. \

The letters are given here in the chronological order in which they were written, rather than in the order they are found in the New Testament.

In preparing these reflections, I have followed this process. First I read the text of a small

section of one of the letters. Then I read several commentaries on the text, from which study it becomes more clear what Paul meant. Then I re-read the text, and it makes much more sense to me than it did when I read it the first time. I suggest that the Word of the Lord will touch you more deeply if you would follow the same process: read the text; read my reflection on the text; then re-read the text.

## Introduction

Many years ago in a course I took at the University of Oxford, in his first class on the letters of Saint Paul, the lecturer said, “I accept as authentically the works of Saint Paul more of the letters attributed to him than do some of my colleagues who wear their collars turned the other way ‘round,” meaning the clergy. Some of us in the lecture hall twittered politely, and then settled down to listen to what the lecturer had to say. Little did I know that I had just been introduced to the minefield of opinions about the letters of Saint Paul. Since then I have learned that there certainly is disagreement among scholars about more than just who is the author of some of these letters. I am in no position to debate or to decide the issues which scholars raise, so I’ll just accept that in some way Paul is the author of the content of these letters, even if someone else actually penned them. In order to understand what Paul’s letters say, it may be helpful to know something about Paul’s life.

## Chronology

Since this book is about Saint Paul’s letters, only a short description of his life will precede that study. The sources used to reconstruct the chronology of Paul’s life are some public records of events which are also mentioned in Acts of the Apostles, and references to events in Paul’s letters. Scholars differ a bit in the conclusions they draw from these sources, but the general pattern of Paul’s life is reasonably clear.

It is generally accepted that Paul was born about the same time that Jesus was. In Acts of the Apostles, Luke tells us that he was born in Tarsus, the capital city of Cilicia (southern Turkey), a Greek-speaking Roman province, and that he was therefore a Roman citizen. One prominent and respected scholar thinks Paul was born elsewhere and his family was forcibly moved to Tarsus. The citizens of Tarsus were quite wealthy and well-educated. Paul himself tells us that he was a well-educated Hebrew member of the Pharisee Party. His letters reveal that he was fluent in Greek as well as in Hebrew. In Acts of the Apostles Luke tells us that Paul claimed to have been educated also in Jerusalem at the feet of Gamaliel. Though there is no indication that Paul met Jesus anywhere but on the road to Damascus, they may have been in Jerusalem at the same time.

Despite his studies and his zeal for the Hebrew religion, he doesn’t seem to have been old enough to have been a rabbi. Luke tells us that he looked on as Stephen was stoned, and we meet him in full force on the road to Damascus in pursuit of other Christians. The encounter with the risen Christ occurred in the year 35 A.D. (Acts, Chapter 9)

1 Now Saul, still breathing murderous threats against the disciples of the Lord,<sup>a</sup> went to the high priest 2 and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, that, if he should find any men or women who belonged to the Way, he might bring them back to Jerusalem in chains.

3 On his journey, as he was nearing Damascus, a light from the sky suddenly flashed around him. 4 He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” 5 He said, “Who are you, sir?” The reply came, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. 6 Now get up and go into the city and you will be told what you must do.” 7 The men who were traveling with him stood speechless, for they heard the voice but could see no one. 8 Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him to Damascus. 9 For three days he was unable to see, and he neither ate nor drank.

10 There was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias, and the Lord said to him in a vision, “Ananias.” He answered, “Here I am, Lord.” 11 The Lord said to him, “Get up and go to the street called Straight and ask at the house of Judas for a man from Tarsus named Saul. He is there praying, 12 and [in a vision] he has seen a man named Ananias come in and lay [his] hands on him, that he may regain his sight.” 13 But Ananias replied, “Lord, I have heard from many sources about this man, what evil things he has done to your holy ones in Jerusalem. 14 And here he has authority from the chief priests to imprison all who call upon your name.” 15 But the Lord said to him, “Go, for this man is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before Gentiles, kings, and Israelites, 16 and I will show him what he will have to suffer for my name.”

17 So Ananias went and entered the house; laying his hands on him, he said, “Saul, my brother, the Lord has sent me, Jesus who appeared to you on the way by which you came, that you may regain your sight and be filled with the holy Spirit.” 18 Immediately things like scales fell from his eyes and he regained his sight. He got up and was baptized, 19 and when he had eaten, he recovered his strength. He stayed some days with the disciples in Damascus, 20 and he began at once to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, that he is the Son of God. 21 All who heard him were astounded and said, “Is not this the man who in Jerusalem ravaged those who call upon this name, and came here expressly to take them back in chains to the chief priests?” 22 But Saul grew all the stronger and confounded [the] Jews who lived in Damascus, proving that this is the Messiah.

23 After a long time had passed, the Jews conspired to kill him, 24 but their plot became known to Saul. Now they were keeping watch on the gates day and night so as to kill him, 25 but his disciples took him one night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket.

Paul stayed in Damascus for some time, and then according to what he wrote in Galatians (1:17), he spent about two years “in Arabia” before returning to Damascus. In 37 A.D. Jewish zealots, those who were previously Paul’s old comrades, came to Damascus to arrest him. His old cohorts in the persecution of the Christians must have been astounded; they sent Paul off to Damascus to persecute Christians, and he turns into one of them! When they came to arrest him, they blocked off the entrance to the city,

24 but their plot became known to Saul. Now they were keeping watch on the gates day and night so as to kill him, 25 but his disciples took him one night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a basket. 26 When he arrived in Jerusalem he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple. 27 Then Barnabas took charge of him and brought him to the apostles, and he reported to them how on the way he had seen the Lord and that he had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had spoken out boldly in the name of Jesus. 28 He moved about freely with them in Jerusalem, and spoke out boldly in the name of the Lord. 29 He also spoke and debated with the Hellenists, but they tried to kill him. 30 And when the brothers learned of this, they took him down to Caesarea and sent him on his way to Tarsus. (Acts, Chapter 9)

Apparently Paul stayed in Tarsus for some time, but he also preached around Damascus almost five years, after which he went to Antioch to preach. In Antioch Paul became the companion – disciple – of Barnabas. After that Luke refers to several more visits by Paul to Jerusalem; scripture scholars consider it more likely that Luke is referring several times to the same visit. In Paul’s letters we learn of only two visits to Jerusalem. However, as a framework

into which to insert Paul's letters, I will follow Luke's version of Paul's travels as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles.

During the years of 45 A.D. to 49 A.D., Paul accompanied Barnabas on what most people call Paul's "first missionary journey." (Acts 13 and 14) But it seems that Barnabas was the leader. Paul wrote no letters during this time, nor did he later write back to any of the places he and Barnabas had visited. After that journey Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch, and then went to Jerusalem for the "Council of Jerusalem," after which Paul separated from Barnabas over their dispute about taking Mark on their next journey. (Acts 15:36 to 42)

Paul took Silas with him and Timothy joined them at Lystra. The three traveled together for three years. (It is probably helpful to note that Paul usually traveled with companions, who may have included scribes who actually penned his letters.) This is usually designated as Paul's second missionary journey (50 A.D. to 53 A.D.), during which he wrote one and possibly two letters to the Church in Thessalonica. The date and authorship of Second Thessalonians is debated.

Paul had begun his second missionary journey during which he passed through Thessalonica, where he and Silas and Timothy got beat up by a mob of jealous Jews. Luke's account in Acts indicates only three weeks spent in Thessalonica, but it is presumed that they spent much more time there. They moved on to Beroea, where the local Jews were more receptive to the message. But Jews from Thessalonica arrived in Beroea and stirred up trouble again. The citizens took Paul to Athens, but Silas and Timothy stayed behind, with Paul's instructions to join him as soon as possible. In Athens Paul didn't make a great hit with the population, even though he tried to approach them with the kind of philosophical arguments which they were used to. So Paul moved on to Corinth, apparently discouraged by his Athens preaching experience. He later wrote back to the Corinthians,

"When I came to you, brothers, proclaiming the mystery of God, I did not come with sublimity of words or of wisdom. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. I came among you in weakness and fear and much trembling, and my message and my proclamation were not with persuasive words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of spirit and power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God. (1 Cor. 2:1-5)

Sometime during this second missionary journey, Paul wrote back to his friends in Thessalonica. After visiting Corinth, Paul completed his journey back to Jerusalem, passing through Ephesus.

Luke describes a third missionary journey (53 A.D. to 57 A.D.) during which Paul wrote 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians and Romans. After this journey Paul and his companions returned to Jerusalem where Paul was arrested and held in prison for two years (57 A.D. to 59 A.D.) until he was sent to Rome for trial before the Emperor. He was a prisoner in Rome for three years, during which he probably wrote Philemon, Colossians and Philippians (and some say Ephesians). That's as far as Luke narrates Paul's career, because Luke is more interested in theology than in history. Luke's is a theology-by-geography. In his Gospel the Good News travels to Jerusalem, the center of the religious world; in Acts the Good News travels to the Rome, the center of the political world. That was the extent of Luke's theological interests.

However, it is possible that Paul was not killed in Rome during his first visit there, but that there was a second period of activity from 62 A.D. to 66 A.D., during which he wrote 1 Timothy and Titus. Then there was a second arrest in 66, after which he wrote 2 Timothy prior to his martyrdom in 67 A.D.

It's also possible that Paul was martyred in Rome in 62 A.D., and after his death his companions penned both letters to Timothy, a letter to Titus, and some scholars think Second Thessalonians and Ephesians were also written by Paul's disciples after Paul's death.

What's written above gives a general outline of Paul's life and his letters. However, as we shall see, that schema will need to be nuanced a bit when we study the individual letters, as for instance in the case of his two letters to the Corinthians. Actually, Paul probably wrote to the Corinthians five times. We, of course, have two letters addressed to the Corinthians, one of which is probably a combination of two or more separate letters. More of that later.

That accounts for all the letters attributed to Paul, except the Letter to the Hebrews, which though attributed to Paul early on, now is admittedly unknown as to its exact audience, the author and even if it was meant to be a letter or some kind of treatise.

Following this chronology of Paul's life, I will study his letters in the order in which they are thought to have been written, rather than in the order in which they appear in the bible.

The recipients of Paul's letters read them aloud to the congregation to which they were addressed. The letters were saved for future reference and copied for distribution to other churches.

### First Letter of Paul to the Thessalonians

This is the earliest Christian document which exists, written by Paul while he was in Corinth during his second missionary journey somewhere between the years 50 and 53 A.D. A short time before writing this letter, Paul had founded the church in Thessalonica. After some Jews caused an uproar in Thessalonica, Paul and Timothy moved on to Berea, where Timothy remained while Paul went on to Athens and then to Corinth. According to Luke in Acts, Paul had been in Thessalonica for only a few weeks. But he was undoubtedly there quite a bit longer. Timothy caught up with Paul in Corinth. The three comrades were back together: Paul, Silas and Timothy.

At the time of Paul's writing this letter, Jesus had been risen for about fifteen years. Paul had been a believer since a year or two after that. From about 37 to 43 A.D. he had been in Tarsus, and preached in Antioch for a year. After a second visit to Jerusalem he spent about four years on his first missionary journey. So he had been preaching about Jesus for about five years. He is now in the middle of his second missionary journey.

What's the point? When Paul wrote his first letter to the Thessalonians, what we would call Christian doctrine was in its initial stages of formation. Paul's letters to Thessalonica are the most primitive expression we have of the earliest Christian teaching.

First Thessalonians is definitely a letter, not a literary treatise. Some scholars think that the letter as we have it is actually a combination of two letters which Paul wrote to the community. As such, it is a time-bound document addressing issues which were contemporary to Paul's experience. But it does have relevance beyond the middle of the First Century.

#### 1:1 - Greeting

1 Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: grace to you and peace.

The greeting reveals Paul's situation. He is accompanied by Silvanus (the same as the Silas mentioned in Acts), and Timothy. The letter will use the first person plural (we) throughout, with the exception of a few places where Paul may have interjected something of his own,

perhaps even writing it with his own hand. Generally the letter may have been written down by a scribe, but it is Paul, Silvanus and Timothy who are addressing the church at Thessalonica.

### 1:2-10 - Thanksgiving

2We give thanks to God always for all of you, remembering you in our prayers, unceasingly 3calling to mind your work of faith and labor of love and endurance in hope of our Lord Jesus Christ, before our God and Father, 4knowing, brothers loved by God, how you were chosen. 5For our gospel did not come to you in word alone, but also in power and in the holy Spirit and [with] much conviction. You know what sort of people we were [among] you for your sake. 6And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, receiving the word in great affliction, with joy from the holy Spirit, 7so that you became a model for all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. 8For from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth not only in Macedonia and [in] Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything. 9For they themselves openly declare about us what sort of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God 10and to await his Son from heaven, whom he raised from [the] dead, Jesus, who delivers us from the coming wrath.

Paul obviously loves the Thessalonians, and recalls to his mind and theirs the wonderful things which happened while he was there. In verse 3, Paul enunciates what have come to called the theological virtues of faith, hope and love. When he speaks of the holy Spirit in verse 5, he is not referring to the Third Person of the Blessed Trinity. He means God's action in their receiving what Paul was preaching.

### 2:1-12 - Paul's ministry among the Thessalonians

2:1For you yourselves know, brothers, that our reception among you was not without effect. 2Rather, after we had suffered and been insolently treated, as you know, in Philippi, we drew courage through our God to speak to you the gospel of God with much struggle. 3Our exhortation was not from delusion or impure motives, nor did it work through deception. 4But as we were judged worthy by God to be entrusted with the gospel, that is how we speak, not as trying to please human beings, but rather God, who judges our hearts. 5Nor, indeed, did we ever appear with flattering speech, as you know, or with a pretext for greed—God is witness—6 nor did we seek praise from human beings, either from you or from others, 7although we were able to impose our weight as apostles of Christ. Rather, we were gentle among you, as a nursing mother cares for her children. 8With such affection for you, we were determined to share with you not only the gospel of God, but our very selves as well, so dearly beloved had you become to us. 9You recall, brothers, our toil and drudgery. Working night and day in order not to burden any of you, we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. 10You are witnesses, and so is God, how devoutly and justly and blamelessly we behaved toward you believers. 11As you know, we treated each one of you as a father treats his children, 12exhorting and encouraging you and insisting that you conduct yourselves as worthy of the God who calls you into his kingdom and glory.

Paul seems unable adequately to express his appreciation for the Thessalonians. And it's no wonder. He had had a bad time in Philippi prior his arrival in Thessalonica. He had been put in prison there because he had driven out a devil from a girl who was making money for her master by prophesying. Then he arrived in Thessalonica where he was welcomed, and where he had the success in proclaiming Jesus, which he continues to describe in his letter, which he wrote after some more disappointing experiences in Athens. So he looks back on his Thessalonian experience as an oasis of happiness and success.

Among the credentials Paul claims for the authenticity of his ministry is the fact that he

worked to support himself during his time with the Thessalonians; he didn't claim the right to compensation for his preaching (2:9).

## 2:13-20 - More Thanksgiving

13And for this reason we too give thanks to God unceasingly, that, in receiving the word of God from hearing us, you received not a human word but, as it truly is, the word of God, which is now at work in you who believe. 14 For you, brothers, have become imitators of the churches of God that are in Judea in Christ Jesus. For you suffer the same things from your compatriots as they did from the Jews, 15 who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets and persecuted us; they do not please God, and are opposed to everyone, 16trying to prevent us from speaking to the Gentiles that they may be saved, thus constantly filling up the measure of their sins. But the wrath of God has finally begun to come upon them.

17Brothers, when we were bereft of you for a short time, in person, not in heart, we were all the more eager in our great desire to see you in person. 18We decided to go to you—I, Paul, not only once but more than once—yet Satan thwarted us. 19For what is our hope or joy or crown to boast of in the presence of our Lord Jesus at his coming if not you yourselves? 20For you are our glory and joy.

Some commentators see this section until 4:2 as an earlier letter Paul had written to the community. If this is correct, it comes down to us as part of a second letter, and I'll treat it that way.

In any case, Paul really likes the Thessalonians! Finally someone listened to him and accepted what he was saying. And they suffered for having believed what Paul preached. In that, they resembled the believers in Judea, where it was the Jews who persecuted the Christians. In Thessalonica, the persecution came from their own Gentile neighbors.

Some scholars think that verses 13-16 were inserted later by someone other than Paul. They give two reasons for this. First this section seems anti-Jewish, which Paul was not; and second, the passage makes great sense if one reads verse 17 immediately after verse 12. [Who knows?]

## 3:1-8 - Paul's love and concern

3:1That is why, when we could bear it no longer, we decided to remain alone in Athens 2and sent Timothy, our brother and co-worker for God in the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, 3so that no one be disturbed in these afflictions. For you yourselves know that we are destined for this. 4For even when we were among you, we used to warn you in advance that we would undergo affliction, just as has happened, as you know. 5For this reason, when I too could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your faith, for fear that somehow the tempter had put you to the test and our toil might come to nothing.

6But just now Timothy has returned to us from you, bringing us the good news of your faith and love, and that you always think kindly of us and long to see us as we long to see you. 7Because of this, we have been reassured about you, brothers, in our every distress and affliction, through your faith. 8For we now live, if you stand firm in the Lord.

According to Acts 17 Timothy had remained in Beroea while Paul moved on to Athens. Perhaps Timothy rejoined Paul in Athens, and was then sent by Paul back to Thessalonica. Or somehow Paul communicated with Timothy who was still in Beroea, to tell him to go back and check on the community in Thessalonica. In either case, Timothy finally rejoined Paul and

Silvanus (Silas) in Corinth. Timothy reported on the progress of the believers in Thessalonica. Just as Paul had hoped, Timothy reported that the church there was thriving and knew itself to be indebted to Paul. It's easy to think that after Philippi and Athens, Paul would have been looking for some consolation. He received it from the report Timothy gave of what he knew about the church in Thessalonica.

### 3:9-13 - More thanksgiving and prayer

9 What thanksgiving, then, can we render to God for you, for all the joy we feel on your account before our God? 10 Night and day we pray beyond measure to see you in person and to remedy the deficiencies of your faith. 11 Now may God himself, our Father, and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you, 12 and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we have for you, 13 so as to strengthen your hearts, to be blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his holy ones. [Amen.]

For those familiar with the correspondence between John Adams and his wife, Abigail, each of whom began their letters to each other, "My dearest friend," Paul's letter to the Thessalonians must sound somewhat similar. Paul is absolutely in love with them!

Is there some moral which can be drawn from these first three chapters of Paul's letter? If there is, it might be this: love those who have been good to you, and *tell them* of your love for them; don't think they are already aware of your love.

Now, having expressed his great appreciation for the Thessalonians, and for what God has already done in them, in Chapter 4 Paul exhorts the community to allow God to do even greater things in them.

### 4:1-8 - Regarding sexuality

1 Finally, brothers, we earnestly ask and exhort you in the Lord Jesus that, as you received from us how you should conduct yourselves to please God—and as you are conducting yourselves—you do so even more. 2 For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. 3 This is the will of God, your holiness: that you refrain from immorality, 4 that each of you know how to acquire a wife for himself in holiness and honor, 5 not in lustful passion as do the Gentiles who do not know God; 6 not to take advantage of or exploit a brother in this matter, for the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you before and solemnly affirmed. 7 For God did not call us to impurity but to holiness. 8 Therefore, whoever disregards this, disregards not a human being but God, who [also] gives his holy Spirit to you.

Paul gives instructions regarding marriage. Even though he says that the instructions he gave were "through the Lord Jesus," he is not claiming that Jesus gave the instructions he is about to give. Paul is giving practical application of the teachings of Jesus. God wills that people refrain from immorality (the Greek word means "fornication"). So Paul is simply making application of this "will of God" to the matter of sexual morality.

On the other hand, because of the phrase "exploit a brother in this matter," one commentator thinks that what Paul might have been referring to in this passage is more complicated. There was apparently a practice among the Greeks which was designed to keep property within the family from one generation to the next by having a daughter marry one's brother. That was incest, to which Paul objected. Exactly how that practice would have protected family property, I don't know. But that may be the practice to which Paul was objecting.

#### 4:9-12 - On mutual love

9On the subject of mutual charity you have no need for anyone to write you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another. 10Indeed, you do this for all the brothers throughout Macedonia. Nevertheless we urge you, brothers, to progress even more, 11and to aspire to live a tranquil life, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your [own] hands, as we instructed you, 12that you may conduct yourselves properly toward outsiders and not depend on anyone.

Love for each other is an essential element in Christian living. That this admonition shows up in the first Christian document is striking. Part of that love for others is taking care to provide for oneself so as not to be a burden to others. “To mind your own affairs and to work with your own hands” is an admonition expressed cleverly in another not-quite-literal translation of the bible: “keep busy rather than being busybodies.”

#### 4:13-18 - The matter of those who have died.

13We do not want you to be unaware, brothers, about those who have fallen asleep, so that you may not grieve like the rest, who have no hope. 14For if we believe that Jesus died and rose, so too will God, through Jesus, bring with him those who have fallen asleep. 15Indeed, we tell you this, on the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will surely not precede those who have fallen asleep. 16For the Lord himself, with a word of command, with the voice of an archangel and with the trumpet of God, will come down from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. 17Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. Thus we shall always be with the Lord. 18Therefore, console one another with these words.

Perhaps Timothy brought Paul news of the death of some of the people of Thessalonica since Paul left there. Perhaps these were people known personally to Paul. Since death was not an issue during Paul’s time in Thessalonica, he didn’t talk about the afterlife. Now he does. There is no need to grieve those who have died. Paul quotes what he must have told the community while he was with them, since it is the foundation of all Christian faith: Jesus died and rose. If Jesus died but remains alive, so must be the case with the Christians who have died.

Perhaps there was some question whether those who were alive at the time of the second coming of Jesus had some advantage over those who had died. Paul assures his readers in verse 15, “on the word of the Lord,” that they would not. So there is no need to worry about those who had died. (Remember that they expected Jesus to return any day.)

Paul’s apocalyptic language to describe the coming of the Lord is not to be taken as a literal description of the event. It’s meant only to show that the event will affect the whole world. The point of all Paul is saying is that alive or dead, we will all be with the Lord.

#### 5:1-11 - Vigilance

1Concerning times and seasons, brothers, you have no need for anything to be written to you. 2For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief at night. 3When people are saying, “Peace and security,” then sudden disaster comes upon them, like labor pains upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. 4But you, brothers, are not in darkness, for that day to overtake you like a thief. 5For all of you are children

of the light and children of the day. We are not of the night or of darkness. 6Therefore, let us not sleep as the rest do, but let us stay alert and sober. 7Those who sleep go to sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. 8But since we are of the day, let us be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love and the helmet that is hope for salvation. 9For God did not destine us for wrath, but to gain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, 10who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live together with him. 11Therefore, encourage one another and build one another up, as indeed you do.

It seems that Paul must have been informed (perhaps by Timothy) that among the Thessalonians there was speculation about the end time and the coming of the Lord. Even though the second coming was expected soon, Paul assures his readers that there is no need for them to trouble their heads over the exact timing of the event. They should just know that it will come suddenly, and therefore they should be prepared for it. Since people sleep at night and get drunk at night, and since Christians are children of light and of the day, they should “stay alert and sober.” Once again, Paul mentions the theological virtues of faith, hope and love as protection from the coming day of the Lord.

I find it interesting that in this first Christian writing, the theological virtues are mentioned twice.

#### 5:12-22 - Church order

12We ask you, brothers, to respect those who are laboring among you and who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you, 13and to show esteem for them with special love on account of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. 14We urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, cheer the fainthearted, support the weak, be patient with all. 15See that no one returns evil for evil; rather, always seek what is good [both] for each other and for all. 16Rejoice always. 17Pray without ceasing. 18In all circumstances give thanks, for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus. 19 Do not quench the Spirit. 20Do not despise prophetic utterances. 21Test everything; retain what is good. 22Refrain from every kind of evil.

In the first sentence Paul “asks,” in the second he “urges.” The whole section is an exhortation to live together in harmony, respecting the leaders (12-13), and caring for all the members of the community (14-22). One commentator calls this end section an “explosion” of admonitions.

When he urges them to “admonish the idle,” he may already be aware of a difficulty he will address in his next letter, namely that some people are using the expectation of Jesus’ early return in order to be lazy.

#### 5:23-27 - Admonitions for good community living.

23May the God of peace himself make you perfectly holy and may you entirely, spirit, soul, and body, be preserved blameless for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24The one who calls you is faithful, and he will also accomplish it. 25Brothers, pray for us [too]. 26Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss. 27I adjure you by the Lord that this letter be read to all the brothers.

Paul signs off, presumably in his own name and also in the name of Timothy and Silvanus (“pray for *us*”), although the first person singular is used also (“*I* adjure you”).

One last thought. This is the first letter written to a Christian community. Because it’s

something new, Paul wants to make it clear to the leaders of the community that his thoughts and words are addressed to all members, not just to the leaders.

5:28 - Sign off

28The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

## First Letter to the Corinthians

Corinth, in Paul's day was reputed to have been a "wide open city" because of its prostitutes and brothels; but it was probably no more so than any other Mediterranean seaport city at Paul's time. The city had been destroyed about 150 B.C., but it was rebuilt by Julius Caesar in 44 B.C. It was populated by freedmen, and had no aristocratic population, although some merchants had become rather wealthy.

Because of its location on an isthmus connecting mainland Achaia (Greece) with the most southern part of the country, it was a crossroads. Traveling overland, one necessarily passed through Corinth. Because Corinth overlooked two ports, one on either side of the isthmus, it also taxed travelers who were cutting across the land to get from the Aegean Sea to the Adriatic Sea. It became a wealthy city, both in terms of merchants plying their trades, and because the government of the city collected taxes on travelers who were obliged to pass through the city, no matter in what direction they were going.

Paul had visited the city on his second missionary journey, and had established, among the great number of other religious sects already existing in the city, a small Christian community, which was made up of Jews and Gentiles, all of whom would be considered in the middle social stratus, without the extremes of high society nor the destitute. But that middle class was very diverse.

One eminent scripture scholar when asked to describe the community at Corinth gave a list of adjectives to describe the members: conceited, stubborn, over-sensitive, argumentative, infantile, pushy. The very diversity of the population of the Christian community caused the widest diversity of problems with which Paul had to deal, more problems than with any of the other communities he had founded. Despite the great number of abuses Paul addresses in his letter, one should assume that the majority of the members of the community were living a good Christian life. Paul is probably addressing much of his letter to a variety of small groups within the community. It would most likely be a mistake to think that the entire community was in shambles.

We can pick a time between 52 A.D. and 57 A.D. as the date for Paul's writing this letter. Paul tells us at the end of his letter that he is writing from Ephesus. Two things prompted Paul to write: a letter or letters he had received from the community in Corinth with questions for Paul (of which letters we have no trace), and the return of Chloe's people to Ephesus (1:11), who brought back some observations of what they had experienced on a business trip to Corinth.

We know that Paul wrote at least four and maybe five letters to Corinth. Some scholars think that the two letters we have may be compilations or amalgams of some of these no-longer-existing original letters which some copyist put together.

Raymond E. Brown has given an outline of Paul's relationship with the Corinthians, which I will present here, because I have found it helpful in understanding the letters Paul wrote to that church. I will continue that outline as we study 2 Corinthians.

#1: Paul arrived in Corinth in A.D. 50 or 51 after a very disappointing sojourn in Philippi, Thessalonica (in both places he was physically assaulted) and Athens (where he tried to be philosophical in his preaching and it was a flop). Possibly some few Jewish Christians were already there (Aquila and Priscilla), the result of the Emperor Claudius having evicted the Jews from Rome, although Paul gives the impression that he established Christianity in the city. Paul began by preaching in the synagogue, but moved to a Gentile home and preached to the Gentiles. Paul remained in Corinth for about 18 months. The community in Corinth numbered about 100.

#2: After Paul left Corinth in the company of Aquila and Priscilla in 52 A.D., other preachers sparked enthusiasm among the Corinthians, introducing practices to which Paul objected.

#3: Between 52 and 56 A.D., Paul heard about these practices and wrote his **Letter A** (1 Cor. 5:9), which has been lost.

#4: Around 56 A.D., while living in Ephesus, Paul received reports from Corinth by information from Chloe's people about goings-on in Corinth.

#5: Around 56 A.D., Paul, still staying in Ephesus, received a letter from Corinth, perhaps in response to his **Letter A**.

#6: From Ephesus Paul wrote **Letter B** around 56 A.D., which we have as First Corinthians. Some would say that this letter is an amalgam of two separate letters, on the supposition that he had finished one composition, then receiving more news from Corinth, he added to what he had already written. Whether he had sent the first part prior to receiving the news and then sent the second part is debated.

After the greeting and thanksgiving, we'll study this letter in six sections.

### 1:1-9 - Greeting and Thanksgiving

<sup>1</sup>Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother, <sup>2</sup>to the church of God that is in Corinth, to you who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be holy, with all those everywhere who call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours. <sup>3</sup>Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

<sup>4</sup>I give thanks to my God always on your account for the grace of God bestowed on you in Christ Jesus, <sup>5</sup>that in him you were enriched in every way, with discourse and knowledge, <sup>6</sup>as the testimony to Christ was confirmed among you, <sup>7</sup>so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revelation of our Lord

Jesus Christ. 8He will keep you firm to the end, irreproachable on the day of our Lord Jesus [Christ]. 9God is faithful, and by him you were called to fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

A typical greeting for letters from a Greek-speaking person. Paul identifies himself as “an apostle of Christ Jesus,” thus establishing his authority. There is a Sosthenes mentioned in Acts of the Apostles 18:17, where he would appear to be a Corinthian, a member of the community Paul is addressing there. Luke tells us that the people of Corinth rose up against Paul and Sosthenes and beat Sosthenes. Perhaps that was enough for Sosthenes to leave his native town and travel with Paul. It’s surprising that Paul does not mention Timothy, his rather constant companion.

Paul gives thanks for the gifts bestowed on the Corinthians: “discourse and knowledge . . . not lacking in any spiritual gift” Compared with his first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul might have meant this sarcastically. In light of what he is going to write next, he may have been damning them with faint praise. His thanksgiving about the Thessalonians was that their gifts were faith, hope and love, gifts not conspicuously present in the Corinthian community. There may be sarcasm in his telling them that they’re so smart and lacking no spiritual gift.

### Section One: Divisions in the Community (1:10-4:21)

#### 1:10-17 - Groups and slogans

10I urge you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree in what you say, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and in the same purpose. 11For it has been reported to me about you, my brothers, by Chloe’s people, that there are rivalries among you. 12I mean that each of you is saying, “I belong to Paul,” or “I belong to Apollos,” or “I belong to Cephas,” or “I belong to Christ.” 13Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? 14I give thanks [to God] that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, 15so that no one can say you were baptized in my name. 16(I baptized the household of Stephanas also; beyond that I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) 17For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with the wisdom of human eloquence, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its meaning.

The essence of Christianity is *koinonia*, that is, community, implying at very least that people are getting along, “that you be united in the same mind and in the same purpose.” Well, Paul has heard from Chloe’s people that there are rivalries instead of *koinonia*, with people dividing themselves into groups loyal to Paul, Apollos, Cephas or Christ. Apollos preached in Corinth after Paul moved on (3:6), and was perhaps more eloquent in his preaching than was Paul. He was with Paul in Ephesus at the time Paul was writing this letter (16:12). “Cephas” is a name Paul used for Peter on other occasions. Whether or not Peter had ever visited Corinth, he was known as the one more observant of Jewish customs than was Paul. Those who said they belonged to Christ may have decided they didn’t need the mediation of anyone or of the church in general.

It is noteworthy that Paul does not take up a partisan defense of “his group,” but rather he condemns the fact that people are making factions out of a situation in which there are in reality no divisions.

“Is Christ divided?” means the body of Christ, the community at Corinth.

No one can claim any superiority because they were baptized by Paul, because he could remember baptizing only Crispus – the president of the synagogue in Corinth (Acts 18:8) – and Gaius – a wealthy Corinthian whose house was large enough to accommodate a collection of congregations from smaller house-churches (14:23).

Paul concludes by stating that baptizing was not his thing; he was a preacher, and, at that, not one who tickled peoples' ears with human eloquence, but bluntly. Remember he is writing bluntly to the Corinthians, whom he described, perhaps sarcastically, in verse 5 as having “all discourse and all knowledge,” that is, human eloquence. Paul contrasts human eloquence with his preaching the foolishness of a crucified Jesus, which is anything but eloquent.

### 1:18-25 - The foolishness of God

18The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. 19For it is written:

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,  
and the learning of the learned I will set aside.”

20Where is the wise one? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made the wisdom of the world foolish? 21 For since in the wisdom of God the world did not come to know God through wisdom, it was the will of God through the foolishness of the proclamation to save those who have faith. 22For Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, 23but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, 24but to those who are called, Jews and Greeks alike, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

Paul continues his diatribe against “human eloquence.” The cross of Christ might be foolishness to others, but it is the wisdom of God for the salvation of those who have faith. The eloquence of Paul's language needs no commentary.

### 1:26-31 - The Corinthian community

26Consider your own calling, brothers. Not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. 27Rather, God chose the foolish of the world to shame the wise, and God chose the weak of the world to shame the strong, 28and God chose the lowly and despised of the world, those who count for nothing, to reduce to nothing those who are something, 29so that no human being might boast before God. 30It is due to him that you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, as well as righteousness, sanctification, and redemption, 31so that, as it is written, “Whoever boasts, should boast in the Lord.”

Paul applies his principle of “God's foolishness” to the members of the church at Corinth, reminding them that they are in Christ Jesus, not because of their wisdom, strength or position in society, but because of *God's* wisdom in choosing them for righteousness, sanctification and redemption. So if you have to boast, boast about what God has done for you.

### 2:1-5 - Paul's preaching

1When I came to you, brothers, proclaiming the mystery of God, I did not come with sublimity of words or of wisdom. 2For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. 3I came to you in weakness and fear and much trembling, 4and my message and my proclamation were not with persuasive

(words of) wisdom, but with a demonstration of spirit and power, <sup>5</sup>so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.

Perhaps it's good to remember that Paul first came to the Corinthians after he had tried to preach to the people of Athens in their more lofty philosophical debating style. It didn't work. So Paul came to the Corinthians in a much humbler stance. Here's Paul's point. If people's faith is based merely on the persuasiveness and cleverness of human argumentation, that faith can be challenged if confronted with even more persuasive and clever human argumentation. Paul insists that it is obvious to the Corinthians that their faith is not based on human persuasiveness, because Paul didn't demonstrate anything like that. Rather he came in weakness, but his message gripped the Corinthians. It was the power of God which moved them to believe, not his nice words. What is this power of God which Paul preached? It is Jesus Christ, *the* good news.

### 2:6-3:4 - True wisdom

<sup>6</sup>Yet we do speak a wisdom to those who are mature, but not a wisdom of this age, nor of the rulers of this age who are passing away. <sup>7</sup>Rather, we speak God's wisdom, mysterious, hidden, which God predetermined before the ages for our glory, <sup>8</sup>and which none of the rulers of this age knew; for if they had known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. <sup>9</sup>But as it is written:

“What eye has not seen, and ear has not heard, and what has not entered the human heart, what God has prepared for those who love him,”

<sup>10</sup>of this God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit scrutinizes everything, even the depths of God.

<sup>11</sup>Among human beings, who knows what pertains to a person except the spirit of the person that is within?

Similarly, no one knows what pertains to God except the Spirit of God. <sup>12</sup>We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the things freely given us by God. <sup>13</sup>And we speak about them not with words taught by human wisdom, but with words taught by the Spirit, describing spiritual realities in spiritual terms. <sup>14</sup>Now the natural person does not accept what pertains to the Spirit of God, for to him it is foolishness, and he cannot understand it, because it is judged spiritually. <sup>15</sup>The spiritual person, however, can judge everything but is not subject to judgment by anyone. <sup>16</sup>For “who has known the mind of the Lord, so as to counsel him?” But we have the mind of Christ.

<sup>3:1</sup>Brothers, I could not talk to you as spiritual people, but as fleshly people, as infants in Christ. <sup>2</sup>I fed you milk, not solid food, because you were unable to take it. Indeed, you are still not able, even now, <sup>3</sup>for you are still of the flesh. While there is jealousy and rivalry among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving in an ordinary human way? <sup>4</sup>Whenever someone says, “I belong to Paul,” and another, “I belong to Apollos,” are you not merely human?

Perhaps still playing off his sarcasm in 1:5, where he commended the Corinthians for their “discourse and knowledge,” Paul claims a wisdom which is for the mature, “God's wisdom.” The Corinthians were familiar with the Greek method of disputation, perhaps through the preaching of Apollos, who was apparently more eloquent than was Paul. Paul's argument is that eloquence does not equal wisdom.

The wisdom Paul preaches is from the Spirit of God, which believers have received. And that Spirit knows God's wisdom, because, as is true of any human being, it is the spirit within which knows the person. Purely natural speculation and eloquence cannot understand the Spirit of God, but the spiritual person can. And we are spiritual people; we have the mind of Christ. God can be known only through “the mind of Christ,” which does not involve speculation, but only obedience and service.

Paul seems to take the blame for the deficiencies in the Corinthians' faith. He did not, could not, speak to them as spiritual people. He fed them baby food, because that's all they could take when he was with them. And apparently they are still infants in the faith, because of the rivalries among them.

### 3:5-23 - The role of God's ministers

5What is Apollos, after all, and what is Paul? Ministers through whom you became believers, just as the Lord assigned each one. 6I planted, Apollos watered, but God caused the growth. 7Therefore, neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who causes the growth. 8The one who plants and the one who waters are equal, and each will receive wages in proportion to his labor. 9For we are God's co-workers; you are God's field, God's building. 10 According to the grace of God given to me, like a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building upon it. But each one must be careful how he builds upon it, 11for no one can lay a foundation other than the one that is there, namely, Jesus Christ. 12If anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, or straw, 13the work of each will come to light, for the Day will disclose it. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire [itself] will test the quality of each one's work. 14If the work stands that someone built upon the foundation, that person will receive a wage. 15But if someone's work is burned up, that one will suffer loss; the person will be saved, but only as through fire. 16Do you not know that you are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? 17If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person; for the temple of God, which you are, is holy. 18Let no one deceive himself. If any one among you considers himself wise in this age, let him become a fool so as to become wise. 19For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in the eyes of God, for it is written:

"He catches the wise in their own ruses,"

20and again:

"The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are vain."

21 So let no one boast about human beings, for everything belongs to you, 22Paul or Apollos or Cephas, or the world or life or death, or the present or the future: all belong to you, 23and you to Christ, and Christ to God.

Paul asks the Corinthians to take another look at the preachers to whom they think they owe allegiance. They all are but ministers through whom the Corinthians came to believe. Each one had his own role to play, but the important thing is the building which is based on belief in Jesus Christ. The Corinthians are the building. If others try to build on the foundations of Jesus Christ with gold or silver or precious stones, or wood, hay or straw, the flimsiness of what they build will be shown. No matter what preachers build their arguments on the foundation (Christ), their eloquence (Gold or silver or precious stones) or lack of it (wood, hay or straw) means nothing. What they build will melt away when tried by fire. People who contribute to the building of the edifice of true belief in Christ will receive their reward. Paul is gentle in considering those who build incorrectly on the foundation; they will be saved, but what they build will disappear.

On the other hand, if someone tries to destroy this building whose foundation is Christ, God will destroy that person.

Paul's point: don't allow anyone to deceive himself or you by thinking he is wise because he possesses the wisdom of this age. Let such a one become foolish in the eyes of the world in order to become wise in the things of God.

When Paul writes "Let no one boast about human beings," he is referring to the arguments among the Corinthians about the person to whom they owe allegiance. No, all who have served the Corinthians belong to the Corinthians as servants. And the Corinthians belong to

Christ, and Christ to God. So, let that be the end of the divisions among you because of all the boasting.

#### 4:1-5 - How Paul regards himself

1Thus should one regard us: as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. 2Now it is of course required of stewards that they be found trustworthy. 3It does not concern me in the least that I be judged by you or any human tribunal; I do not even pass judgment on myself; 4I am not conscious of anything against me, but I do not thereby stand acquitted; the one who judges me is the Lord. 5Therefore, do not make any judgment before the appointed time, until the Lord comes, for he will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will manifest the motives of our hearts, and then everyone will receive praise from God.

Although some others may regard themselves as leaders and teachers of the congregation, Paul regards himself only as the congregation's servant. Servants must be trustworthy. And it doesn't matter to Paul how others judge him. He's not even sure of how he judges himself. But that doesn't mean he is justified. Only the Lord can judge correctly. So until the Lord comes at the appointed time, don't make judgements about others' motives.

#### 4:6-21 - Paul's example

6I have applied these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brothers, so that you may learn from us not to go beyond what is written, so that none of you will be inflated with pride in favor of one person over against another. 7Who confers distinction upon you? What do you possess that you have not received? But if you have received it, why are you boasting as if you did not receive it? 8You are already satisfied; you have already grown rich; you have become kings without us! Indeed, I wish that you had become kings, so that we also might become kings with you. 9For as I see it, God has exhibited us apostles as the last of all, like people sentenced to death, since we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels and human beings alike. 10We are fools on Christ's account, but you are wise in Christ; we are weak, but you are strong; you are held in honor, but we in disrepute. 11To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are poorly clad and roughly treated, we wander about homeless 12and we toil, working with our own hands. When ridiculed, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; 13when slandered, we respond gently. We have become like the world's rubbish, the scum of all, to this very moment. 14I am writing you this not to shame you, but to admonish you as my beloved children. 15Even if you should have countless guides to Christ, yet you do not have many fathers, for I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel. 16Therefore, I urge you, be imitators of me. 17For this reason I am sending you Timothy, who is my beloved and faithful son in the Lord; he will remind you of my ways in Christ [Jesus], just as I teach them everywhere in every church. 18 Some have become inflated with pride, as if I were not coming to you. 19But I will come to you soon, if the Lord is willing, and I shall ascertain not the talk of these inflated people but their power. 20For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power. 21Which do you prefer? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love and a gentle spirit?

Paul has just said in verse 5 that everyone will receive praise or blame at the coming of Jesus, and that no judgement should be made until then, but he again takes up the issue of the Corinthians' claiming allegiance to one or the other of the preachers who have come to them or who have arisen among them and their motive for their preaching. Although Paul says that he is not writing in order to shame the community because of their divisions, that's exactly what he is

doing. But he doesn't rejoice in their shame; he wants a change in behavior.

At the beginning of these commentaries and reflections, I said that when he writes, sometimes Paul is being pious and at other times he is perturbed. When he is pious he can be difficult to understand; when he is perturbed, he is pretty straight forward. Here he is perturbed; very little commentary or reflection is required. Perhaps the message of Paul to the Corinthians, and by extension to us, is that for all of our supposed richness in "discourse and knowledge" (1:5), if our opinions and preferences are causing division among us, we've missed the point of being a Christian community.

## Section Two: Behavioral problems within the community (5:1-6:20)

### 5:1-8 - Incest

1It is widely reported that there is immorality among you, and immorality of a kind not found even among pagans—a man living with his father's wife. 2And you are inflated with pride. Should you not rather have been sorrowful? The one who did this deed should be expelled from your midst. 3I, for my part, although absent in body but present in spirit, have already, as if present, pronounced judgment on the one who has committed this deed, 4in the name of [our] Lord Jesus: when you have gathered together and I am with you in spirit with the power of the Lord Jesus, 5you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord. 6Your boasting is not appropriate. Do you not know that a little yeast leavens all the dough? 7 Clear out the old yeast, so that you may become a fresh batch of dough, inasmuch as you are unleavened. For our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed. 8Therefore let us celebrate the feast, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

This seems to be the case of a father who married a second time, and this time to a woman much younger than himself. This woman would be the stepmother of the son by the father's first marriage. Perhaps this stepmother was closer in age to the son than to the father. Even though there would be no blood relationship of the son and the stepmother, the close affinity between the two, by both Jewish and Greek law, would prohibit marriage even though the father had died. Apparently some within the community prided themselves on their "liberation" from such moral and social constraints, and there existed a marriage between a man and his stepmother.

Paul pulls the rank of his authority as an apostle, claiming that even though he is not physically present to the community, he is present in spirit, and has already pronounced the man a sinner who should be excluded from the community. (Delivering the man to Satan means excluding him from the holy assembly presided over by the risen Lord, and consigning him to the outside which is unholy, and therefore ruled by Satan.) Why expel him? Because he is like yeast which corrupts, and his continued presence within the community may corrupt the community.

### 5:9-13 - Correcting a misunderstanding

9 I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people, 10not at all referring to the immoral of this world or the greedy and robbers or idolaters; for you would then have to leave the world. 11But I now write to you not to associate with anyone named a brother, if he is immoral, greedy, an idolater, a slanderer, a drunkard, or a robber, not even to eat with such a person. 12For why should I be judging outsiders? Is it not your business to judge those within? 13God will judge those outside. "Purge the evil person from your midst."

Paul had previously written to the community (no trace of that letter exists), warning them not to associate with immoral people. He now writes to correct a misunderstanding. His Corinthian community could not help but associate with “the immoral of this world or the greedy and robbers and idolaters.” They would have to leave the world in order to avoid contact with these. Paul meant that they should not associate with these kinds of people within their own community. The community should judge behavior by its members; leave the judging of those outside to God.

#### 6:1-11 - Law suits before unbelievers

1How can any one of you with a case against another dare to bring it to the unjust for judgment instead of to the holy ones? 2Do you not know that the holy ones will judge the world? If the world is to be judged by you, are you unqualified for the lowest law courts? 3Do you not know that we will judge angels? Then why not everyday matters? 4If, therefore, you have courts for everyday matters, do you seat as judges people of no standing in the church? 5I say this to shame you. Can it be that there is not one among you wise enough to be able to settle a case between brothers? 6But rather brother goes to court against brother, and that before unbelievers?

7Now indeed [then] it is, in any case, a failure on your part that you have lawsuits against one another. Why not rather put up with injustice? Why not rather let yourselves be cheated? 8Instead, you inflict injustice and cheat, and this to brothers. 9 Do you not know that the unjust will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators nor idolaters nor adulterers nor boy prostitutes nor sodomites 10nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor robbers will inherit the kingdom of God. 11That is what some of you used to be; but now you have had yourselves washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.

When Paul calls the judges “unjust,” he is not thinking of ones who are corrupt, but rather to those who are not members of “the holy ones,” that is, members of the community. It was thought that the just would participate in making judgements at the last judgement. So, if the Christians are to judge angels and the rest of the world, why go to lower courts to settle disputes? It’s bad enough that you have law suits against one another and that you quarrel among yourselves. Why not put up with some violations of your preferences by other members of the community? But why would you ask those who will not inherit the kingdom of God to be *your* judges?

#### 6:12-20 - Casual copulation

12“Everything is lawful for me,” but not everything is beneficial. “Everything is lawful for me,” but I will not let myself be dominated by anything. 13“Food for the stomach and the stomach for food,” but God will do away with both the one and the other. The body, however, is not for immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord is for the body; 14God raised the Lord and will also raise us by his power. 15Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take Christ’s members and make them the members of a prostitute? Of course not! 16[Or] do you not know that anyone who joins himself to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For “the two,” it says, “will become one flesh.” 17But whoever is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. 18Avoid immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the immoral person sins against his own body. 19Do you not know that your body is a temple of the holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? 20For you have been purchased at a price. Therefore, glorify God in your body.

Paul quotes and refutes a couple of slogans that existed among the Corinthians:

“Everything is lawful for me.” Just because it is lawful for you, that doesn’t mean it’s beneficial to your building up of the community. “Food for the stomach and the stomach for food,” implies that there is no morality in things having to do with the body. Paul refutes that by recalling that the body is not for immorality, but for the Lord, because our bodies are members of Christ. Here Paul in speaking of being members of Christ, is speaking of the individual as being a member of the community which is the Body of Christ. Paul contrasts joining one’s body with that of a prostitute and therefore becoming one flesh with her, with the belief that by baptism one has been joined to Christ and has become one spirit in Christ.

In verse 18, the translators of this version of the bible use the word “immorality.” The Greek word *pornia* means sexual sins, immoral intercourse. That’s the root of our English word “pornography.” So one who sins that way sins against his own body, which is the temple of the Holy Spirit.

### Section Three: Answers to some questions (7:1-11:2)

#### 7:1-16 - Marriage questions

1Now in regard to the matters about which you wrote: “It is a good thing for a man not to touch a woman,” 2but because of cases of immorality every man should have his own wife, and every woman her own husband. 3The husband should fulfill his duty toward his wife, and likewise the wife toward her husband. 4A wife does not have authority over her own body, but rather her husband, and similarly a husband does not have authority over his own body, but rather his wife. 5Do not deprive each other, except perhaps by mutual consent for a time, to be free for prayer, but then return to one another, so that Satan may not tempt you through your lack of self-control. 6This I say by way of concession, however, not as a command. 7Indeed, I wish everyone to be as I am, but each has a particular gift from God, one of one kind and one of another. 8Now to the unmarried and to widows, I say: it is a good thing for them to remain as they are, as I do, 9but if they cannot exercise self-control they should marry, for it is better to marry than to be on fire. 10 To the married, however, I give this instruction (not I, but the Lord): A wife should not separate from her husband 11—and if she does separate she must either remain single or become reconciled to her husband—and a husband should not divorce his wife. 12To the rest I say (not the Lord): if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she is willing to go on living with him, he should not divorce her; 13and if any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he is willing to go on living with her, she should not divorce her husband. 14For the unbelieving husband is made holy through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy through the brother. Otherwise your children would be unclean, whereas in fact they are holy. 15If the unbeliever separates, however, let him separate. The brother or sister is not bound in such cases; God has called you to peace. 16For how do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband; or how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?

Apparently some in Corinth were saying that “It is a good thing for a man not to touch a woman,” meaning that it is a good thing for married couples to not have intercourse. Paul offers some cautions about such a practice, citing the belief that the marriage contract gives spouses rights to intercourse with each other. So his advice is that couples should not deprive each other of exercising that right, except, perhaps, by mutual consent they decide not to have sex for a time. But, understanding the strength of the sexual urges, he advises that the couple should not abstain for too long a time, lest one or the other give into the temptation to have sex with someone other than their spouse. But Paul says this is not a command. Paul expresses his opinion that he could wish that everyone was as he is (unmarried or a widower).

His advice to the unmarried and the widowed is that it is a good thing to remain such, but if that's too much for someone, it's better to marry than to be on fire (with sexual desires). His command to the married is that they should stay married. He immediately makes some distinctions. "If any brother (that means a member of the community) has a wife" who is an unbeliever and the wife is willing to stay married to him, the husband ought not divorce her. And the same is true of a believing wife and an unbelieving husband.

The instruction in verse 15 has found its way into Roman Catholic canon law; it is known as the Pauline Privilege. If two people are married, and neither of them is baptized, but they have consummated the marriage, the church considers that a valid marriage. If one of the two unbaptized partners gets baptized, and the spouse refuses to live with that person, that person is free to marry again without need for dispensation from the church.

The unbelieving spouse is made holy by union with the believing spouse. "Otherwise your children would be unclean, whereas they are holy." The children, even before baptism, are also clean because of the believing parent.

#### 7:17-24 - Stay as you are

17Only, everyone should live as the Lord has assigned, just as God called each one. I give this order in all the churches. 18Was someone called after he had been circumcised? He should not try to undo his circumcision. Was an uncircumcised person called? He should not be circumcised. 19Circumcision means nothing, and uncircumcision means nothing; what matters is keeping God's commandments. 20Everyone should remain in the state in which he was called. 21Were you a slave when you were called? Do not be concerned but, even if you can gain your freedom, make the most of it. 22For the slave called in the Lord is a freed person in the Lord, just as the free person who has been called is a slave of Christ. 23You have been purchased at a price. Do not become slaves to human beings. 24Brothers, everyone should continue before God in the state in which he was called.

Paul's conviction which he says he shares with all the churches is that people's state in life when they were called is not nearly as important as the fact that, whatever their state, they *were* called; there's room for everybody.

#### 7:25-40 - Questions about the unmarried

25Now in regard to virgins, I have no commandment from the Lord, but I give my opinion as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy. 26So this is what I think best because of the present distress: that it is a good thing for a person to remain as he is. 27Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek a separation. Are you free of a wife? Then do not look for a wife. 28If you marry, however, you do not sin, nor does an unmarried woman sin if she marries; but such people will experience affliction in their earthly life, and I would like to spare you that.

29 I tell you, brothers, the time is running out. From now on, let those having wives act as not having them, 30those weeping as not weeping, those rejoicing as not rejoicing, those buying as not owning, 31those using the world as not using it fully. For the world in its present form is passing away.

32I should like you to be free of anxieties. An unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord. 33But a married man is anxious about the things of the world, how he may please his wife, 34and he is divided. An unmarried woman or a virgin is anxious about the things of the Lord, so that she may be holy in both body and spirit. A married woman, on the other hand, is anxious about the things of the world, how she may please her husband. 35I am telling you this for your own benefit, not to impose a restraint upon you, but for the sake of propriety and adherence to the Lord without distraction.

36 If anyone thinks he is behaving improperly toward his virgin, and if a critical moment has come and so it

has to be, let him do as he wishes. He is committing no sin; let them get married. 37The one who stands firm in his resolve, however, who is not under compulsion but has power over his own will, and has made up his mind to keep his virgin, will be doing well. 38So then, the one who marries his virgin does well; the one who does not marry her will do better.

39 A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to be married to whomever she wishes, provided that it be in the Lord. 40She is more blessed, though, in my opinion, if she remains as she is, and I think that I too have the Spirit of God.

Although Paul has “no commandment from the Lord,” he has an opinion on the matters he is about to discuss, and he thinks his opinion is worth listening to. Strangely, at least to me, commentators do not think Paul’s reference to “the present distress” refers to the expected immanent return of the Lord, but simply to the distress of the everyday “affliction in their earthly life.” But the same commentators think “the time is running out” in verse 29 does refer to the parousia.

Apparently there was in Corinth, along with the “wide-open city” syndrom, a false asceticism in regard to married people, suggesting that they should practice abstinence. In giving his advice not to have anxious care about the things of this world, Paul is not lending support to this ascetical practice among the Corinthians. Paul assumes that people should and will go about their regular life, but with an attitude which is different from those who do not believe in Jesus and his second coming. Paul just means that “propriety and adherence to the Lord without distraction” are called for.

Commentators disagree about what Paul refers to when he writes about someone who has a virgin, but it probably refers to a married couple who have decided not to have sex. If this gets to be too great a burden, let them have sex; it is no sin. But others in the same situation who are able to maintain continence within a “spiritual marriage” also do a good thing. Paul favors the latter situation.

The wife whose husband dies is free to marry, although Paul again prefers that one remain as she is. Remember that Paul was probably single, or more like a widower, so he knows of what he speaks. He’s giving only advice, but he thinks it’s good advice.

## 8:1-13 - Knowledge, food and idols

1Now in regard to meat sacrificed to idols: we realize that “all of us have knowledge”; knowledge inflates with pride, but love builds up. 2If anyone supposes he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. 3But if one loves God, one is known by him. 4So about the eating of meat sacrificed to idols: we know that “there is no idol in the world,” and that “there is no God but one.” 5Indeed, even though there are so-called gods in heaven and on earth (there are, to be sure, many “gods” and many “lords”), 6 yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom all things are and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things are and through whom we exist.

7But not all have this knowledge. There are some who have been so used to idolatry up until now that, when they eat meat sacrificed to idols, their conscience, which is weak, is defiled. 8 Now food will not bring us closer to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, nor are we better off if we do. 9But make sure that this liberty of yours in no way becomes a stumbling block to the weak. 10If someone sees you, with your knowledge, reclining at table in the temple of an idol, may not his conscience too, weak as it is, be “built up” to eat the meat sacrificed to idols? 11Thus through your knowledge, the weak person is brought to destruction, the brother for whom Christ died. 12When you

sin in this way against your brothers and wound their consciences, weak as they are, you are sinning against Christ. 13 Therefore, if food causes my brother to sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I may not cause my brother to sin.

In their questions brought to Paul, the Corinthians wondered about eating food which had been dedicated by sacrifice to a god. Paul's untangling of this thorny question has relevance to this day.

Some had enough *knowledge* to understand that eating food dedicated to a god didn't make any difference, because there is only one God. But having that knowledge doesn't answer the whole question. Others are not so firm in that knowledge. Those who are firm in their understanding that there is no god other than the one Jesus revealed, might still be deficient, because they lack the *love* which would respect the scruples of those within the community without such firm knowledge.

Having *knowledge* is an individualistic criterion for judging one's actions. By acting on that knowledge one does not violate one's individual conscience by eating meat sacrificed to an idol. But "if anyone supposes he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know." There's more to understanding one's moral obligations than one's own conscience. There needs also to be taken into consideration how one's behavior affects other members of the community. One's love of God encompasses tolerance of the scruples of one's neighbors. Out of respect for the conscience of others, Paul says he would never eat meat again.

Knowledge is great; but love is greater!

#### 9:1-12 - Paul's rights as an apostle

1 Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not my work in the Lord?  
2 Although I may not be an apostle for others, certainly I am for you, for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.

3 My defense against those who would pass judgment on me is this. 4 Do we not have the right to eat and drink? 5 Do we not have the right to take along a Christian wife, as do the rest of the apostles, and the brothers of the Lord, and Cephas? 6 Or is it only myself and Barnabas who do not have the right not to work? 7 Who ever serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard without eating its produce? Or who shepherds a flock without using some of the milk from the flock? 8 Am I saying this on human authority, or does not the law also speak of these things? 9 It is written in the law of Moses, "You shall not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain." Is God concerned about oxen, 10 or is he not really speaking for our sake? It was written for our sake, because the plowman should plow in hope, and the thresher in hope of receiving a share. 11 If we have sown spiritual seed for you, is it a great thing that we reap a material harvest from you? 12 If others share this rightful claim on you, do not we still more? Yet we have not used this right. On the contrary, we endure everything so as not to place an obstacle to the gospel of Christ.

Apparently connected with Paul's willingness to refrain from eating meat, even though doing so is legitimate, is Paul's claim here that he also has a right to earn his living by his preaching. But he doesn't accept remuneration. Whether it was some comments brought to Paul from the Corinthians, perhaps some insinuation that he couldn't be for real because he didn't charge for his preaching, as did other traveling lecturers and preachers, or from some other cause, all of a sudden Paul sounds like he has a burr under his saddle concerning his legitimacy as an apostle. So he lets loose.

First of all, the Corinthians themselves are proof that Paul is an apostle, because he

evangelized them. Then comes his defense “against those who would pass judgment on me.” Paul does not accept remuneration for his preaching; is that what is bothering his critics? Using the example of a soldier, a vineyard owner, a shepherd, and even the Law of Moses, Paul asserts that he has a right to such remuneration by means of material reward for having sown among the Corinthians the spiritual seed. But he doesn’t make use of that right, because inability to pay might be an obstacle to people hearing the gospel.

#### 9:13-18 - Why doesn’t Paul charge for preaching the gospel?

13 Do you not know that those who perform the temple services eat [what] belongs to the temple, and those who minister at the altar share in the sacrificial offerings? 14 In the same way, the Lord ordered that those who preach the gospel should live by the gospel. 15 I have not used any of these rights, however, nor do I write this that it be done so in my case. I would rather die. Certainly no one is going to nullify my boast. 16 If I preach the gospel, this is no reason for me to boast, for an obligation has been imposed on me, and woe to me if I do not preach it! 17 If I do so willingly, I have a recompense, but if unwillingly, then I have been entrusted with a stewardship. 18 What then is my recompense? That, when I preach, I offer the gospel free of charge so as not to make full use of my right in the gospel.

Even though “the Lord ordered that those who preach the gospel should live by the gospel,” Paul has not done so. He is proud of what he has done, but on the other hand he says he had no choice, because he is under obligation to preach. If he takes up that obligation willingly, that preaching free of charge in itself is recompense enough.

However, there is a little “mental reservation” here. True, Paul did not charge the Corinthians for his preaching, but while at Corinth, Paul was being subsidized from Macedonia. He admits as much in his second letter to the Corinthians 11:7-9 when he writes “Did I make a mistake when I humbled myself so that you might be exalted, because I preached the gospel of God to you without charge? I plundered other churches by accepting from them in order to minister to you. And when I was with you and in need, I did not burden anyone, for the brothers who came from Macedonia supplied my needs. So I refrained and will refrain from burdening you in any way.

#### 9:19-27 - All things to all

19 Although I am free in regard to all, I have made myself a slave to all so as to win over as many as possible. 20 To the Jews I became like a Jew to win over Jews; to those under the law I became like one under the law—though I myself am not under the law—to win over those under the law. 21 To those outside the law I became like one outside the law—though I am not outside God’s law but within the law of Christ—to win over those outside the law. 22 To the weak I became weak, to win over the weak. I have become all things to all, to save at least some. 23 All this I do for the sake of the gospel, so that I too may have a share in it. 24 Do you not know that the runners in the stadium all run in the race, but only one wins the prize? Run so as to win. 25 Every athlete exercises discipline in every way. They do it to win a perishable crown, but we an imperishable one. 26 Thus I do not run aimlessly; I do not fight as if I were shadowboxing. 27 No, I drive my body and train it, for fear that, after having preached to others, I myself should be disqualified.

Paul is actually quite emotional here. He’s defending himself against charges impugning his ministry. [Don’t read this out loud in a pious sort of way; it needs to be read with fire in the belly.]

Paul is claiming his missionary vocation; he adapts to those to whom he ministers. Among the Jews, he was an observer of the Mosaic Law; among those outside the law, he abandoned his

Jewish practices. There may be irony in his use of the phrase “outside the law.” It means Gentiles, certainly; but Corinth was also notorious for its lawless citizens.

Paul’s reference to athletic pursuits would strike a chord with the Corinthians, because in their city were celebrated the Isthmian games, second in importance only to the Olympic games celebrated in Athens.

#### 10:1-13 - The dangers of overconfidence.

1I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our ancestors were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea, 2and all of them were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. 3All ate the same spiritual food, 4and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they drank from a spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was the Christ. 5Yet God was not pleased with most of them, for they were struck down in the desert. 6These things happened as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil things, as they did. 7And do not become idolaters, as some of them did, as it is written, “The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel.” 8Let us not indulge in immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell within a single day. 9Let us not test Christ as some of them did, and suffered death by serpents. 10Do not grumble as some of them did, and suffered death by the destroyer. 11These things happened to them as an example, and they have been written down as a warning to us, upon whom the end of the ages has come. 12Therefore, whoever thinks he is standing secure should take care not to fall. 13No trial has come to you but what is human. God is faithful and will not let you be tried beyond your strength; but with the trial he will also provide a way out, so that you may be able to bear it.

Taking up the last statement in the previous section (9:27) “for fear that, after having preached to others, I myself should be disqualified,” Paul gives examples from the Hebrew scriptures of people who presumed they were saved, but might not have been. He draws all his examples from the Book of Exodus: idolatry, immorality, testing Christ (for Paul the rock which followed them), grumbling. These things were written down as a warning for us. So Paul doesn’t think he is secure, and neither should the Corinthians.

The point Paul makes in verse 13 is that although the Corinthians have suffered some trials, even trials to their faith, they can trust God to strengthen them. Trials are inevitable, but succumbing to them is not inevitable. God “will also provide a way out.”

#### 10:14-22 - Warning against idolatry

14Therefore, my beloved, avoid idolatry. 15I am speaking as to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I am saying. 16The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? 17Because the loaf of bread is one, we, though many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf. 18Look at Israel according to the flesh; are not those who eat the sacrifices participants in the altar? 19So what am I saying? That meat sacrificed to idols is anything? Or that an idol is anything? 20No, I mean that what they sacrifice, [they sacrifice] to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to become participants with demons. 21You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and also the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and of the table of demons. 22Or are we provoking the Lord to jealous anger? Are we stronger than he?

In chapter 8:1-13, Paul dealt with the question about eating food sacrificed to idols. He concluded that since there are no gods but One, there would, in itself, be no objection to sharing a meal which included food offered to idols. However, he couched that “freedom” in terms of the responsibility of love one has for the conscience others, who would be disturbed by that practice.

Here he again takes up the question of the meaning of shared meals. This time it is a different situation.

This time Paul is writing about sharing in a meal which includes food sacrificed to *demons*. There are no idols, but there are demons. Paul's caution is to "avoid idolatry." He's appealing to people's logic rather than to some revealed truth. He makes the comparison between participation in the eucharist and participation in a meal dedicated to demons. Since all accept that the sharing in the blessing cup is a participation in the blood of Christ, and the breaking of bread is a participation in the body of Christ, and that by such participation in the cup and the bread, all are made one in Christ, the Corinthians ought to be able to see that by their participation in meals dedicated to demons they would make themselves one with demons. And that is idolatry.

#### 10:23-11:2 - The scruples of the weak

23"Everything is lawful," but not everything is beneficial. "Everything is lawful," but not everything builds up. 24No one should seek his own advantage, but that of his neighbor. 25 Eat anything sold in the market, without raising questions on grounds of conscience, 26for "the earth and its fullness are the Lord's." 27If an unbeliever invites you and you want to go, eat whatever is placed before you, without raising questions on grounds of conscience. 28But if someone says to you, "This was offered in sacrifice," do not eat it on account of the one who called attention to it and on account of conscience; 29I mean not your own conscience, but the other's. For why should my freedom be determined by someone else's conscience? 30If I partake thankfully, why am I reviled for that over which I give thanks? 31So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God. 32 Avoid giving offense, whether to Jews or Greeks or the church of God, 33just as I try to please everyone in every way, not seeking my own benefit but that of the many, that they may be saved. 11:1So imitate Paul, as he imitates Jesus. 2I praise you because you remember me in everything and hold fast to the traditions, just as I handed them on to you.

Paul is still dealing with the situation in Corinth, where the community is made up of "the strong" and "the weak." The strong – "Everything is lawful" – are those whose consciences allow them to eat anything (except in idolatrous sacrificial meals). The weak are those whose scruples prevent them from eating any food offered to idols. Paul's admonition to the strong is that consideration must include what builds up the community, not only what is permissible.

Practically, Paul means that people can eat anything that they buy in the market, because everything belongs to the Lord. So, if a Christian is eating a meal in the home of an unbeliever, just eat whatever is served; don't raise unnecessary questions. But if some of "the weak" are present, refrain from violating *their* consciences. Here Paul is expressing compassion for "the weak."

However, he then expresses compassion for "the strong," asking why their behavior should be limited by someone else's conscience.

Taking all things into consideration, *koinonia*, – community – needs to be the criterion by which all things are judged. Paul says that he himself tries to please everyone in every way, not seeking just what pleases him. So folks should imitate Paul. And he praises them for doing so.

#### Section Four: Problems in liturgical assemblies (11:3-14:40)

#### 11:3-16 - Let men be men, and women be women

3But I want you to know that Christ is the head of every man, and a husband the head of his wife, and God the head of Christ. 4 Any man who prays or prophesies with his head covered brings shame upon his head. 5But any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled brings shame upon her head, for it is one and the same thing as if she had had her head shaved. 6For if a woman does not have her head veiled, she may as well have her hair cut off. But if it is shameful for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, then she should wear a veil.

7 A man, on the other hand, should not cover his head, because he is the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man. 8For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; 9nor was man created for woman, but woman for man; 10for this reason a woman should have a sign of authority on her head, because of the angels. 11Woman is not independent of man or man of woman in the Lord. 12For just as woman came from man, so man is born of woman; but all things are from God. 13 Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head unveiled? 14Does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears his hair long it is a disgrace to him, 15whereas if a woman has long hair it is her glory, because long hair has been given [her] for a covering? 16But if anyone is inclined to be argumentative, we do not have such a custom, nor do the churches of God.

If we knew for sure that Paul wrote this section of the letter, and if we knew for sure that he was responding to a question asked by the Corinthians, and if we knew for sure what that question might be, this section of the letter might make great good sense to us. But we don't know any of those things. As Raymond F. Collins, the scripture scholar, wrote in the introduction to this section of Paul's letter:

For contemporary readers 11:2-16 is one of the most difficult passages in the entire letter. With its allusions to a specific situation within the Corinthian church and to the biblical stories about creation, the passage is somewhat confusing and difficult to understand. For many contemporary readers the passage is also difficult to accept. On first reading it appears to advance a Pauline claim that women are inferior and subordinate to men.

Yeah, tell me about it! I've given it much more than a "first reading." Even after having read several commentaries on this passage by really reputable scholars, I find no real convergence of the opinions, which range from finding this a misogynist diatribe, to considering this a discussion about homosexuality, to dictums about liturgical behavior, to a discussion about hair styles. No wonder this passage does not appear in the lectionary of daily readings, even though what precedes this passage and what follows it are included. If all these commentators would get together in one room to discuss this passage among themselves, I bet they would leave as confused as they have left me.

Because this passage is so different from what precedes it and what follows, many scholars consider this an interpolation introduced into the text by someone other than Paul. In that case, the question remains: was this person a misogynist, a homophobe or a liturgical purist or a hair stylist?

On the assumption that Paul is the author of this passage, and on the assumption that he is neither a misogynist, nor a homophobe, nor a liturgical purist, nor a hair stylist, is there a way we can make sense of what is written here? I can't. I feel pretty sure, because I want to, that Paul was not a misogynist. In verse 11 he seems to propose the equality of men and women when he writes that "woman is not independent of man or man of woman in the Lord," and in verse 12 "woman came from man, so man is born of woman."

11:17-34 - Celebration of the Eucharist

17In giving this instruction, I do not praise the fact that your meetings are doing more harm than good. 18First of all, I hear that when you meet as a church there are divisions among you, and to a degree I believe it; 19there have to be factions among you in order that (also) those who are approved among you may become known. 20When you meet in one place, then, it is not to eat the Lord's supper, 21for in eating, each one goes ahead with his own supper, and one goes hungry while another gets drunk. 22Do you not have houses in which you can eat and drink? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and make those who have nothing feel ashamed? What can I say to you? Shall I praise you? In this matter I do not praise you.

23 For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was handed over, took bread, 24and, after he had given thanks, broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." 25In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." 26For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes. 27Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will have to answer for the body and blood of the Lord. 28A person should examine himself, and so eat the bread and drink the cup. 29For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body, eats and drinks judgment on himself. 30That is why many among you are ill and infirm, and a considerable number are dying. 31If we discerned ourselves, we would not be under judgment; 32but since we are judged by [the] Lord, we are being disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world. 33Therefore, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for one another. 34If anyone is hungry, he should eat at home, so that your meetings may not result in judgment. The other matters I shall set in order when I come.

The practice seems to have been that the wealthier members of the community who had larger houses put these at the disposal of the entire community for the celebration of eucharist. The problem which Paul sees as doing more harm than good to the gathering is that the hosts invited their wealthy friends to join them for dinner prior to the "breaking of the bread." The poorer members of the community were not invited to the dinner, and probably waited in the courtyard of the house where the "breaking of the bread" would take place, while the wealthier members of the community dined inside.

When Paul writes that there *must be* factions among you so that it will become clear who is doing the right thing, he is probably acknowledging that there are people doing the right thing in Corinth, even though he is addressing problems which also exist.

Paul takes a strong stand about a gathering for eucharist which is not characterized by mutual love. After describing what he "received from the Lord and handed on to" the Corinthians, he writes that "whoever eats and drinks without discerning the body, eats and drinks judgement on himself." By sharing in the eucharist all are incorporated into the Body of Christ. By their failure to recognize the community as the Body of Christ, while participating in receiving the Body of Christ in eucharist, people condemn themselves. Paul falls back on his Jewish theological roots by claiming that the illness and death in the community are caused by the sin committed in failure to discern the body (the community) while participating in the breaking of the bread.

When we read verses 31 and 32 aloud, if we emphasize the word "ourselves" the lines will make sense. "If we discerned *ourselves*, we would not be under judgment; 32but since we are judged by *[the] Lord*, we are being disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world." So Paul sees the sickness and death in the community as the community's being disciplined by the Lord.

12:1-11 - Gifts of the Spirit

1Now in regard to spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be unaware. 2 You know how, when you were pagans, you were attracted and led away to mute idols. 3Therefore, I tell you that nobody speaking by the spirit of God says, “Jesus be accursed.” And no one can say, “Jesus is Lord,” except by the holy Spirit. 4 There are different kinds of spiritual gifts but the same Spirit; 5there are different forms of service but the same Lord; 6there are different workings but the same God who produces all of them in everyone. 7To each individual the manifestation of the Spirit is given for some benefit. 8To one is given through the Spirit the expression of wisdom; to another the expression of knowledge according to the same Spirit; 9to another faith by the same Spirit; to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit; 10to another mighty deeds; to another prophecy; to another discernment of spirits; to another varieties of tongues; to another interpretation of tongues. 11But one and the same Spirit produces all of these, distributing them individually to each person as he wishes.

The opening phrase indicates that the Corinthians have asked Paul questions about spiritual gifts. While we don’t know the question or questions asked by the Corinthians, we have Paul’s long answer; it runs for three chapters.

The Corinthians were familiar with a certain spiritism, even before they believed in Christ; they were attracted to idols. And the cult of those idols called Jesus accursed, a clear sign that they were not led by the Spirit of God. On the other hand, anyone who claims that Jesus is Lord has to be led by the Spirit of God. Paul’s point may be addressing a certain elitism which had crept into the community, which he addresses by reminding the congregation that there is an equality among all those who can say, “Jesus is Lord.” They are all led by the Spirit of God. There is no place for elitism among Christian believers. He will elaborate on that theme throughout the next three chapters.

Although there are different manifestations of the Spirit – gifts (*charismata*) from the same Spirit; service (*diaconiai*) from the same Lord, and workings (*energemata*) from the same God – they all come from the same God. All such manifestations are given for some benefit. (Intended by Paul or not, there is here an indication of the Trinity.)

Paul continues, listing the kinds of gifts that perhaps have been manifest within the Corinthian community. One can imagine that there might have been a competitiveness among those with the various gifts. So the important thing here is not the listing of the various gifts, but the phrase “But one and the same Spirit produces all of these.” These next three chapters will emphasize Paul’s message of unity and love.

## 12:12-26 - One body, many parts

12As a body is one though it has many parts, and all the parts of the body, though many, are one body, so also Christ. 13For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free persons, and we were all given to drink of one Spirit. 14Now the body is not a single part, but many. 15If a foot should say, “Because I am not a hand I do not belong to the body,” it does not for this reason belong any less to the body. 16Or if an ear should say, “Because I am not an eye I do not belong to the body,” it does not for this reason belong any less to the body. 17If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? 18But as it is, God placed the parts, each one of them, in the body as he intended. 19If they were all one part, where the body be? 20But as it is, there are many parts, yet one body. 21The eye cannot say to the hand, “I do not need you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I do not need you.” 22Indeed, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are all the more necessary, 23and those parts of the body that we consider less honorable we surround with greater honor, and our less presentable parts are treated with greater propriety, 24whereas our more presentable parts do not need this. But God has so constructed the body as to give greater honor to a part that is without it, 25so that there may be no division in the body, but that the parts may have the same concern for one

another. 26If [one] part suffers, all the parts suffer with it; if one part is honored, all the parts share its joy.

The image of the body is distinctly Pauline. At the time he wrote there existed the notion of the “body politic,” but that was far different from Paul’s use of the analogy here. His statement in verse 14 carries the weight of his profound message to the Corinthians. In order to be a body, there have to be many parts. The admonition is not just that people ought to get along; they can’t be a body without each other.

#### 12:27-31 - Application to Christ

27Now you are Christ’s body, and individually parts of it. 28Some people God has designated in the church to be, first, apostles; second, prophets; third, teachers; then, mighty deeds; then, gifts of healing, assistance, administration, and varieties of tongues. 29Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work mighty deeds? 30Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? 31Strive eagerly for the greatest spiritual gifts. But I shall show you a still more excellent way.

Only when they are all together do they make up the Body of Christ. So, how do people with these different functions, and perhaps therefore different outlooks, work together? They strive for the greatest spiritual gifts like those mentioned above. The Corinthians were apparently already arguing about which were the greatest gifts. No, I shall show you a still more excellent way.

#### 13:1-13 - The way of love

1If I speak in human and angelic tongues but do not have love, I am a resounding gong or a clashing cymbal. 2And if I have the gift of prophecy and comprehend all mysteries and all knowledge; if I have all faith so as to move 3If I give away everything I own, and if I hand my body over so that I may boast but do not have love, I gain nothing.

4Love is patient, love is kind. It is not jealous, [love] is not pompous, it is not inflated, 5it is not rude, it does not seek its own interests, it is not quick-tempered, it does not brood over injury, 6it does not rejoice over wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth. 7It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

8 Love never fails. If there are prophecies, they will be brought to nothing; if tongues, they will cease; if knowledge, it will be brought to nothing. 9For we know partially and we prophesy partially, 10but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. 11When I was a child, I used to talk as a child, think as a child, reason as a child; when I became a man, I put aside childish things. 12At present we see indistinctly, as in a mirror, but then face to face. At present I know partially; then I shall know fully, as I am fully known. 13 So faith, hope, love remain, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

In the first paragraph, Paul writes that love supercedes all the charisms over which the Corinthians were fighting. In the second paragraph Paul describes love for what it is and what it isn’t, again addressing elements of conflict within the community. The third paragraph paints love’s endurance as superior to all the other charisms. Perhaps Paul’s use of the analogy of a child is a rebuke to the Corinthians who in his opinion had been acting childish. OK, so none of us sees perfectly nor are we seen accurately. That’s why the Corinthians’ foibles are understandable. But in the end, love needs to be their rule of life.

#### 14:1-12 - Prophecy and tongues

1 Pursue love, but strive eagerly for the spiritual gifts, above all that you may prophesy. 2For one who speaks in a tongue does not speak to human beings but to God, for no one listens; he utters mysteries in spirit. 3On the other hand, one who prophesies does speak to human beings, for their building up, encouragement, and solace. 4Whoever speaks in a tongue builds himself up, but whoever prophesies builds up the church. 5Now I should like all of you to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. One who prophesies is greater than one who speaks in tongues, unless he interprets, so that the church may be built up.

6 Now, brothers, if I should come to you speaking in tongues, what good will I do you if I do not speak to you by way of revelation, or knowledge, or prophecy, or instruction? 7Likewise, if inanimate things that produce sound, such as flute or harp, do not give out the tones distinctly, how will what is being played on flute or harp be recognized? 8And if the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for battle? 9Similarly, if you, because of speaking in tongues, do not utter intelligible speech, how will anyone know what is being said? For you will be talking to the air. 10It happens that there are many different languages in the world, and none is meaningless; 11but if I do not know the meaning of a language, I shall be a foreigner to one who speaks it, and one who speaks it a foreigner to me. 12So with yourselves: since you strive eagerly for spirits, seek to have an abundance of them for building up the church.

In telling the Corinthians to “strive eagerly” for the spiritual gifts, Paul is suggesting that people receive the gift they want. And he encourages them to want to gift of prophecy more than the gift of tongues. The gift of tongues may enhance their own prayer, and even enhance their prestige within the community. But prophecy will enhance the prayer of the whole community.

The notion of prophecy is “speaking for God.” It can be thought of as simply an astute observation, or as a revelation, pointing out what God wills. Paul contrasts the value of prophecy with that of speaking in tongues, and concludes that prophecy is of more benefit to the community than is speaking in tongues, because it builds up the community. Tongues are alright if there is someone, the speaker or others, who can interpret the speech in tongues.

Paul actually seems a bit suspicious of the practice of speaking in tongues. He wonders what good it does for the building up of the community. While acknowledging that for the one who speaks in tongues there may be meaning in what is said, for the community there is no meaning, and therefore no benefit. There may also be something detrimental about speaking in tongues. Paul compares speaking in tongues to the situation of being a foreigner, perhaps suggesting that the use of the gift of tongues divides the community. Paul’s advice is to strive for the gifts which build up the community.

#### 14:13-19 - More on speaking in tongues

13Therefore, one who speaks in a tongue should pray to be able to interpret. 14[For] if I pray in a tongue, my spirit is at prayer but my mind is unproductive. 15So what is to be done? I will pray with the spirit, but I will also pray with the mind. I will sing praise with the spirit, but I will also sing praise with the mind. 16Otherwise, if you pronounce a blessing [with] the spirit, how shall one who holds the place of the uninstructed say the “Amen” to your thanksgiving, since he does not know what you are saying? 17For you may be giving thanks very well, but the other is not built up. 18I give thanks to God that I speak in tongues more than any of you, 19but in the church I would rather speak five words with my mind, so as to instruct others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue.

Continuing his thought that all gifts of the Spirit are given for the upbuilding of the community, Paul advises that one who speaks in tongues should pray also for the ability to interpret what is spoken in tongues. Paul uses two phrases to characterize the gift of tongues and the gift of interpretation: “sing praise with the spirit” and “sing praise with the mind.” If one prays

only in tongues without interpretation, he asks, how can “the uninstructed” say “amen” to the prayer. The uninstructed includes visitors to the community as well as those within the community who don’t know what’s going on.

Paul claims that he speaks in tongues more than any of the rest of them, but that’s not nearly as important to him as speaking “five words with my mind,” for the upbuilding of others.

#### 14:20-25 - Limits on the usefulness of tongues

20Brothers, stop being childish in your thinking. In respect to evil be like infants, but in your thinking be mature. 21It is written in the law:  
“By people speaking strange tongues  
and by the lips of foreigners  
I will speak to this people,  
and even so they will not listen to me, says the Lord.”

22Thus, tongues are a sign not for those who believe but for unbelievers, whereas prophecy is not for unbelievers but for those who believe. 23So if the whole church meets in one place and everyone speaks in tongues, and then uninstructed people or unbelievers should come in, will they not say that you are out of your minds? 24But if everyone is prophesying, and an unbeliever or uninstructed person should come in, he will be convinced by everyone and judged by everyone, 25and the secrets of his heart will be disclosed, and so he will fall down and worship God, declaring, “God is really in your midst.”

Paul’s suspicion concerning the use of tongues leads him to quote a passage from Isaiah (28:11-12) where God punishes the people by speaking in a foreign language. Reflecting on the practice of speaking in tongues from the viewpoint of the uninstructed or strangers, Paul concludes the speaking in tongues in the presence of these two groups could lead them only to conclude that those who speak in tongues are out of their minds. How different would be the impression of the uninstructed or the unbeliever if they witnessed the whole community prophesying instead.

#### 14:26-40 - Order in the use of gifts

26So what is to be done, brothers? When you assemble, one has a psalm, another an instruction, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Everything should be done for building up. 27If anyone speaks in a tongue, let it be two or at most three, and each in turn, and one should interpret. 28But if there is no interpreter, the person should keep silent in the church and speak to himself and to God. 29Two or three prophets should speak, and the others discern.

30But if a revelation is given to another person sitting there, the first one should be silent. 31For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged. 32Indeed, the spirits of prophets are under the prophets’ control, 33since he is not the God of disorder but of peace. As in all the churches of the holy ones, 34women should keep silent in the churches, for they are not allowed to speak, but should be subordinate, as even the law says. 35But if they want to learn anything, they should ask their husbands at home. For it is improper for a woman to speak in the church. 36Did the word of God go forth from you? Or has it come to you alone?

37If anyone thinks that he is a prophet or a spiritual person, he should recognize that what I am writing to you is a commandment of the Lord. 38If anyone does not acknowledge this, he is not acknowledged. 39So, (my) brothers, strive eagerly to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues, 40but everything must be done properly and in order.

If the assemblies are disorderly or too long, people will not be built up, but rather they will become discouraged and impatient. So Paul lays down some instructions about the quality and quantity of the agenda for the meetings. If more than one person wishes to give a prophecy, they should take their turns, and make room for each other. When Paul writes “Indeed, the spirits of prophets are under the prophets’ control,” he means that just because one feels inspired to say something, that doesn’t mean that God wants that said right now. Take turns.

Almost everyone would have preferred that Paul hadn’t written verses 34 and 35. And he didn’t. It is the work of very early copyist who wrote them in a margin, giving vent to his own frustration over what was going on in the assemblies. When a subsequent copyist made a new copy, these marginal jottings were included in the text. Verse 36 makes much more sense if it is read immediately after verse 33.

Paul concludes this section by appealing to his authority, claiming that what he is writing is a commandment of the Lord. If someone doesn’t like it, tough. That someone will not be acknowledged by Paul. Verses 30 and 40 summarized what Paul has been saying.

### Section Five: The Resurrection

#### 15:1-11 - The resurrection of Christ: the gospel Paul preached

1Now I am reminding you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you indeed received and in which you also stand. 2Through it you are also being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you, unless you believed in vain. 3 For I handed on to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures; 4that he was buried; that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures; 5that he appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve. 6After that, he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at once, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. 7After that he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. 8Last of all, as to one born abnormally, he appeared to me. 9For I am the least of the apostles, not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. 10But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me has not been ineffective. Indeed, I have toiled harder than all of them; not I, however, but the grace of God [that is] with me. 11Therefore, whether it be I or they, so we preach and so you believed.

After answering all the questions the Corinthians had addressed to him, and after all the practical advice Paul has given about the different gifts and order in the assembly, he finally gets down to what is really important to him, and what ought to be really important to the Corinthians. This may originally have been part or all of a letter Paul wrote previously to the Corinthians. It may have been written to demonstrate Paul’s credentials as an apostle, which had been challenged by other preachers, especially by those who were promoters of the more eloquent Apollos. (Remember all that stuff back in Chapter One.)

After addressing the discord and bickering which was apparently going on in the Corinthian church, Paul now reminds the community of the gospel he preached to them, and in which they are still standing, unless some have believed in vain. Then he writes, “For I handed on to you *as of first importance* what I also received.”

After verifying the Jesus is alive, by reporting all the people to whom the risen Lord appeared, Paul narrates his own experience on the road to Damascus. “One born abnormally” probably means born by c-section, as Shakespear phrased it in relation to Julius Caesar, “from my mother’s womb untimely ripped.” So Paul was ripped from his Pharisee outlook after all the other

apostles. It is thought by some scholars that Paul was ridiculed by some of the Corinthians because he didn't know Jesus before his resurrection, and because he had persecuted the church. Paul admits guilt for persecuting, but claims that it is by the grace of God that he is who he is, despite his unworthiness of the call to be an apostle. But he has toiled harder than any of the rest of them, but that too, he attributes to the grace of God.

Paul is now going to make three arguments to correct the misapprehensions of the Corinthians. The three points he makes are these: first, there will be a resurrection from the dead; second, that resurrection has not happened yet; it is in the future; and third, the resurrection will be a bodily resurrection.

#### 15:12-19 - Resurrection from the dead

12But if Christ is preached as raised from the dead, how can some among you say there is no resurrection of the dead? 13If there is no resurrection of the dead, then neither has Christ been raised. 14And if Christ has not been raised, then empty [too] is our preaching; empty, too, your faith. 15Then we are also false witnesses to God, because we testified against God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if in fact the dead are not raised. 16For if the dead are not raised, neither has Christ been raised, 17and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is vain; you are still in your sins. 18Then those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. 19If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are the most pitiable people of all.

This passage is the *first of three arguments* Paul makes, namely that all the dead will be raised. Some claimed that the resurrection had already happened, and were denying that the members of the community who had died would be raised from the dead. But Christ was raised from the dead; if that isn't true, then everything you have believed is a lie. But since we believe that Christ was raised from the dead, we can believe that we will also be raised. Christ means a lot for our present condition, but if his meaning is for this life only, we are to be pitied.

#### 15:20-34 - The resurrection hasn't happened yet. It is in the future

20 But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. 21For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead came also through a human being. 22For just as in Adam all die, so too in Christ shall all be brought to life, 23but each one in proper order: Christ the firstfruits; then, at his coming, those who belong to Christ; 24then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to his God and Father, when he has destroyed every sovereignty and every authority and power. 25For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. 26The last enemy to be destroyed is death, 27for "he subjected everything under his feet." But when it says that everything has been subjected, it is clear that it excludes the one who subjected everything to him. 28When everything is subjected to him, then the Son himself will [also] be subjected to the one who subjected everything to him, so that God may be all in all. 29Otherwise, what will people accomplish by having themselves baptized for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, then why are they having themselves baptized for them?

30Moreover, why are we endangering ourselves all the time? 31Every day I face death; I swear it by the pride in you [brothers] that I have in Christ Jesus our Lord. 32If at Ephesus I fought with beasts, so to speak, what benefit was it to me? If the dead are not raised:

"Let us eat and drink,  
for tomorrow we die.

33Do not be led astray:

"Bad company corrupts good morals."

34Become sober as you ought and stop sinning. For some have no knowledge of God; I say this to your shame.

This is Paul's *second argument*; the resurrection hasn't happened yet; it is in the future. If he sounds exasperated he probably was. Some were claiming that because the Holy Spirit had already been given, the resurrection of the dead had already happened. Paul insists that all must happen "in proper order." Yes, Christ has been raised. But for the rest of us the resurrection will happen in the future at Christ's coming. Only then comes the end. Christ will have destroyed the last of his enemies – death – and then he will hand over his kingdom to his Father, who will then be "all in all."

Apparently some in Corinth had been getting themselves baptized again in the name of a friend or relative who had died without having received baptism themselves. Paul doesn't comment on the propriety of such a practice, but uses their own behavior as an argument against them. If the resurrection has already happened, then there's nothing one can do for those who have died. Their practice of being baptized on behalf of dead friends or relatives doesn't make sense if the resurrection has already happened, and everything is already settled.

Paul's last piece of evidence that the resurrection has not happened yet is his own situation. He's writing from Ephesus, where he claims to have been in danger from "wild beasts, so to speak." And he wouldn't be going through all that he suffers if the resurrection had already happened.

If the end has already come, "let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die." Rather Paul shames the congregation by the saying, "Bad company corrupts good morals." So sober up and stop sinning. Those who are saying the resurrection has already happened have "no knowledge of God."

15:35-49 - What kind of resurrection? Of the body.

35But someone may say, "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come back?" 36 You fool! What you sow is not brought to life unless it dies. 37And what you sow is not the body that is to be but a bare kernel of wheat, perhaps, or of some other kind; 38but God gives it a body as he chooses, and to each of the seeds its own body. 39Not all flesh is the same, but there is one kind for human beings, another kind of flesh for animals, another kind of flesh for birds, and another for fish. 40There are both heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the brightness of the heavenly is one kind and that of the earthly another. 41The brightness of the sun is one kind, the brightness of the moon another, and the brightness of the stars another. For star differs from star in brightness. 42So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown corruptible; it is raised incorruptible. 43It is sown dishonorable; it is raised glorious. It is sown weak; it is raised powerful. 44It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual one. 45So, too, it is written, "The first man, Adam, became a living being," the last Adam a life-giving spirit. 46But the spiritual was not first; rather the natural and then the spiritual. 47The first man was from the earth, earthly; the second man, from heaven. 48As was the earthly one, so also are the earthly, and as is the heavenly one, so also are the heavenly. 49Just as we have borne the image of the earthly one, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly one.

Paul gives this long answer as his *third argument* that the resurrection will be a bodily resurrection, not just a spiritual one, as some in Corinth were saying. While he makes no effort to explain just what that risen body will be like, it will be a body. He uses examples from nature to demonstrate the possibility of things changing. Well, that's going to be the case with the body we

will have at our resurrection from the dead; it will be changed from what we experience now.

### 15:50-58 - The Resurrection Event.

50This I declare, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does corruption inherit incorruption. 51Behold, I tell you a mystery. We shall not all fall asleep, but we will all be changed, 52in an instant, in the blink of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. 53For that which is corruptible must clothe itself with incorruptibility, and that which is mortal must clothe itself with immortality. 54And when this which is corruptible clothes itself with incorruptibility and this which is mortal clothes itself with immortality, then the word that is written shall come about: Death is swallowed up in victory. 55Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" 56The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. 57But thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

58Therefore, my beloved brothers, be firm, steadfast, always fully devoted to the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

Paul, like many of his contemporaries, was open to the possibility that the second coming of Jesus would occur during his lifetime. In preparation for the end time, the law laid down precepts whose observance would assure one was prepared for that event. But Paul says that during the interim between the present and the end time, one prepares for the end time by being "fully devoted to the work of the Lord," not to the observance of the law.

### Section Six: Conclusion (in five parts) - 16:1-24

#### 16:1-4 - The collection

1Now in regard to the collection for the holy ones, you also should do as I ordered the churches of Galatia. 2On the first day of the week each of you should set aside and save whatever one can afford, so that collections will not be going on when I come. 3And when I arrive, I shall send those whom you have approved with letters of recommendation to take your gracious gift to Jerusalem. 4If it seems fitting that I should go also, they will go with me.

A practical matter. Take up a collection each week at your assembly and set it aside for the poor of Jerusalem. This is also a communal and social suggestion for the closer bonding of the Gentile believers in Corinth with the Jewish believers in Jerusalem. Paul will arrange one way or another for the collection to get to Jerusalem.

#### 16:5-9 - Travel plans

5I shall come to you after I pass through Macedonia (for I am going to pass through Macedonia), 6and perhaps I shall stay or even spend the winter with you, so that you may send me on my way wherever I may go. 7For I do not wish to see you now just in passing, but I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits. 8I shall stay in Ephesus until Pentecost, 9because a door has opened for me wide and productive for work, but there are many opponents.

Paul saw some recent opening for his work of evangelization, so he is going to remain in Ephesus until the spring. It sounds like Paul planned to visit Corinth soon and spend some considerable time there. It is possible that Paul visited Corinth two more times. There is certainly evidence that he got back there in his third missionary journey.

## 16:10-12 - Timothy and Apollos

10If Timothy comes, see that he is without fear in your company, for he is doing the work of the Lord just as I am. 11Therefore no one should disdain him. Rather, send him on his way in peace that he may come to me, for I am expecting him with the brothers. 12Now in regard to our brother Apollos, I urged him strongly to go to you with the brothers, but it was not at all his will that he go now. He will go when he has an opportunity.

Since Timothy has been a rather constant companion, Paul must have missed him. Apollos, who by no instigation of his own, had become in the minds of the Corinthians a competitor of Paul, decided not to return to Corinth, possibly so as not to stir up anti-Paul sentiment again.

## 16:13 - Exhortation to love

13Be on your guard, stand firm in the faith, be courageous, be strong. 14Your every act should be done with love.

No commentary required.

## 16:15-20 - Acknowledgments and greetings all around

15I urge you, brothers—you know that the household of Stephanas is the firstfruits of Achaia and that they have devoted themselves to the service of the holy ones— 16be subordinate to such people and to everyone who works and toils with them. 17I rejoice in the arrival of Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus, because they made up for your absence, 18for they refreshed my spirit as well as yours. So give recognition to such people. 19The churches of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Prisca together with the church at their house send you many greetings in the Lord. 20All the brothers greet you. Greet one another with a holy kiss.

## 16:21-24 - Personal sign-off

21I, Paul, write you this greeting in my own hand. 22If anyone does not love the Lord, let him be accursed. Marana tha. 23The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you. 24My love to all of you in Christ Jesus.

The phrase “Marana tha” is Arabic meaning “Our Lord, come.” Apparently the Corinthians know some of the mother tongue of Jesus.



## Second Letter to the Corinthians

Everyone agrees that this is Paul's warmest and most personal and passionate letter, due in part to the fact that he felt the need to defend himself against intruders who apparently actively opposed him. Perhaps the words "anxious" and "scurrying," even "frenetic" might describe Paul at the point in his life just prior to and during his writing this letter (in which he probably wrote the several parts at different times). He's been traveling back and forth between Ephesus and Corinth; and he had written several letters to the Corinthians, most of which are combined in the letter as we receive it.

Once again it would be nice if all the commentators agreed on the elements of this letter and what prompted them. It would be nice if they all agreed on whether this letter as we have it is to be taken as a single letter or as a compilation of several letters. But no such unanimity exists among the scholars.

There was clearly, at some point, something going on in Corinth which was in opposition to Paul. The list of suggestions as to what that something was takes up a lot of space in the commentaries. But again, the scholars don't agree.

What we can be quite sure of is that by the time this letter, at least the section of the letter which was the latest to be written, Paul has come back into favor with the Corinthians.

Again, I find it helpful to consider (from 1 Corinthians) Raymond E. Brown's outline of Paul's relationship with the Christians at Corinth.

#7: In late 56 or early 57 A.D. Paul is still in Ephesus. Timothy arrives. He had passed through Corinth and brought Paul bad news, apparently some "false apostles" who were hostile to Paul had arrived in Corinth.

#8: Timothy's bad news caused Paul to leave immediately for Corinth, probably by sea (250 miles) rather than by land (900 miles), for what turned out to be the "painful visit" which is mentioned in 2 Cor. 2:1. When Paul writes that he decided not to come to the Corinthians *again* in painful circumstances, the supposition is that he had earlier come for a visit which caused pain. During that visit Paul made a poor showing as timid and ineffective in confronting the Corinthians.

#9: When Paul returned to Ephesus, he wrote a letter "with many tears," **Letter C**, which is lost. The letter might have been severe. After Paul left Corinth, he became bold and may have hurt the Corinthians' feelings by his letter. Titus carried this letter to Corinth.

#10: In the summer of 57 A.D., Paul left Ephesus heading for Corinth. He traveled north to Troas, from which he took a ship to Macedonia. Meanwhile Titus had been well received in Corinth. The Corinthians had repented of their stubbornness. Titus continued the collection of money for Paul to bring to Jerusalem. Titus left Corinth and met up with Paul in Macedonia, bringing him the good news of the Corinthians' change of heart.

#11: Probably from Philippi (which is in Macedonia) Paul wrote Second Corinthians ( **Letter D**), which Titus carried to Corinth, where he continued to collect money for Paul to take to Jerusalem.

#12: Paul continued his journey to Corinth, where he spent the winter of 57/58 A.D. This was his third and last visit to Corinth. (Although on his trip to Rome as a prisoner the ship may have stopped in Corinth.)

So, there is disagreement about whether this is all one letter, or a combination of several letters. If you opt for the opinion that it is an amalgam of several letters, you can pick a number from 1 to 5 in deciding how many letters are combined. And if you think the letter as we have it is a collection of several letters, you can try to figure out in what sequence they were written. I'll accept that there are five letters showing up in what we have as the Second Letter to the Corinthians. I'll consider the letter in the sequence as we have it, but I'll also number the sections of the letter to indicate the sequence of the other letters which make up our present composition. I'll make note of some of the opinions in the reflections which follow, in so far as the context may be helpful in understanding what Paul was writing.

As he begins to write this letter, Paul is feeling relieved by the news Titus brought about the Corinthians' change of heart. Scholars think he wrote from Philippi.

Letter #4 [also called Letter D above] (1:1-2:13; 6:14-7:4)

Paul has learned from Titus that he is back in the good graces of the Corinthians, and he writes to them from Philippi.

1:1-3 - Greeting

<sup>1</sup>Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother, <sup>2</sup>to the church of God that is in Corinth, to you who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be holy, with all those everywhere who call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours. <sup>3</sup>Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Why Paul doesn't use the same greeting he used in 1 Corinthians is a mystery. In this letter he includes all the churches along with Corinth. Perhaps because he is so happy to be on good terms with the Corinthians again.

1:3-11 - Thanksgiving

<sup>3</sup>Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and God of all encouragement, <sup>4</sup>who encourages us in our every affliction, so that we may be able to encourage those who are in any

affliction with the encouragement with which we ourselves are encouraged by God. 5For as Christ's sufferings overflow to us, so through Christ does our encouragement also overflow. 6If we are afflicted, it is for your encouragement and salvation; if we are encouraged, it is for your encouragement, which enables you to endure the same sufferings that we suffer. 7Our hope for you is firm, for we know that as you share in the sufferings, you also share in the encouragement. 8We do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction that came to us in the province of Asia; we were utterly weighed down beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life. 9Indeed, we had accepted within ourselves the sentence of death, that we might trust not in ourselves but in God who raises the dead. 10He rescued us from such great danger of death, and he will continue to rescue us; in him we have put our hope [that] he will also rescue us again, 11as you help us with prayer, so that thanks may be given by many on our behalf for the gift granted us through the prayers of many.

It's possible that in verse 5 Paul refers to "Christ's sufferings" and means the suffering of the Christians, the body of Christ. As he continues, he asserts that affliction can be endured because of the strengthening and encouragement that is received from God and from other Christians. Paul really bares his soul as he tells of the afflictions he has undergone. Paul has been through the mill, both by what he has suffered physically by the riots of the silversmiths and by his imprisonment in Ephesus, and emotionally in the turmoil he has experienced in his recent dealings with the Corinthians. He seems to say that he felt so weak that he almost despaired. But from his sufferings he has learned to rely only on God, not his own strength.

He will sum up this relationship of his sufferings and the encouragement or strengthening which comes from God in Chapter 12, when he writes, "When I am weak, then I am strong." He puts his hope in God who rescued him before, and he expects, with the help of the prayers of the Corinthians, to continue to be rescued by God.

### 1:12-22 - Paul's plans

12For our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially toward you, with the simplicity and sincerity of God, [and] not by human wisdom but by the grace of God. 13For we write you nothing but what you can read and understand, and I hope that you will understand completely, 14as you have come to understand us partially, that we are your boast as you also are ours, on the day of [our] Lord Jesus. 15With this confidence I formerly intended to come to you so that you might receive a double favor, 16namely, to go by way of you to Macedonia, and then to come to you again on my return from Macedonia, and have you send me on my way to Judea. 17So when I intended this, did I act lightly? Or do I make my plans according to human considerations, so that with me it is "yes, yes" and "no, no"? 18As God is faithful, our word to you is not "yes" and "no." 19For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was proclaimed to you by us, Silvanus and Timothy and me, was not "yes" and "no," but "yes" has been in him. 20For however many are the promises of God, their Yes is in him; therefore, the Amen from us also goes through him to God for glory. 21But the one who gives us security with you in Christ and who anointed us is God; 22he has also put his seal upon us and given the Spirit in our hearts as a first installment.

Apparently part of the grievance the Corinthians had against Paul was that he had promised to come back for another visit shortly after the first one, but his plans changed. For awhile the Corinthians held that against him. Now they seem to understand that it was not duplicity on Paul's part that kept him from coming to them, but circumstances.

### 1:23-2:13 - Consequences of a change in plans

23But I call upon God as witness, on my life, that it is to spare you that I have not yet gone to Corinth. 24Not that we lord it over your faith; rather, we work together for your joy, for you stand firm in the faith. 2:1For I decided

not to come to you again in painful circumstances. 2For if I inflict pain upon you, then who is there to cheer me except the one pained by me? 3And I wrote as I did so that when I came I might not be pained by those in whom I should have rejoiced, confident about all of you that my joy is that of all of you. 4For out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote to you with many tears, not that you might be pained but that you might know the abundant love I have for you.

5If anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure (not to exaggerate) to all of you. 6This punishment by the majority is enough for such a person, 7so that on the contrary you should forgive and encourage him instead, or else the person may be overwhelmed by excessive pain. 8Therefore, I urge you to reaffirm your love for him. 9For this is why I wrote, to know your proven character, whether you were obedient in everything. 10Whomever you forgive anything, so do I. For indeed what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for you in the presence of Christ, 11so that we might not be taken advantage of by Satan, for we are not unaware of his purposes.

12When I went to Troas for the gospel of Christ, although a door was opened for me in the Lord, 13I had no relief in my spirit because I did not find my brother Titus. So I took leave of them and went on to Macedonia.

We need to remember that up to this point, Paul is writing what some would call the fourth letter to the Corinthians. It is the second to last part of his writing. In other words, much of the rest of the letter is presumed to be a collection of earlier letters Paul had written to them. He refers to one of those letters, which has come to be called “the letter of tears” because of what he wrote here in verse 4. That letter has been lost.

When Paul refers to “anyone who has caused pain,” he may be referring to whomever it was who came after Paul and preached a different gospel. Or, it may be someone else. In either case, Paul claims that that person caused more pain to the community than to him. And the community should forgive him, and Paul forgives him, too. Not to forgive would be to “be taken advantage of by Satan.”

#### Letter #2, Part One (2:14-6:13)

Much of this part of the letter concerns Paul’s reaction to those in Corinth who have opposed him. Those difficulties had been resolved by the time Paul wrote 1:1 to 2:13. So this section is understood to be a letter Paul wrote earlier, but which was later inserted here. The first part of the letter as we have it was celebrating the reconciliation between Paul and the Corinthians. This part is defensive of Paul’s ministry. It is written against the background of “false apostles” who have wooed the Corinthians away from their loyalty to Paul and the message he preached.

In Paul’s second visit to Corinth he had seemed weak, ineffective and not persuasive. In this part of the letter does he go head-to-head with those super-apostles and present himself as stronger than they who showed up in Corinth with letters showing their credentials? No. He presents as his credentials his own weakness – which the Corinthians had experienced of him in his last visit – through which shines the power of Christ.

2:14-3:6 - Paul justifies his ministry of the new covenant: “Who is qualified for this?”

14But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph in Christ and manifests through us the odor of the knowledge of him in every place. 15For we are the aroma of Christ for God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, 16to the latter an odor of death that leads to death, to the former an odor of life that leads to life. Who is qualified for this? 17For we are not like the many who trade on the word of God; but as out of sincerity, indeed as from God and in the presence of God, we speak in Christ.

3:1 Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you or from you? 2 You are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by all, 3 shown to be a letter of Christ administered by us, written not in ink but by the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets that are hearts of flesh.

4 Such confidence we have through Christ toward God. 5 Not that of ourselves we are qualified to take credit for anything as coming from us; rather, our qualification comes from God, 6 who has indeed qualified us as ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit; for the letter brings death, but the Spirit gives life.

The opening words of this section, “But thanks be to God,” may give a hint that this is the beginning of a different letter. Phrases like that are common as the introductions to Paul’s other letters.

Paul claims that his preaching is the “odor of the knowledge of him (Christ)” and that odor is “the aroma of Christ” in every place that Paul preaches. For some that aroma of Christ will bring salvation and life; for those who resist the knowledge that Paul brings, the aroma will be to their perishing. Paul asks who is qualified to bring the real message of Christ. Not those who preach, and apparently get paid for it, but Paul who preaches out of sincerity. Other traveling preachers, teachers and philosophers traveled from place to place and made their living by charging for their lectures.

This whole section can be taken as an answer to Paul’s question, “Who is qualified for this?” He or the super-apostles who arrived in Corinth after he left.

Then Paul gets sarcastic. The preachers who came after him must have shown some kind of credentials – letters of recommendation. For Paul the Corinthians themselves are his letter of recommendation, and that letter is written on his heart.

The preachers who came to Corinth after Paul had left apparently were preaching a form of belief which included observance of the Law of Moses. Paul claims to have preached not a letter of the law, but a message of the Spirit.

### 3:7-4:6 - The old and the new law

7 Now if the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone, was so glorious that the Israelites could not look intently at the face of Moses because of its glory that was going to fade, 8 how much more will the ministry of the Spirit be glorious? 9 For if the ministry of condemnation was glorious, the ministry of righteousness will abound much more in glory. 10 Indeed, what was endowed with glory has come to have no glory in this respect because of the glory that surpasses it. 11 For if what was going to fade was glorious, how much more will what endures be glorious. 12 Therefore, since we have such hope, we act very boldly 13 and not like Moses, who put a veil over his face so that the Israelites could not look intently at the cessation of what was fading. 14 Rather, their thoughts were rendered dull, for to this present day the same veil remains unlifted when they read the old covenant, because through Christ it is taken away. 15 To this day, in fact, whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their hearts, 16 but whenever a person turns to the Lord the veil is removed. 17 Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. 18 All of us, gazing with unveiled face on the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, as from the Lord who is the Spirit.

4:1 Therefore, since we have this ministry through the mercy shown us, we are not discouraged. 2 Rather, we have renounced shameful, hidden things; not acting deceitfully or falsifying the word of God, but by the open declaration of the truth we commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God. 3 And even though our gospel is veiled, it is veiled for those who are perishing, 4 in whose case the god of this age has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, so that they may not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. 5 For we do not preach ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your slaves for the sake of Jesus. 6 For God who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to bring to light the knowledge of the glory of God on the face of [Jesus] Christ.

Paul contrasts the “letter” – the old covenant – with the “spirit” – the gospel Paul preaches, using terms and ideas from the Book of Exodus, Chapter 24, where God’s giving of the law to Moses, and Moses’ giving the law to the people, is described. If the letter given by Moses was so glorious that the Israelites couldn’t look on the brilliance of Moses’ face, how much more glorious is the ministry of the spirit, namely Paul’s ministry among the Corinthians. Despite the glory of the law of Moses, it was going to fade; the glory of the gospel will outshine it. Moses put a veil over his face to protect the Israelites from the light of his countenance. And Paul insists that even to the present day, a veil covers the eyes of the Jews so that they cannot see the glory of the gospel.

In contrast to the Jews, there is no veil blinding Christians from seeing the glory of the Spirit, which is Christ. And because of the Christians’ seeing that glory, they themselves are being transformed by the glory of the Spirit.

In Chapter Four, verses 1 and 6, Paul contrasts his ministry with those others who have come into the Corinthian community, and who preach for money and for their own glory, when he writes that he, unlike they, doesn’t participate in “shameful, hidden things; not acting deceitfully or falsifying the word of God.” Continuing the theme of the veil, he insists that there is no veil hiding the glory of Christ for those who believe, but that a veil still exists hiding the gospel from those who are blinded by the “god of this age.”

Beginning in verse 7, we get a glimpse of the conversion which is taking place in Paul’s own life, as a result of the sufferings and the failures he has experienced. While he is preaching a great treasure, he is only an earthen vessel. He has learned humility from what he has suffered and from his failures. Because of this humbling, the power of God at work in him can become more apparent. It might be worthwhile to reflect how far Paul has come from the self-assured firebrand who set out for Damascus, or even from his claims to certain rights in First Thessalonians because of his status as an apostle (1 Thess 2:7), and now to his present self-understanding as a mere servant of the gospel he proclaims. He takes that up in the following section. What he writes can be read in the privacy of one’s own room, or heard read in a church service. We need to understand the deep conversion which has happened and is happening in Paul, or we will miss the profound message he is giving us.

#### 4:7-18 - The paradox of ministry

7But we hold this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassing power may be of God and not from us. 8We are afflicted in every way, but not constrained; perplexed, but not driven to despair; 9persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed; 10always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our body. 11For we who live are constantly being given up to death for the sake of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh.

12So death is at work in us, but life in you. 13Since, then, we have the same spirit of faith, according to what is written, “I believed, therefore I spoke,” we too believe and therefore speak, 14knowing that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and place us with you in his presence. 15Everything indeed is for you, so that the grace bestowed in abundance on more and more people may cause the thanksgiving to overflow for the glory of God.

16Therefore, we are not discouraged; rather, although our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. 17For this momentary light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, 18as we look not to what is seen but to what is unseen; for what is seen is transitory, but what is unseen is eternal.

Paul expresses his awareness of his own weakness and of God's power working through it. Profound theology follows. In the "dying" Paul experiences in his ministry is the "dying of Jesus" and that "dying" of Paul's and his still being able to carry on manifests the life of Jesus also present in his life. The message goes sort of like this: although you can see all the stuff which seems to kill the body, such as my increasing weakness, the fact that I continue to live can also be seen as supernatural; it is the life of Christ in me.

5:1-10 - So I keep going; there are better things ahead

1For we know that if our earthly dwelling, a tent, should be destroyed, we have a building from God, a dwelling not made with hands, eternal in heaven. 2For in this tent we groan, longing to be further clothed with our heavenly habitation 3if indeed, when we have taken it off, we shall not be found naked. 4For while we are in this tent we groan and are weighed down, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. 5Now the one who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a first installment.

6So we are always courageous, although we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, 7for we walk by faith, not by sight. 8Yet we are courageous, and we would rather leave the body and go home to the Lord. 9Therefore, we aspire to please him, whether we are at home or away. 10For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive recompense, according to what he did in the body, whether good or evil.

As Paul continues his defense of his ministry among the Corinthians, he stresses that he does so, not for some reward here and now, but because there is a future of glory still to come. He uses the image of a tent (for the here and now) and a building (for the hereafter). He also uses the image of clothing. His hope is that when he takes off this earthly mortal clothing he will not be found naked, but will be found clothed with new life.

That makes Paul courageous in pleasing the Lord now by proclaiming the gospel, because his reward is from Christ at the judgment.

5:11-17 - A new creation

11Therefore, since we know the fear of the Lord, we try to persuade others; but we are clearly apparent to God, and I hope we are also apparent to your consciousness. 12We are not commending ourselves to you again but giving you an opportunity to boast of us, so that you may have something to say to those who boast of external appearance rather than of the heart. 13For if we are out of our minds, it is for God; if we are rational, it is for you. 14For the love of Christ impels us, once we have come to the conviction that one died for all; therefore, all have died. 15He indeed died for all, so that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.

16Consequently, from now on we regard no one according to the flesh; even if we once knew Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know him so no longer. 17So whoever is in Christ is a new creation: the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come.

Paul admits that he is trying to persuade others, but there is nothing devious in his attempts to persuade. He is open to God, and he hopes that he is equally open to the Corinthians.

In writing about himself and his struggles (as he has been since 4:7), he does not wish to commend himself – he's not bragging; rather he hopes that when the Corinthians recognize what he has been going through for their sake, they will boast about him. In boasting about Paul, the Corinthians will have something to say to those false apostles who have attempted to ensnare the

Corinthians by mere external appearances.

Paul has said that he spoke in tongues, even that he did so more than anyone else. But he says that this being “out of our minds” is only for God, because he is then speaking to God. Others may have claimed that speaking in tongues was a sign of the validation of what they were preaching. But Paul refutes that. Speaking in tongues is for God. Being in full possession of one’s rational senses is a prerequisite for love, which Paul will now write about.

The love of Christ, that is, the love received from Christ, impels Paul, because he is convinced that since one died for all, all have died (to anything that is hostile to God). “Therefore, those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.” The import of that statement is immense. It means that *nothing so radically excludes Christianity as doing something selfish.*

Paul never knew Christ before his resurrection, so when he said that he once knew Christ “according to the flesh,” he means when he persecuted Christ in his body, the church. Now he knows Christ in the love Christ has for him. So everything is new because of the love Christ has for all.

### 5:18-6:10 - The ministry of reconciliation

18And all this is from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ and given us the ministry of reconciliation, 19namely, God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting their trespasses against them and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. 20So we are ambassadors for Christ, as if God were appealing through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. 21For our sake he made him to be sin who did not know sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him.

6:1Working together, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. 2For he says: “In an acceptable time I heard you, and on the day of salvation I helped you.”

Behold, now is a very acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation. 3We cause no one to stumble in anything, in order that no fault may be found with our ministry; 4on the contrary, in everything we commend ourselves as ministers of God, through much endurance, in afflictions, hardships, constraints, 5beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, vigils, fasts; 6by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, in a holy spirit, in unfeigned love, 7in truthful speech, in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness at the right and at the left; 8through glory and dishonor, insult and praise. We are treated as deceivers and yet are truthful; 9as unrecognized and yet acknowledged; as dying and behold we live; as chastised and yet not put to death; 10as sorrowful yet always rejoicing; as poor yet enriching many; as having nothing and yet possessing all things.

Paul begins by articulating how reconciliation touches human lives. It comes from God, through Christ, for the forgiveness of sin, and through the ministry of others, including Paul. Because he has received the ministry of reconciliation, it is as if God were appealing through Paul for people to be reconciled to God. Both God and Paul respect people’s freedom: God appeals and Paul implores. No one forces. This appeal to reconciliation is made through Christ whom God “made to be sin” – took on human nature, even though he did not sin – so that humankind could become righteous.

Paul appeals to the Corinthians not to receive the grace of God in vain, and this is a very acceptable time to be reconciled to God.

It is possible for a minister to become an obstacle to being reconciled to God. This is apparently a reference to whomever it was in Corinth who was preaching a message contrary to the one they had received from Paul. Paul goes on at length to justify his ministry, because of all

he has suffered, even if in the eyes of others he appears deficient.

#### Back to Letter #4 [also called Letter D above] (6:11-7:4)

This section appears to have been detached from the first part of the letter as we have it, namely the fourth letter Paul wrote to the Corinthians.

#### 6:11-7:4

11We have spoken frankly to you, Corinthians; our heart is open wide. 12You are not constrained by us; you are constrained by your own affections. 13As recompense in kind (I speak as to my children), be open yourselves.

14Do not be yoked with those who are different, with unbelievers. For what partnership do righteousness and lawlessness have? Or what fellowship does light have with darkness? 15What accord has Christ with Beliar? Or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever? 16What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said:

“I will live with them and move among them,  
and I will be their God  
and they shall be my people.

17Therefore, come forth from them and be separate,” says the Lord,  
“and touch nothing unclean;

then I will receive you  
18and I will be a father to you,  
and you shall be sons and daughters to me,  
says the Lord Almighty.”

7:1Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of flesh and spirit, making holiness perfect in the fear of God.

2Make room for us; we have not wronged anyone, or ruined anyone, or taken advantage of anyone. 3I do not say this in condemnation, for I have already said that you are in our hearts, that we may die together and live together. 4I have great confidence in you, I have great pride in you; I am filled with encouragement, I am overflowing with joy all the more because of all our affliction.

This sounds like the conclusion of the letter we have in 1:1 to 2:13. The unbelievers, the lawless, those in darkness, Beliar ( a pagan god), cannot be yoked with the Christian. In the quotation Paul gives, we find phrases from several parts of the Old Testament which reveal that God is present to God’s people. Because God is in their midst, they must flee defilement and become perfectly holy.

#### Letter #2, Part Two (7:5-16)

#### 7:5-16 - Happiness that the crisis is over

5For even when we came into Macedonia, our flesh had no rest, but we were afflicted in every way—external conflicts, internal fears. 6But God, who encourages the downcast, encouraged us by the arrival of Titus, 7and not only by his arrival but also by the encouragement with which he was encouraged in regard to you, as he told us of your yearning, your lament, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced even more. 8For even if I saddened you by my letter, I do not regret it; and if I did regret it ([for] I see that that letter saddened you, if only for a while), 9I rejoice now, not because you were saddened, but because you were saddened into repentance; for you were saddened in a godly way, so that you did not suffer loss in anything because of us. 10For godly sorrow produces a salutary repentance without regret, but worldly sorrow produces death. 11For behold what earnestness this godly sorrow has produced for you, as well as readiness for a defense, and indignation, and fear, and yearning, and zeal, and

punishment. In every way you have shown yourselves to be innocent in the matter. 12So then even though I wrote to you, it was not on account of the one who did the wrong, or on account of the one who suffered the wrong, but in order that your concern for us might be made plain to you in the sight of God. 13For this reason we are encouraged.

And besides our encouragement, we rejoice even more because of the joy of Titus, since his spirit has been refreshed by all of you. 14For if I have boasted to him about you, I was not put to shame. No, just as everything we said to you was true, so our boasting before Titus proved to be the truth. 15And his heart goes out to you all the more, as he remembers the obedience of all of you, when you received him with fear and trembling. 16I rejoice, because I have confidence in you in every respect.

Whatever the chronology of the pieces of this letter, this represents the “happy ending” of the tension between Paul and the Corinthians, brought about by the return of Titus with the news that the Corinthians love Paul again. If Paul’s previous letter made them sad because of the rebuke from Paul, Paul is now happy about the sorrow he caused them because they have repented because of that sorrow. And now Paul is completely happy with his Corinthians.

### Two more letters - ? (8:1-9:15)

Chapters 8 and 9 are thought by some to be two separate letters on the same subject, namely the collection Paul and others are taking up for the benefit of the church in Jerusalem. Whether one or two distinct letters, the topic is the collection.

### 8:1-15 - Collection for Jerusalem

1We want you to know, brothers, of the grace of God that has been given to the churches of Macedonia, 2for in a severe test of affliction, the abundance of their joy and their profound poverty overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. 3For according to their means, I can testify, and beyond their means, spontaneously, 4they begged us insistently for the favor of taking part in the service to the holy ones, 5and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and to us through the will of God, 6so that we urged Titus that, as he had already begun, he should also complete for you this gracious act also. 7Now as you excel in every respect, in faith, discourse, knowledge, all earnestness, and in the love we have for you, may you excel in this gracious act also.

8I say this not by way of command, but to test the genuineness of your love by your concern for others. 9For you know the gracious act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that for your sake he became poor although he was rich, so that by his poverty you might become rich. 10And I am giving counsel in this matter, for it is appropriate for you who began not only to act but to act willingly last year: 11complete it now, so that your eager willingness may be matched by your completion of it out of what you have. 12For if the eagerness is there, it is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what one does not have; 13not that others should have relief while you are burdened, but that as a matter of equality 14your surplus at the present time should supply their needs, so that their surplus may also supply your needs, that there may be equality. 15As it is written:

“Whoever had much did not have more,  
and whoever had little did not have less.”

Whatever his purpose, whether to shame or to encourage, Paul begins by celebrating the generosity of the churches in Macedonia which responded to the plea for help for the church in Jerusalem. Titus is already in Corinth and has begun the collection for Jerusalem there, and Paul urges the Corinthians to take part in “this gracious act.” Verse 7 may be sincere, or it may be tongue-in-cheek. Paul has used the technique of “faint praise” in other places in order to prompt people to do what he thinks is right.

Tucked away in this appeal for generosity on the part of the Corinthians is a profound theological statement that “the genuineness of your love” will be measured “by your concern for

others.” And he uses Jesus as the perfect example of that truth. The collection for Jerusalem has been underway in Corinth for a year already. Paul urges them to complete what they began so eagerly. There is another profound theological principle articulated in verses 12 to 15. It is the principle of distributive justice, namely a call for the just distribution of the goods of this world.

As an aside, I’m told by those who can read and understand Greek, that the poetry and beauty of this passage is such that it would knock your socks off if you could read it in Greek.

#### 8:16-24 - Titus and others

16But thanks be to God who put the same concern for you into the heart of Titus, 17for he not only welcomed our appeal but, since he is very concerned, he has gone to you of his own accord. 18With him we have sent the brother who is praised in all the churches for his preaching of the gospel. 19And not only that, but he has also been appointed our traveling companion by the churches in this gracious work administered by us for the glory of the Lord [himself] and for the expression of our eagerness. 20This we desire to avoid, that anyone blame us about this lavish gift administered by us, 21for we are concerned for what is honorable not only in the sight of the Lord but also in the sight of others. 22And with them we have sent our brother whom we often tested in many ways and found earnest, but who is now much more earnest because of his great confidence in you. 23As for Titus, he is my partner and co-worker for you; as for our brothers, they are apostles of the churches, the glory of Christ. 24So give proof before the churches of your love and of our boasting about you to them.

Paul’s trust in Titus and two other brethren can be mirrored by the Corinthians’ trust in them and in Paul. Paul has taken precautions to insure that there be no question about his handling of the money gathered for Jerusalem.

#### 9:1-15 - More about the collection

1Now about the service to the holy ones, it is superfluous for me to write to you, 2for I know your eagerness, about which I boast of you to the Macedonians, that Achaia has been ready since last year; and your zeal has stirred up most of them. 3Nonetheless, I sent the brothers so that our boast about you might not prove empty in this case, so that you might be ready, as I said, 4for fear that if any Macedonians come with me and find you not ready we might be put to shame (to say nothing of you) in this conviction. 5So I thought it necessary to encourage the brothers to go on ahead to you and arrange in advance for your promised gift, so that in this way it might be ready as a bountiful gift and not as an exaction.

6Consider this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. 7Each must do as already determined, without sadness or compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. 8Moreover, God is able to make every grace abundant for you, so that in all things, always having all you need, you may have an abundance for every good work. 9As it is written: “He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.”

10The one who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed and increase the harvest of your righteousness.

11You are being enriched in every way for all generosity, which through us produces thanksgiving to God, 12for the administration of this public service is not only supplying the needs of the holy ones but is also overflowing in many acts of thanksgiving to God. 13Through the evidence of this service, you are glorifying God for your obedient confession of the gospel of Christ and the generosity of your contribution to them and to all others, 14while in prayer on your behalf they long for you, because of the surpassing grace of God upon you. 15Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

Paul has been boasting about the Corinthians to the churches in Macedonia, as he has been boasting to the Corinthians about those Macedonian churches. So Paul sent people on ahead of

him to Corinth to make sure that by the time he arrives with his companions from Macedonia, the collection will have in fact been completed, as Paul had boasted. If it isn't completed, Paul will be embarrassed, and so will the Corinthians.

Paul follows up with an exhortation to the Corinthians to be generous. Sow sparingly, reap sparingly. Sow bountifully, reap bountifully. And then he gives the line which has been taken up by every fund-raiser the world over: the Lord loves a cheerful giver.

There is a hidden benefit to the generosity of the Corinthians. Not only is it going to provide physically for the church in Jerusalem. It's going to cause that church (mainly Jewish Christians) to thank God for the Corinthians (predominantly Gentile Christians), and thereby break down the suspicion with which those members of the mother church in Jerusalem have regarded the Gentile converts. Perhaps this is the cause of Paul's explosive, "Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!"

### Another Letter - ?

Unless Paul had a very bad night's sleep and awoke with a severe headache, it's hard to believe that he wrote what's in Chapters 10 to 13 immediately after what is written just above. So scholars propose that this is a different letter, perhaps a continuation of the letter which has been lost.

In 10:1-18 Paul appeals for complete obedience. He begins with a description of what lack of obedience will bring.

#### 10:1-6 - Disobedience will be destroyed

1Now I myself, Paul, urge you through the gentleness and clemency of Christ, I who am humble when face to face with you, but brave toward you when absent, 2I beg you that, when present, I may not have to be brave with that confidence with which I intend to act boldly against some who consider us as acting according to the flesh. 3For, although we are in the flesh, we do not battle according to the flesh, 4for the weapons of our battle are not of flesh but are enormously powerful, capable of destroying fortresses. We destroy arguments 5and every pretension raising itself against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive in obedience to Christ, 6and we are ready to punish every disobedience, once your obedience is complete.

It's not a very nice thing to say, but let's face it, Paul is pissed. He threatens the Corinthians with a return which will find him "acting boldly" even though the last time he was there, he seemed so humble. The metaphor in the rest of this section is that of a besieging army. Paul will come with weapons enormously powerful, capable of destroying fortresses. What will he destroy? Arguments and pretensions against the gospel Paul has preached to them. And when the fortress is destroyed and prisoners taken, he will punish the disobedience.

#### 10:7-18 - Paul asserts his authority

7Look at what confronts you. Whoever is confident of belonging to Christ should consider that as he belongs to Christ, so do we. 8And even if I should boast a little too much of our authority, which the Lord gave for building you up and not for tearing you down, I shall not be put to shame. 9May I not seem as one frightening you through letters. 10For someone will say, "His letters are severe and forceful, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible." 11Such a person must understand that what we are in word through letters when absent, that we also are in action when present.

12Not that we dare to class or compare ourselves with some of those who recommend themselves. But when they measure themselves by one another and compare themselves with one another, they are without understanding. 13But we will not boast beyond measure but will keep to the limits God has apportioned us, namely, to reach even to you. 14For we are not overreaching ourselves, as though we did not reach you; we indeed first came to you with the gospel of Christ. 15We are not boasting beyond measure, in other people's labors; yet our hope is that, as your faith increases, our influence among you may be greatly enlarged, within our proper limits, 16so that we may preach the gospel even beyond you, not boasting of work already done in another's sphere. 17"Whoever boasts, should boast in the Lord." 18For it is not the one who recommends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord recommends.

When Paul writes "Look at what confronts you," he may be speaking about what he has just written. In his anger, Paul is besieging the Corinthians. He contrasts himself with those who claim to belong to Christ. Well, so does Paul. And he takes up the criticism of himself that he is weak and ineffectual when he is with them, but bold in his writing. He assures them that he will be equally bold when he is with them. His boldness is not to frighten them, but to build them up.

Uninterested as he is in comparing himself to his opponents in Corinth, Paul will not boast beyond measure, but will stick to the limits God has given him, which include his reaching out to the Corinthians. Apparently the mention of "limits" put Paul in mind of geographical limits. For he next compares his work in Corinth almost as claiming them as his territory, because he was the first to bring them the gospel. Unlike those who came after him, and who are building on Paul's work, he will not overreach himself to claim what another has done. But he intends to preach the gospel beyond the territory of Corinth.

Paul knows he has been boasting in recommending himself, but he claims that the Lord also recommends him to the Corinthians.

We need to understand that in what he writes from 11:1 to 12:13 in his anger, Paul is being really sarcastic.

### 11:1-21 - Paul's justification for being foolish

1If only you would put up with a little foolishness from me! Please put up with me. 2For I am jealous of you with the jealousy of God, since I betrothed you to one husband to present you as a chaste virgin to Christ. 3But I am afraid that, as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts may be corrupted from a sincere [and pure] commitment to Christ. 4For if someone comes and preaches another Jesus than the one we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it well enough. 5For I think that I am not in any way inferior to these "superapostles." 6Even if I am untrained in speaking, I am not so in knowledge; in every way we have made this plain to you in all things.

7Did I make a mistake when I humbled myself so that you might be exalted, because I preached the gospel of God to you without charge? 8I plundered other churches by accepting from them in order to minister to you. 9And when I was with you and in need, I did not burden anyone, for the brothers who came from Macedonia supplied my needs. So I refrained and will refrain from burdening you in any way. 10By the truth of Christ in me, this boast of mine shall not be silenced in the regions of Achaia. 11And why? Because I do not love you? God knows I do!

12And what I do I will continue to do, in order to end this pretext of those who seek a pretext for being regarded as we are in the mission of which they boast. 13For such people are false apostles, deceitful workers, who masquerade as apostles of Christ. 14And no wonder, for even Satan masquerades as an angel of light. 15So it is not strange that his ministers also masquerade as ministers of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds.

16I repeat, no one should consider me foolish; but if you do, accept me as a fool, so that I too may boast a little. 17What I am saying I am not saying according to the Lord but as in foolishness, in this boastful state. 18Since many boast according to the flesh, I too will boast. 19For you gladly put up with fools, since you are wise yourselves. 20For you put up with it if someone enslaves you, or devours you, or gets the better of you, or puts on airs, or slaps

you in the face. 21To my shame I say that we were too weak!

But what anyone dares to boast of (I am speaking in foolishness) I also dare.

Paul is setting the stage for what comes in the next section, namely his sarcasm in boasting. He begins this section by expressing his love for the Corinthians, and his fear that they have been lured away from the Christ to which Paul betrothed them by “someone comes” into the community. His opponent or opponents are not from the community. They came from elsewhere. The Corinthians put up with this someone who is preaching a different gospel. Paul claims not to be inferior to these “super apostles” even though he may not speak as well as they do; he is superior to them in knowledge.

Paul preached without charging; the super apostles charge for their services. While he was preaching in Corinth, Paul was supported by the churches in Macedonia. He ministered to them out of love. The others, under the pretext of loving as Paul does, are actually ministers of the devil. The others abused the Corinthians; they will pay for it.

Very cleverly Paul says that no one should consider him a fool, but if you think me a fool, then put up awhile with my foolishness. And he enters into his foolish boasting in the next section.

### 11:21-12:10 - Boasting

21To my shame I say that we were too weak! But what anyone dares to boast of (I am speaking in foolishness) I also dare. 22Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they descendants of Abraham? So am I. 23Are they ministers of Christ? (I am talking like an insane person.) I am still more, with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, far worse beatings, and numerous brushes with death. 24Five times at the hands of the Jews I received forty lashes minus one. 25Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I passed a night and a day on the deep; 26on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my own race, dangers from Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers at sea, dangers among false brothers; 27in toil and hardship, through many sleepless nights, through hunger and thirst, through frequent fastings, through cold and exposure. 28And apart from these things, there is the daily pressure upon me of my anxiety for all the churches. 29Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is led to sin, and I am not indignant?

30If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. 31The God and Father of the Lord Jesus knows, he who is blessed forever, that I do not lie. 32At Damascus, the governor under King Aretas guarded the city of Damascus, in order to seize me, 33but I was lowered in a basket through a window in the wall and escaped his hands.

12:1I must boast; not that it is profitable, but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. 2I know someone in Christ who, fourteen years ago (whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows), was caught up to the third heaven. 3And I know that this person (whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows) 4was caught up into Paradise and heard ineffable things, which no one may utter. 5About this person I will boast, but about myself I will not boast, except about my weaknesses. 6Although if I should wish to boast, I would not be foolish, for I would be telling the truth. But I refrain, so that no one may think more of me than what he sees in me or hears from me 7because of the abundance of the revelations. Therefore, that I might not become too elated, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, an angel of Satan, to beat me, to keep me from being too elated. 8Three times I begged the Lord about this, that it might leave me, 9but he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” I will rather boast most gladly of my weaknesses, in order that the power of Christ may dwell with me. 10Therefore, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and constraints, for the sake of Christ; for when I am weak, then I am strong

Paul sounds as though he were ranting; and perhaps he was. But he is also being astute in his form of rhetorical argumentation. His opponents in Corinth had apparently presented as their

credentials (1) the fact that they were Jews, (2) their achievements, and (3) their visions and revelations. Paul counters cleverly by listing his own credentials in the same categories. In 12:6 he basically repudiates all the credentials about which he has been facetiously boasting, although they are all true. But that which really matters is that he should be taken as he appears and sounds as a result of all that he has experienced.

What is the thorn for his side which was to keep him from becoming too elated? Its mention has given countless people the opportunity to project on to it whatever bothers them! In the present context I opt for the explanation that the thorn was the rejection and misunderstanding Paul received from those whom he evangelized.

The resolution of the rant or the astute rhetorical argument is that he will put up with whatever hardships may come his way for the sake of Christ, because “power is made perfect in weakness,” and therefore “when I am weak, then I am strong.”

### 12:11-18 - Selfless Concern for the Church

11I have been foolish. You compelled me, for I ought to have been commended by you. For I am in no way inferior to these “superapostles,” even though I am nothing. 12The signs of an apostle were performed among you with all endurance, signs and wonders, and mighty deeds. 13In what way were you less privileged than the rest of the churches, except that on my part I did not burden you? Forgive me this wrong!

14Now I am ready to come to you this third time. And I will not be a burden, for I want not what is yours, but you. Children ought not to save for their parents, but parents for their children. 15I will most gladly spend and be utterly spent for your sakes. If I love you more, am I to be loved less? 16But granted that I myself did not burden you, yet I was crafty and got the better of you by deceit. 17Did I take advantage of you through any of those I sent to you? 18I urged Titus to go and sent the brother with him. Did Titus take advantage of you? Did we not walk in the same spirit? And in the same steps?

Paul is either cooling down after his rant, or he’s drawing conclusions from his rhetorical argumentation. He admits to being foolish for his boasting, but claims that the Corinthians forced him to boast, where they should have instead been boasting about him. The signs Paul performed among them should have convinced them of his authenticity as an apostle. Did he wrong them because he did not burden them by charging them for his preaching? If so, he asks their forgiveness.

Paul is planning another trip to Corinth, and again his coming will not be an added expense to them, because he doesn’t want their money; he wants them, because he loves them. For this will they love him less? His refusal to accept remuneration was considered by some to be a crafty way to ingratiate himself to them. But neither Paul nor those he sent to Corinth took advantage of them.

### 12:19-13:10 - Final warnings and appeals

19Have you been thinking all along that we are defending ourselves before you? In the sight of God we are speaking in Christ, and all for building you up, beloved. 20For I fear that when I come I may find you not such as I wish, and that you may find me not as you wish; that there may be rivalry, jealousy, fury, selfishness, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder. 21I fear that when I come again my God may humiliate me before you, and I may have to mourn over many of those who sinned earlier and have not repented of the impurity, immorality, and licentiousness they practiced.

13:1 This third time I am coming to you. “On the testimony of two or three witnesses a fact shall be established.” 2 I warned those who sinned earlier and all the others, and I warn them now while absent, as I did when present on my second visit, that if I come again I will not be lenient, 3 since you are looking for proof of Christ speaking in me. He is not weak toward you but powerful in you. 4 For indeed he was crucified out of weakness, but he lives by the power of God. So also we are weak in him, but toward you we shall live with him by the power of God.

5 Examine yourselves to see whether you are living in faith. Test yourselves. Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless, of course, you fail the test. 6 I hope you will discover that we have not failed. 7 But we pray to God that you may not do evil, not that we may appear to have passed the test but that you may do what is right, even though we may seem to have failed. 8 For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth. 9 For we rejoice when we are weak but you are strong. What we pray for is your improvement.

10 I am writing this while I am away, so that when I come I may not have to be severe in virtue of the authority that the Lord has given me to build up and not to tear down.

Paul asks not to be misinterpreted. He has not been bragging to build himself up; but to build up the Corinthians by admonishing them to shape up before he comes to visit again. He’d like that to be a pleasant visit. But there is some conversion and repentance which must take place prior to Paul’s visit so he will not need to be harsh.

Quoting Deuteronomy, Paul draws a comparison between the “two witnesses” required to convince, and the two previous times he has visited. His point is that they have had fair warning, and Paul will reluctantly use his apostolic authority to deal with the offenders.

Paul asks the Corinthians to test themselves to see if Christ is in them. Paul’s hope is that they will find that “we” have not failed, meaning that Paul’s message to them has not been in vane. But he quickly adds that it is not about his own success that he is concerned, but about their success in living the gospel he has preached.

A final warning that Paul will be severe if he has to, but only in order to build up and not to tear down.

### 13:11-13 - Conclusion

11 Finally, brothers, rejoice. Mend your ways, encourage one another, agree with one another, live in peace, and the God of love and peace will be with you. 12 Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the holy ones greet you. 13 The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the holy Spirit be with all of you.

The only thing which comes to my mind at the conclusion of reflecting on II Corinthians is that there is so little agreement among scholars about the formation of this letter. I wish that Paul’s admonition to “agree with one another” were carried out in the commentaries I have read in preparing these reflections. Commentators don’t even agree on whether the final verse is intended to be a trinitarian formulation. Intended to be so or not, it has come to be so for a couple of melania.

## Letter to the Philippians

Although not as complicated as the Second Letter to the Corinthians, the commentaries on the Letter to the Philippians present a more complex document than the casual reader would expect. Scholars disagree about the place from which the letter was written, the date of the letter, and whether the letter should be seen as a collection of smaller letters, and if so, how should those letters be identified. Nevertheless one scholar classifies this as the most attractive of Paul's letters because of his warm affection for his brothers and sisters in Christ at Philippi. It is described as a letter written in the rhetoric of friendship.

An important word about Philippi will help understand some of Chapter 3. It was founded in 358 B.C. It came under Roman control in 167 B.C., and it became famous when Roman soldiers who under the leadership of Mark Anthony defeated Brutus and Cassius, Caesar's assassins, in 31 B.C. It received the status of a Roman colony, which gave its citizens privileges. Retired Roman soldiers made up part of the citizenry at the time of Paul. Those two things will help explain what Paul writes in Chapter 3:19-20.

Is this one letter or three which have been joined together? If there are three, the compiler is unknown. If one, the break in thought at 3:1 is mystifying. Those who opt for three letters designate them this way. Letter A - 4:10-20, a letter expressing gratitude for a gift from the Philippians. Letter B - 1:1-3:1a, 4:4-7,21-23, a letter urging unity and joy. Letter C - 3:1b-4:3, 8-9, main body of the letter, something of a polemic. That, of course, doesn't account for every verse in the letter. Those unaccounted for could be connecting verses added by the compiler.

From material within the letter itself, three possibilities suggest themselves as to the place from which Paul writes, and therefore the date of the letters: Caesarea (58-60 A.D.), Rome (61-63 A.D.) and Ephesus (54-56 A.D.). If from Caesarea, Paul has already been arrested and is in jail awaiting his transfer to Rome. If from Rome, he is awaiting judgement by the Emperor. If from Ephesus, he has already written two letters to the Corinthians from there. Best guess? It depends on who's guessing. I'll go with Raymond E. Brown and opt for Ephesus somewhere between 54 and 56 A.D. Ephesus and Philippi were geographically close enough that travel between them would not be an undue burden, about 450 miles.

Those things having been noted, we'll comment on the letter as it comes to us.

### 1:1-2 - Greeting

<sup>1</sup>Paul and Timothy, slaves of Christ Jesus, to all the holy ones in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the overseers and ministers: 2grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul is the author of this letter; Timothy is his companion. In other letters Paul refers to himself as an apostle; here he presents himself as “slave.” The reason is probably Paul’s deep friendship with the Philippians. He is not relying on his authority to write to them, but on his love for and his fellowship with them. This really is a friendly letter.

Earlier English translations of verse 1 read “with the bishops and deacons,” instead of “with the overseers and ministers.” The Greek words are *episcopoi* and *diaconoi*, and would look like “bishops and deacons.” However this early in the First Century the roles referred to here were just beginning to develop into the ecclesial offices we know today.

The phrase “grace to you and peace” is such a standard greeting from Paul, that the letters attributed to Paul but written by his disciples after Paul’s death all begin the same way. The exceptions are the letters to Timothy, where the author wishes him “grace, mercy and peace.”

### 1:3-8 - Thanksgiving

3I give thanks to my God at every remembrance of you, 4praying always with joy in my every prayer for all of you, 5because of your partnership for the gospel from the first day until now. 6I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work in you will continue to complete it until the day of Christ Jesus. 7It is right that I should think this way about all of you, because I hold you in my heart, you who are all partners with me in grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. 8For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.

Such affection Paul felt toward the Philippians! Apparently the Christians in Philippi were also suffering for their embrace of the Gospel. Their support of Paul in his own suffering and imprisonment is a grace, but for Paul even the suffering borne of fidelity to the Gospel is a grace.

### 1:9-11 - Prayer

9And this is my prayer: that your love may increase ever more and more in knowledge and every kind of perception, 10to discern what is of value, so that you may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, 11filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

It is typical for Paul to include a prayer after the greeting and thanksgiving.

### 1:12-26 - Paul’s situation

12I want you to know, brothers, that my situation has turned out rather to advance the gospel, 13so that my imprisonment has become well known in Christ throughout the whole praetorium and to all the rest, 14and so that the majority of the brothers, having taken encouragement in the Lord from my imprisonment, dare more than ever to proclaim the word fearlessly.

15Of course, some preach Christ from envy and rivalry, others from good will. 16The latter act out of love, aware that I am here for the defense of the gospel; 17the former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not from pure motives, thinking that they will cause me trouble in my imprisonment. 18What difference does it make, as long as in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is being proclaimed? And in that I rejoice. Indeed I shall continue to rejoice,

19for I know that this will result in deliverance for me through your prayers and support from the Spirit of Jesus Christ. 20My eager expectation and hope is that I shall not be put to shame in any way, but that with all boldness, now as always, Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death. 21For to me life is Christ,

and death is gain. <sup>22</sup>If I go on living in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. And I do not know which I shall choose. <sup>23</sup>I am caught between the two. I long to depart this life and be with Christ, [for] that is far better. <sup>24</sup>Yet that I remain [in] the flesh is more necessary for your benefit. <sup>25</sup>And this I know with confidence, that I shall remain and continue in the service of all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, <sup>26</sup>so that your boasting in Christ Jesus may abound on account of me when I come to you again.

Paul's imprisonment keeps him personally from proclaiming the Gospel, but that has encouraged others to preach even more fearlessly. Some seem to be preaching Christ almost in competition to Paul. Others preach out of love. What difference does their motive for preaching make? In all cases Christ is being preached. In that Paul rejoices and will continue to rejoice.

Paul is awaiting trial. He writes that his trust in the prayers of the Philippians and the support of the Spirit will see him through his trial, no matter how it results for him. Either his life or his death will glorify Christ. He seems indifferent to either outcome. If he lives Christ will be glorified, because Paul will keep on preaching. But death would be of benefit to Paul because he would be with the Lord. But he clearly plans to go on living for the benefit of his beloved Philippians, who will boast about him.

### 1:27-30 - Be steadfast

<sup>27</sup>Only, conduct yourselves in a way worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear news of you, that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind struggling together for the faith of the gospel, <sup>28</sup>not intimidated in any way by your opponents. This is proof to them of destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God's doing. <sup>29</sup>For to you has been granted, for the sake of Christ, not only to believe in him but also to suffer for him. <sup>30</sup>Yours is the same struggle as you saw in me and now hear about me.

A prisoner, Paul offers two admonitions to his beloved Philippians. First, stand firm in the faith, even if you are persecuted. Second, have unity among yourselves. Both their faith and their fraternity/sorority are God's doing. Paul had suffered from opponents while he was in Philippi, as he suffers now in Ephesus. The Philippians' suffering may be more bearable if they recognize that Paul has been and is going through the same things.

### 2:1-4 - Plea for unity and humility

<sup>1</sup>If there is any encouragement in Christ, any solace in love, any participation in the Spirit, any compassion and mercy, <sup>2</sup>complete my joy by being of the same mind, with the same love, united in heart, thinking one thing. <sup>3</sup>Do nothing out of selfishness or out of vainglory; rather, humbly regard others as more important than yourselves, <sup>4</sup>each looking out not for his own interests, but [also] everyone for those of others.

If one were looking for a definition of Christianity, these four verses could be put forward as an adequate and profound description. And for Paul, this would complete his joy. This admonition sets up for Paul's quoting the hymn in 2:6-11.

### 2:5-11 - The kenosis hymn

<sup>5</sup>Have among yourselves the same attitude that is also yours in Christ Jesus,  
<sup>6</sup>Who, though he was in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God something to be grasped.

7Rather, he emptied himself,  
 taking the form of a slave,  
 coming in human likeness;  
 and found human in appearance,  
 8he humbled himself,  
 becoming obedient to death,  
 even death on a cross.  
 9Because of this, God greatly exalted him  
 and bestowed on him the name  
 that is above every name,  
 10that at the name of Jesus  
 every knee should bend,  
 of those in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
 11and every tongue confess that  
 Jesus Christ is Lord,  
 to the glory of God the Father.

Acknowledged by almost all people as one of the most beautiful passages in the New Testament, the scholarly attempts to discern its origin, structure and precise meaning can almost obscure that beauty. There must be at least two commentators who agree on everything about this hymn, but I didn't find them! All think Paul did not compose it. Where did it come from? Some think it was a composition familiar to the Philippians, and may have originated there.

Granted the wide variety of interpretations, I elect to take the hymn as a poetic expression of the most basic of Christian mysteries and beliefs, namely, the Paschal Mystery. It describes that mystery as Christ lived it, and invites Christians to enter personally into living the same mystery, "the same attitude that is also yours in Christ Jesus."

First, he did not cling to equality with God but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave. *He became what all people are.* Most Western people, and especially most Americans will try to related this to the condition of slaves in the south at the time of the Civil War. The notion of "slave" at Paul's time included a wide range of people somehow indentured to a master. It would include those at the bottom of the social strata who worked in mines and in construction. But it also included those who were the managers of the estates of their masters, as in the story of the prudent servant in Jesus' parable in Luke's Gospel. There is no way of telling how the word is meant here when it is applied to Jesus.

Secondly, *he accepted even death.* That Jesus died is an article of Christian faith. He didn't just pretend to be dead. He was really dead. How dead? He was buried. How buried? For three days.

And third, because of his obedience *God raised him high.* In that being raised, he was given the name which is above every other name, "Lord," the name reserved only for God. Proclaiming that "Jesus Christ is Lord" is the touchstone for identifying a Christian. [In the theology of John's Gospel, declaring Jesus to be Lord means that one knows that Jesus is alive, in a new and mysterious way, in which he no longer comes and goes, but is just present. That is John's theology, not Paul's.]

The hymn says that he "humbled himself, becoming obedient to death." This is understood by many to mean, not that God required Jesus' death, but perhaps is better understood to mean

that because he was obedient to God, he was killed.

The invitation from Paul is to have in ourselves the same attitude which was in Christ. We too must become what all people are. In fact, we are what all people are, but we must also be that in attitude. We must accept even death. And we will be raised to new life.

## 2:12-18 - Obedience and witness to the world

12So then, my beloved, obedient as you have always been, not only when I am present but all the more now when I am absent, work out your salvation with fear and trembling. 13For God is the one who, for his good purpose, works in you both to desire and to work. 14Do everything without grumbling or questioning, 15that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine like lights in the world, 16as you hold on to the word of life, so that my boast for the day of Christ may be that I did not run in vain or labor in vain. 17But, even if I am poured out as a libation upon the sacrificial service of your faith, I rejoice and share my joy with all of you. 18In the same way you also should rejoice and share your joy with me.

The Philippians' obedience is obvious because they continue to follow what Paul has taught them, even when he is not with them to prod them along. When Paul admonishes that they should work out their salvation "with fear and trembling," he is using a standard phrase used several times in the Old Testament, where it means "with awe and seriousness." And that obedience – both the desire and the accomplishment – is the work of God within the assembly and in individuals. So don't grumble or question. Just keep doing what you are doing in the midst of the world and you will be a light to that world. Paul wants to be able to boast on the day of judgement that he did not work among the Philippians in vain.

Paul is in prison, and he is not sure of the outcome of his trial. Maybe he will be executed; maybe not. If his life is poured out, it will be as a libation. A libation was a joyful drink offering, usually of wine, poured over or around the sacrifice and the altar. Paul is joyful about the Philippians, and he asks them to be joyful with him. In the same way they should rejoice and share their joy with Paul.

## 2:19-24 - Timothy

19I hope, in the Lord Jesus, to send Timothy to you soon, so that I too may be heartened by hearing news of you. 20For I have no one comparable to him for genuine interest in whatever concerns you. 21For they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. 22But you know his worth, how as a child with a father he served along with me in the cause of the gospel. 23He it is, then, whom I hope to send as soon as I see how things go with me, 24but I am confident in the Lord that I myself will also come soon.

It is assumed by many commentators that there was quite a bit of traffic between Paul, imprisoned in Ephesus, and Philippi. Timothy will be sent soon so that Paul can learn how the community there is doing. No one is more genuinely concerned about the Philippians than is Timothy. Some others, as Paul mentioned in 1:15, seek their own interest in competing with Paul as a preacher, but not Timothy. The Philippians experienced Timothy working along with Paul as though he were a son working with a father. And although Paul is prepared to die, he hopes to be able to return to Philippi soon.

## 2:25-30 - Epaphroditus

25With regard to Epaphroditus, my brother and co-worker and fellow soldier, your messenger and minister in my need, I consider it necessary to send him to you. 26For he has been longing for all of you and was distressed because you heard that he was ill. 27He was indeed ill, close to death; but God had mercy on him, not just on him but also on me, so that I might not have sorrow upon sorrow. 28I send him therefore with the greater eagerness, so that, on seeing him, you may rejoice again, and I may have less anxiety. 29Welcome him then in the Lord with all joy and hold such people in esteem, 30because for the sake of the work of Christ he came close to death, risking his life to make up for those services to me that you could not perform.

Very little commentary is required here. Pardon my romantic streak, please. But the warmth of feeling between Paul and the people of Philippi is touching. The Philippians had sent Epaphroditus to do something for Paul in his imprisonment or to bring him something from Philippi. He became ill while he was on his way or after he arrived. The community back home heard about his illness, and now Epaphroditus is distressed because the folks back home are worrying.

## 3:1 - Closing

1Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord. Writing the same things to you is no burden for me but is a safeguard for you.

This sounds like the closing of a letter, and is part of the reason some commentators believe that what we have here is a composite of several letters. The following section from 3:2 to 4:1 is a striking shift from what has immediately preceded it. This again leads some to think this is a different letter. It is certainly a polemic against someone or some group at work in Philippi.

## 3:2-4a - Legalistic teachers

2Beware of the dogs! Beware of the evil workers! Beware of the mutilation! 3For we are the circumcision, we who worship through the Spirit of God, who boast in Christ Jesus and do not put our confidence in flesh, 4although I myself have grounds for confidence even in the flesh.

It's difficult to know exactly who the "dogs" are. By calling them "dogs," Paul has reached for the most atrocious category at his disposal. Jews generally, when they were exceedingly angry with Gentiles, called them "dogs." There's a clever little twist here. Whereas observant Jews would call Gentiles dogs, Paul calls "dogs" those who want to impose the Law of Moses on Gentiles. Clearly they were people, Christian or not, who wanted to reimpose on people observance of the Law of Moses in order to attain perfection. In that they became "evil workers." He counsels "Beware of the mutilation," that is circumcision. Believers in Jesus, who worship through the Spirit of God are truly the people of God. But if they think that circumcision is something to boast about, Paul notes that he would have grounds to boast on that account, too.

### 3:4b-6 - Paul's boast

If anyone else thinks he can be confident in flesh, all the more can I. 5Circumcised on the eighth day, of the race of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrew parentage, in observance of the law a Pharisee, 6in zeal I persecuted the church, in righteousness based on the law I was blameless.

So, take that!

### 3:7-11 - True righteousness

7[But] whatever gains I had, these I have come to consider a loss because of Christ. 8More than that, I even consider everything as a loss because of the supreme good of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have accepted the loss of all things and I consider them so much rubbish, that I may gain Christ 9and be found in him, not having any righteousness of my own based on the law but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God, depending on faith 10to know him and the power of his resurrection and [the] sharing of his sufferings by being conformed to his death, 11if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Using the vocabulary of an accountant counting gains and losses, Paul concludes that everything he used to think of as gain, he now counts as loss because it was contrary to his new gain of knowing "Christ Jesus my Lord." He's very strong in his language about what he used to rely on; those things are now rubbish, that is, something to be disposed of. He used to think that he arrived at righteousness by his own efforts to observe the law, because he used to think that by observing the law *he himself* obtained righteousness in the sight of God. Now he depends solely on his faith in Christ as his path to righteousness. That comes about because he shares in Christ's sufferings so as to be conformed to Christ's death, because then he will obtain with Christ resurrection from the dead.

### 3:12-16 - Keep going

12It is not that I have already taken hold of it or have already attained perfect maturity, but I continue my pursuit in hope that I may possess it, since I have indeed been taken possession of by Christ [Jesus]. 13Brothers, I for my part do not consider myself to have taken possession. Just one thing: forgetting what lies behind but strain into what lies ahead, 14I continue my pursuit toward the goal, the prize of God's upward calling, in Christ Jesus. 15Let us, then, who are "perfectly mature" adopt this attitude. And if you have a different attitude, this too God will reveal to you. 16Only, with regard to what we have attained, continue on the same course.

Paul's understand, even of his own pursuit of being conformed to Christ, that it is the work of Christ, who has taken possession of him. There is no claim to self-righteousness. He continues to make real in himself the calling which Christ Jesus is working within him. Although Paul is urging a continued striving for that perfection which can come only from Christ, he acknowledges that any success in the pursuit is due to the fact that Christ has taken possession of him. So, forget the past, just keep going.

The image of the "upward calling" is part of the athletic metaphor Paul has been using. His image is that of a race. At the end of the race, the winner was "called upward" to the judges' stand to receive the prize. That's what Paul is after. This alone is the perfection for which Paul strives.

### 3:17-21 - Join me; aim higher

17Join with others in being imitators of me, brothers, and observe those who thus conduct themselves according to the model you have in us. 18For many, as I have often told you and now tell you even in tears, conduct themselves as enemies of the cross of Christ. 19Their end is destruction. Their God is their stomach; their glory is in their “shame.” Their minds are occupied with earthly things. 20But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we also await a savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. 21He will change our lowly body to conform with his glorified body by the power that enables him also to bring all things into subjection to himself.

Possibly this is a section on what really matters. The observance of the law will not bring salvation. External practice of religion alone is insufficient. Because Philippi was a Roman colony populated in part by retired Roman soldiers, there was a gymnasium there. The word “gymnasium” in Greek means “nudatory” because the sporting events, especially wrestling, took place when the contestants were naked.

When Paul writes that for his opponents, who are trying to impose Mosaic Law on all the Christians, “Their God is their stomach,” he isn’t talking about gluttony; he’s talking about the Jewish dietary laws which his opponents wanted strictly observed. And when he writes “Their glory is in the ‘shame,’” he means their circumcision. When they took part in the sports in the gymnasium, which were played in the nude, their circumcision was made fun of, which some of the Jews tried to hide (however that may have been possible!). They were shamed because of their circumcision, yet they gloried in it. All of which were earthly things.

To have Roman citizenship was very advantageous. Citizens of Philippi were Roman citizens. Paul contrasts that citizenship with Christian citizenship which is in heaven, from which we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. Perhaps Paul had in mind the physical fitness practiced in the gymnasium when he wrote that when Jesus returns “he will change our lowly body to conform to his glorified body.”

### 4:1-3 - Get along

1Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, in this way stand firm in the Lord, beloved. 2I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to come to a mutual understanding in the Lord. 3Yes, and I ask you also, my true yokemate, to help them, for they have struggled at my side in promoting the gospel, along with Clement and my other co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.

Nobody knows anything about Euodia, Syntyche or Clement, other than that they were co-workers with Paul.

### 4:4-7 - No reason to be disturbed; the Lord is very near

4Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again: rejoice! 5Your kindness should be known to all. The Lord is near. 6Have no anxiety at all, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God. 7Then the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Perhaps the meaning of this short section can come alive if we recall that it was in his resurrection that Jesus was given the name above every other name; the name was “Lord.” (2:9-

11) That word always refers to the risen Christ. Rejoice in the Lord always, Paul writes. And then he says it again. It must be important. Why can the Philippians rejoice? Because the Lord is very near. Therefore they can let their “kindness” be known to all. The Greek word which is here translated as “kindness” is “*epieikes*.” It’s a Stoic word representing that state which the Stoics wanted to reach, where they were “unperturbable.” That’s not really an English word, but it is perhaps the best translation of the Greek word translated here as “kindness.”

Because the risen Lord is very near, there is no need at all for anxiety. Pray and petition God with thanksgiving. And because Jesus is alive and very near, the peace of God will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Just let that blow your mind for a minute. Rejoice! Again, I say rejoice!

#### 4:8-9 - Keep on going

8Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. 9Keep on doing what you have learned and received and heard and seen in me. Then the God of peace will be with you.

There are good things to think about; there are good things to do. Keep on doing good things. Then the God of peace will be with you.

#### 4:10-20 - A grateful Paul

10I rejoice greatly in the Lord that now at last you revived your concern for me. You were, of course, concerned about me but lacked an opportunity. 11Not that I say this because of need, for I have learned, in whatever situation I find myself, to be self-sufficient. 12I know indeed how to live in humble circumstances; I know also how to live with abundance. In every circumstance and in all things I have learned the secret of being well fed and of going hungry, of living in abundance and of being in need. 13I have the strength for everything through him who empowers me. 14Still, it was kind of you to share in my distress. 15You Philippians indeed know that at the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, not a single church shared with me in an account of giving and receiving, except you alone. 16For even when I was at Thessalonica you sent me something for my needs, not only once but more than once. 17It is not that I am eager for the gift; rather, I am eager for the profit that accrues to your account. 18I have received full payment and I abound. I am very well supplied because of what I received from you through Epaphroditus, “a fragrant aroma,” an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God. 19My God will fully supply whatever you need, in accord with his glorious riches in Christ Jesus. 20To our God and Father, glory forever and ever. Amen.

Paul uses some accounting terminology to express his gratitude to the Philippians. He understands that they always care about him, but didn’t have the opportunity to show that care. While he isn’t really boasting that he knows how to take care of himself in all circumstances; it is in the strength of the Lord that he is able to carry on. But the Philippians took care of him, and he’s grateful. And although Paul has always paid his own way, not accepting anything for what he has given, from the Philippians alone he has accepted gifts. (He paid his own way by his craft of tent-making most of the time.)

Still in terms of accounting, he assures the Philippians that he rejoices more in the profit which will accrue to them than in their gift which benefitted him, which came to him through the good graces of Epaphroditus. Praise God for it all. Amen.

#### 4:21-23 - Farewell

21 Give my greetings to every holy one in Christ Jesus. The brothers who are with me send you their greetings; 22 all the holy ones send you their greetings, especially those of Caesar's household. 23 The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

Paul passes on greetings from "the brothers who are with me," presumably Timothy and Epaphroditus, and all the holy ones, presumably even those mentioned at the beginning of the letter who preached Christ "out of envy and rivalry" (1:15-17). Those of Caesar's household would probably be the slaves attached to the Roman establishment. Grace be to all.

## Letter to Philemon

This letter was almost certainly written by Paul while he was in prison in Ephesus, therefore around 55 A.D. Short though it is in the number of words (335), it is long in the discussion about it, some of which will be reflected in the commentary below. But from among the many possibilities for the meaning of several points in the letter presented by commentators I will pick just one for each instance where there are many possibilities.

The letter concerns an escaped slave named Onesimus. In Paul's world, the term "slave" could apply to people in a great number of situations, ranging from those who did the hard manual work of mining and construction to the managers of households and businesses. People could become indentured as slaves to a master in many ways, such as because of debts owed to having been born the offspring of an indentured person. The term shouldn't be understood as representing the situation of Black people before and during the United States' Civil War.

From the Letter to the Colossians (4:9) we learn that there was someone named Onesimus who was from Colossae. Most romantics presume it is the same person who appears in the Letter to Philemon. In which case, it's possible that Philemon also lived in Colossae. There's a saying in Italian to the effect that even if it isn't true, it still makes a good story! A less romantic presumption is that the author of Colossians, who was not Paul but a disciple of Paul's, had a friend with him who had taken the name of the person mentioned in the Letter to Philemon. No one can say for certain which is true.

Since this is such a short letter, there is no designation of chapters, only of verses.

Although it will destroy the surprise contained in the letter, it should be recorded that the name "Onesimus" is Greek meaning "useful."

### 1-3 - Greeting

1 Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon, our beloved and our co-worker, 2 to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church at your house. 3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Apparently writing from his imprisonment at Ephesus, Paul addresses his letter to "our brother" Philemon, to Apphia "our sister," and to Archippus, and to the church at your house. Out of the many hypotheses presented by commentators, the general assumption seems to be that Apphia is the wife of Philemon, and that Archippus is their son. The letter is addressed also to the

members of the house church which belongs to this family. And the greeting is typical of Paul's letters.

#### 4-6 - Thanksgiving

4I give thanks to my God always, remembering you in my prayers, 5as I hear of the love and the faith you have in the Lord Jesus and for all the holy ones, 6so that your partnership in the faith may become effective in recognizing every good there is in us that leads to Christ.

A rather typical statement in Paul's letters. How did Paul hear of the love and the faith of Philemon? Possibly from Onesimus himself.

#### 7-22 - Plea for Onesimus

7For I have experienced much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the holy ones have been refreshed by you, brother. 8Therefore, although I have the full right in Christ to order you to do what is proper, 9I rather urge you out of love, being as I am, Paul, an old man, and now also a prisoner for Christ Jesus. 10I urge you on behalf of my child Onesimus, whose father I have become in my imprisonment, 11who was once useless to you but is now useful to [both] you and me. 12I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. 13I should have liked to retain him for myself, so that he might serve me on your behalf in my imprisonment for the gospel, 14but I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that the good you do might not be forced but voluntary. 15Perhaps this is why he was away from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, 16no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a brother, beloved especially to me, but even more so to you, as a man and in the Lord. 17So if you regard me as a partner, welcome him as you would me. 18And if he has done you any injustice or owes you anything, charge it to me. 19I, Paul, write this in my own hand: I will pay. May I not tell you that you owe me your very self. 20Yes, brother, may I profit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ. 21With trust in your compliance I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. 22At the same time prepare a guest room for me, for I hope to be granted to you through your prayers.

Can't you just feel the butter seeping through those words? Paul praises Philemon for his work for the "holy ones," the believing community, which might have been meeting in his house. So Paul is not playing the authority card from his rights as an apostle by commanding Philemon. Rather, he pleads out of love from an old man in circumstances somewhat similar to Onesimus's.

Paul became his "father" by baptizing Onesimus. Paul uses the play on the slave's name. He was once useless to you, because he fled, but now he is again "onesimus," that is "useful" to both Paul and Philemon. Paul is sending Onesimus back, because it is the right thing to do, but in doing so, he is sending his own heart. He would rather have kept Onesimus with him. Paul's relationship with Philemon is such that he assumes that he would gladly serve Paul's needs himself if he could, but since he can't he might consider allowing his slave, Onesimus, to serve Paul's needs. But since Paul doesn't want to force the issue, he's sending Onesimus back.

And Philemon ought to receive Onesimus back, not only as a slave, but now as a brother, because of their common baptism, and even as Philemon would receive Paul himself.

If Onesimus had done any injustice to Philemon, Paul writes that he will make it up personally. But then he reminds Philemon that he is deeply in debt to Paul because of his faith and baptism. So he trusts that Philemon will do what Paul asks and even more.

Paul hopes to visit Philemon, if Philemon will pray for him.

## 23-25 - Final greetings

23Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you, 24as well as Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my co-workers. 25The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit,

That Paul, even in prison, is accompanied by friends and supporters is not surprising. It was a common practice of Paul to travel with companions, and it was a common practice that prisoners were allowed to have people around who supported them.

### A bit of commentary

Paul simply accepts the reality of slavery in his day. As noted above, this cannot be understood as the plight of Black people in the United States in the 1800's. Paul simply accepted the social realities of his time. However, the theology in this letter has profound meaning and application to the world even today.

The distance between people on a social ladder is overcome by their common baptism and belief in Christ. Paul applies this principle to Philemon and Onesimus. Could it not also apply to business relationships in the modern world. The one who is the boss is not that much different from the one in the mail room of a corporation because of their common faith in Jesus Christ and their baptism into his body.

It is this theological perspective which caused this letter to be included in the canon of sacred scripture.



## Letter to the Galatians

There are some lovely, beautiful, tender and even profound passages in this letter, but overall, it could be subtitled, “The day Paul lost his cool.”

Galatia is modern day Greece. At Paul’s time it was settled almost exclusively by pagan Gentiles who welcomed the gospel proclaimed by Paul during his third missionary journey. Although there is debate about the place from which Paul writes and the year of the writing, there are enough scholarly opinions to warrant situating the place of composition as prison in Ephesus around the year 55 A.D. As with just about everything concerning Paul and his letters, one can find scholars who hold differing opinions.

So what’s going on in Galatia? Since the Galatians were converts from paganism, there was no influence of the Law of Moses on them prior to their conversion to Christianity. After Paul’s departure other Christian missionaries entered the scene; these were converts from Judaism who still thought and taught that some parts of the Law of Moses, particularly circumcision and the observance of Jewish feasts, were a must in order for one to gain salvation. They were believers in Christ, but for deeply theological reasons they believed that since all were descendants of Abraham, certain parts of the law must be observed, particularly circumcision.

This, of course, was directly contrary to what the Galatians had learned from Paul, who had proclaimed that salvation comes through the cross of Christ. These “Judaisers” belittled Paul because he had not seen Jesus during his life before his resurrection, and because Paul had given them a watered down version of Christianity which omitted observance of certain precepts of the Law of Moses and the covenant given to Abraham, which demanded circumcision. Paul, they said, was not really an apostle, and in omitting to require circumcision of the Gentiles he was currying favor with them rather than giving them the whole truth.

It is probably best to regard these Christian “Judaisers,” not as villains, but as sincere although misguided and overzealous believers in Christ.

There also seems to have been another group which came to Galatia, or developed there, whose members placed such emphasis on the Spirit that they set aside all norms of behavior and became libertine in their practices. Paul will spend most of his letter dealing the those who required circumcision; in Chapter 5 he will address this other group.

Those scholars who think Paul wrote the Letter to the Romans before this one, see the Letter to the Galatians as a summary of all he wrote in Romans. Others see this letter as sort of the outline Paul used in composing the Letter to the Romans. The Letter to the Romans is almost a

treatise on Christian belief; almost, but not quite; it is a letter. The Letter to the Galatians is a rather polemic defense of Paul's life and ministry.

### 1:1-5 - Greeting

1Paul, an apostle not from human beings nor through a human being but through Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised him from the dead, 2and all the brothers who are with me, to the churches of Galatia: 3grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, 4who gave himself for our sins that he might rescue us from the present evil age in accord with the will of our God and Father, 5to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.

From the very outset, Paul lays out his argument. He is an apostle! And not from human beings, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised him from the dead. Immediately Paul asserts his status as an apostle and defends his gospel from the Judaizers by stating that redemption comes through Jesus Christ (rather than through observance of the Law of Moses).

### 1:6-10 - Loyalty to the gospel

6I am amazed that you are so quickly forsaking the one who called you by [the] grace [of Christ] for a different gospel 7(not that there is another). But there are some who are disturbing you and wish to pervert the gospel of Christ. 8But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach [to you] a gospel other than the one that we preached to you, let that one be accursed! 9As we have said before, and now I say again, if anyone preaches to you a gospel other than the one that you received, let that one be accursed!

10Am I now currying favor with human beings or God? Or am I seeking to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a slave of Christ.

At this point in most of his letters, Paul writes a thanksgiving for the church to which he is writing. But he doesn't seem to think he has anything to be thankful for at Galatia. Rather he is amazed at how quickly they have latched onto a gospel different from the one he had preached. He is not pleased with what he has heard about the Galatians.

Answering the charge that Paul had pussyfooted around the issue of circumcision in order to curry the Galatians' favor, he storms into their lives with this blunt proclamation that his, and only his, is the gospel of Christ.

Paul is now going to launch into a defense of his gospel and of his authority. He will base that defense on his call by Christ, his experience with the other apostles at the "Council of Jerusalem," his argument with Peter, and his defense of salvation by faith rather than works.

### 1:11-24 - His call by Christ

11Now I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel preached by me is not of human origin. 12For I did not receive it from a human being, nor was I taught it, but it came through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

13For you heard of my former way of life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it, 14and progressed in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries among my race, since I was even more a zealot for my ancestral traditions. 15But when [God], who from my mother's womb had set me apart and called me through his grace, was pleased 16to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him to the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult flesh and blood, 17nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; rather, I went into Arabia and then returned to Damascus.

18Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to confer with Cephas and remained with him for fifteen days. 19But I did not see any other of the apostles, only James the brother of the Lord. 20(As to what I am writing to you, behold, before God, I am not lying.) 21Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. 22And I was unknown personally to the churches of Judea that are in Christ; 23they only kept hearing that “the one who once was persecuting us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy.” 24So they glorified God because of me.

The source of Paul’s gospel is Jesus Christ himself; he didn’t get it from anyone else. In defense of that fact, he narrates his conversion experience, which caused the drastic change in his life from a persecutor to a preacher of the gospel. Although not given any formal approval by those who were apostles before him, they heard of what Paul was doing, and “so they glorified God because of me.” The point Paul makes is that he is not a second-hand apostle.

## 2:1-10 - The Council of Jerusalem

1Then after fourteen years I again went up to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along also. 2I went up in accord with a revelation, and I presented to them the gospel that I preach to the Gentiles—but privately to those of repute—so that I might not be running, or have run, in vain. 3Moreover, not even Titus, who was with me, although he was a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised, 4but because of the false brothers secretly brought in, who slipped in to spy on our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, that they might enslave us— 5to them we did not submit even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might remain intact for you. 6But from those who were reputed to be important (what they once were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality)—those of repute made me add nothing. 7On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter to the circumcised, 8for the one who worked in Peter for an apostolate to the circumcised worked also in me for the Gentiles, 9and when they recognized the grace bestowed upon me, James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave me and Barnabas their right hands in partnership, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. 10Only, we were to be mindful of the poor, which is the very thing I was eager to do.

Paul continues the defense of himself and his ministry. He presented to the other apostles what he had been preaching to the Gentiles, even describing the resistance he received from “false brothers” who wanted to “enslave” the believers in Christ to the Mosaic Law. The meeting in Jerusalem recognized the equality between Peter’s ministry to the Jews and Paul’s ministry to the Gentiles. All the others asked of him was that Paul and his companions remembered the poor in Jerusalem, which Paul gladly did, and apparently had already been doing.

## 2:11-14 - Paul’s challenge to Peter

11And when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face because he clearly was wrong. 12For, until some people came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he began to draw back and separated himself, because he was afraid of the circumcised. 13And the rest of the Jews [also] acted hypocritically along with him, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy. 14But when I saw that they were not on the right road in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in front of all, “If you, though a Jew, are living like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?”

Both Paul and Cephas (Peter) were circumcised. both had been raised to observe the Law of Moses. Both were now Christians who believed that Jesus had released them from observance of the Law of Moses. When they met in Antioch, Paul noticed that Peter, who had been eating non-Kosher food with the Gentiles, had joined some Jewish Christians when they had arrived and

began to eat Kosher food with them. Paul challenged Peter. Paul thought that Peter was intimidated by the Jewish Christians, and so he confronted Peter because he was acting hypocritically, and Barnabas started to follow Peter's example. Paul's point was that Peter's behavior made it look like he was compelling Gentiles to live like Jews, when he himself was a Jew who had been living like a Gentile.

### 2:15-21 - Faith's freedom

15We, who are Jews by nature and not sinners from among the Gentiles, 16 [yet] who know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified. 17But if, in seeking to be justified in Christ, we ourselves are found to be sinners, is Christ then a minister of sin? Of course not! 18But if I am building up again those things that I tore down, then I show myself to be a transgressor. 19For through the law I died to the law, that I might live for God. I have been crucified with Christ; 20yet I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me; insofar as I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God who has loved me and given himself up for me. 21I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing.

Possibly reprising what he had said to Peter in Antioch, Paul articulates the basic premise about the relationship between the Law and Christ. Even "we" who are Jews by nature (children of Abraham by his free wife Sarah) and not sinners among the Gentiles (children of Abraham by his slave wife Hagar) know that a person is not justified by works of the law. So Paul thinks that in terms of salvation "we" Jews are better off than the Gentiles. But even "we" are justified by faith in Jesus Christ. The works of the law do not justify anyone. But if because we do not observe the law are we therefore sinners for believing instead in Christ; does that mean that Christ is a minister of sin? Of course not.

Paul reasons that if he, who had torn down the law as a means of salvation, is now building it up by observing the law, is a transgressor. So because he has faith in Jesus Christ, according to the law, Paul would be considered an apostate; the law killed him and he is dead to the law. Therefore he died to the law that he might live for God by faith in Jesus Christ.

How did he die? He has been crucified with Christ, whom the law killed. And yet he lives, rather Christ lives in him while he is still alive. He lives by faith in Christ. If justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing.

### 3:1-14 - Justification by faith

1O stupid Galatians! Who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified? 2I want to learn only this from you: did you receive the Spirit from works of the law, or from faith in what you heard? 3Are you so stupid? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh? 4Did you experience so many things in vain?—if indeed it was in vain. 5Does, then, the one who supplies the Spirit to you and works mighty deeds among you do so from works of the law or from faith in what you heard? 6Thus Abraham "believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness."

7Realize then that it is those who have faith who are children of Abraham. 8Scripture, which saw in advance that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, foretold the good news to Abraham, saying, "Through you shall all the nations be blessed." 9Consequently, those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham who had faith. 10For all who depend on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed be everyone who does not persevere in

doing all the things written in the book of the law.” 11And that no one is justified before God by the law is clear, for “the one who is righteous by faith will live.” 12But the law does not depend on faith; rather, “the one who does these things will live by them.” 13Christ ransomed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written, “Cursed be everyone who hangs on a tree,” 14that the blessing of Abraham might be extended to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.

Paul’s argumentation against the Judaisers is drawn from the Old Testament and goes like this. In verses 1 to 5, he argues that when he preached the gospel of Christ crucified, the Galatians received the Spirit without observing the works of the law, so how can those works now be necessary. In verses 6 to 14, he argues against those who contend that circumcision is required because of God’s covenant with Abraham. God promised Abraham that in him *all* nations would be blessed, and that promise was independent of circumcision. So in giving the Spirit to Gentiles through faith, God is fulfilling his promise to Abraham, a man whose *faith* was reckoned as righteousness.

### 3:15-22 - The law did not nullify the promise

15Brothers, in human terms I say that no one can annul or amend even a human will once ratified. 16Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his descendant. It does not say, “And to descendants,” as referring to many, but as referring to one, “And to your descendant,” who is Christ. 17This is what I mean: the law, which came four hundred and thirty years afterward, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to cancel the promise. 18For if the inheritance comes from the law, it is no longer from a promise; but God bestowed it on Abraham through a promise. 19Why, then, the law? It was added for transgressions, until the descendant came to whom the promise had been made; it was promulgated by angels at the hand of a mediator. 20Now there is no mediator when only one party is involved, and God is one. 21Is the law then opposed to the promises [of God]? Of course not! For if a law had been given that could bring life, then righteousness would in reality come from the law. 22But scripture confined all things under the power of sin, that through faith in Jesus Christ the promise might be given to those who believe.

Paul continues his argumentation, this time by using the chronological distance between the promise made to Abraham and the law given through Moses. His argument is that once a last will and testament is ratified, it can’t be changed, nothing can be added to it. The promise made to Abraham and his descendant (who Paul says is Christ) cannot be changed once it is ratified, so the law which came much later doesn’t change the promise God made to Abraham that *all* the nations will be blessed.

So, then, why the law? It was given for moral guidance for the time from Moses until Christ came. But justification did not come through the law; the law merely identified what things were sinful. Next comes a subtlety. The law came through a mediator, but the promise has no mediator. God is one. So God made the promise, and God in Jesus is the promised one. So is there some kind of opposition between the promise and the law? No. It’s just the law was the younger, weaker sister to the promise. What the law of Moses couldn’t do, the promise made by God to Abraham could and did do.

### 3:23-29 - The interim role of the law

23Before faith came, we were held in custody under law, confined for the faith that was to be revealed. 24Consequently, the law was our disciplinarian for Christ, that we might be justified by faith. 25But now that faith has

come, we are no longer under a disciplinarian. 26For through faith you are all children of God in Christ Jesus. 27For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 28There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. 29And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendant, heirs according to the promise.

Paul continues his argumentation from the Old Testament. The law was only a disciplinarian (think "nanny") preparing the world for Christ, in whom we would be justified by faith. Well, now that faith in Christ has come, there is no longer a need for a disciplinarian. We are all now children of God in Christ, because we were baptized into Christ. And since we are in Christ, and Christ is the descendant of Abraham, we too are heirs to the promise made to Abraham, and therefore justified by faith, rather than by works of the law, including circumcision, which the Judaisers wanted to impose on the Gentiles.

The last two lines are real killers for the idea that justification comes through the law. "You are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendant, heirs according to the promise." Notice the singular noun, not plural. Jesus is *the* descendant; we are one in him.

#### 4:1-7 - You have come of age; you are free

I mean that as long as the heir is not of age, he is no different from a slave, although he is the owner of everything, 2but he is under the supervision of guardians and administrators until the date set by his father. 3In the same way we also, when we were not of age, were enslaved to the elemental powers of the world. 4But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, 5to ransom those under the law, so that we might receive adoption. 6As proof that you are children, God sent the spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying out, "Abba, Father!" 7So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

In the First Century, children were non-entities. They had no rights until they came of age in their bar mitsva or bat mitsva. They might be the designated heir of a fortune, but they could not do anything with that fortune until they came of age. Paul makes the comparison that the Galatians were under the elemental powers of the world (perhaps the type of worship in which they engaged before believing in Christ). God sent his son in order to remove from the care of the guardians those whom he chose in Christ to be his adopted children. The proof the Galatians had of this having happened to them is that they received the Spirit of God's Son into their hearts. That Spirit cries out, "Aba, Father!" from within us. Free now, you are a child of God and an heir to the promises made to Abraham. No more nanny!

#### 4:8-11 - Do Not Throw This Freedom Away

8At a time when you did not know God, you became slaves to things that by nature are not gods; 9but now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and destitute elemental powers? Do you want to be slaves to them all over again? 10You are observing days, months, seasons, and years. 11I am afraid on your account that perhaps I have labored for you in vain.

Paul didn't mean these as rhetorical questions. He asked do you really want to go back to the slavery you had in your pagan religion. Or for that matter, do you want to become slaves to the

law? Besides circumcision, the Judaisers insisted on the observance of the Jewish seasons and feasts. Some Galatians were doing that. Paul asks whether he had labored among them in vain.

#### 4:12-20 - Appeal for loyalty

12I implore you, brothers, be as I am, because I have also become as you are. You did me no wrong; 13you know that it was because of a physical illness that I originally preached the gospel to you, 14and you did not show disdain or contempt because of the trial caused you by my physical condition, but rather you received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus. 15Where now is that blessedness of yours? Indeed, I can testify to you that, if it had been possible, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me. 16So now have I become your enemy by telling you the truth? 17They show interest in you, but not in a good way; they want to isolate you, so that you may show interest in them. 18Now it is good to be shown interest for good reason at all times, and not only when I am with you. 19My children, for whom I am again in labor until Christ be formed in you! 20I would like to be with you now and to change my tone, for I am perplexed because of you.

A tender as well as a passionate moment has been reached in his writing as Paul identifies himself with the Galatians. “Be as I am,” a person free of the law, “because I have also become as you are,” a people who never knew the law. Apparently Paul was ill when he arrived in Galacia, and the people took care of him. The illness is unknown. The Galatians received him as an angel, even as Christ himself. “Where now is that blessedness?” Where now is the passionate consideration they gave Paul at the beginning? Has Paul become their enemy just because he told them the truth? The preachers who have come among them have shown interest in them, because they just want to separate the Galatians from Paul. Paul assures them that even in his absence, he is interested in them. Paul would like to be with them now, and change his tone.

#### 4:21-5:1 - Allegory based on Abraham

21Tell me, you who want to be under the law, do you not listen to the law? 22For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the freeborn woman. 23The son of the slave woman was born naturally, the son of the freeborn through a promise. 24Now this is an allegory. These women represent two covenants. One was from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; this is Hagar. 25Hagar represents Sinai, a mountain in Arabia; it corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery along with her children. 26But the Jerusalem above is freeborn, and she is our mother. 27For it is written

“Rejoice, you barren one who bore no children;  
break forth and shout, you who were not in labor;  
for more numerous are the children of the deserted one  
than of her who has a husband.”

28Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of the promise. 29But just as then the child of the flesh persecuted the child of the spirit, it is the same now. 30But what does the scripture say? “Drive out the slave woman and her son! For the son of the slave woman shall not share the inheritance with the son” of the freeborn. 31Therefore, brothers, we are children not of the slave woman but of the freeborn woman.

1For freedom Christ set us free; so stand firm and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery.

Abraham continues to be the center of this allegory because the main issue for Paul is the current emphasis the “preachers” are placing on circumcision, part of Abraham’s covenant with God. Paul’s challenge to the Galatians is do they want to be children of Abraham according to the flesh (by a slave woman, Hagar), or children by virtue of the promise (by a free woman, Sarah)?

Hagar, the slave woman, represents the covenant with Moses who received the law on Mount Sinai; the children from this union are slaves, and they represent present day Jerusalem. But the Jerusalem above is freeborn, represented by Sarah, who was barren until the promise was given to Abraham. She is our mother.

The Galatians are like Isaac who was born as the result of the promise. It's no wonder that they are persecuted by those whom Paul equates with the children of Hagar, because that's the way it was with Isaac and Esau. Abraham was told to be rid of the slave woman and her son. We are the children of the freeborn woman, not subject to the law.

#### 5:2-6 - Faith, not circumcision

2It is I, Paul, who am telling you that if you have yourselves circumcised, Christ will be of no benefit to you. 3Once again I declare to every man who has himself circumcised that he is bound to observe the entire law. 4You are separated from Christ, you who are trying to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace. 5For through the Spirit, by faith, we await the hope of righteousness. 6For in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.

If you get circumcised, Christ will mean nothing to you. Besides which if you decide you want to be Jewish by being circumcised, you will have to be Jewish in the observance of the whole law. And if you try for justification by means of observance of the law, you have abandoned Christ, you have fallen from grace. In the Spirit and with faith we expect to be counted righteous. Circumcision or the lack of it doesn't really matter, but only faith working through love. Paul doesn't consider circumcision as something evil, just unnecessary. What is necessary is faith which finds expression in love. Both the faith and the works inspired by love are gifts from God.

#### 5:7-12 - Paul, disheartened and angry

7You were running well; who hindered you from following [the] truth? 8That enticement does not come from the one who called you. 9A little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough. 10I am confident of you in the Lord that you will not take a different view, and that the one who is troubling you will bear the condemnation, whoever he may be. 11As for me, brothers, if I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case, the stumbling block of the cross has been abolished. 12Would that those who are upsetting you might also castrate themselves!

Paul frequently likens the living of a life of faith in Jesus Christ to the running of a race. The Galatians were doing so well. What has caused them to stumble? Not the one who called you – to be understood as either Paul or God, or both. Paul uses the already existing proverb about the yeast to indicate his concern about the preachers' effect on the community. Those preachers had claimed that Paul still preached the necessity of circumcision in places other than in Galatia. He counters with the argument that if he is still preaching circumcision, why are the circumcised persecuting him? But he continues to preach the "stumbling block" of the cross.

A final jab (pardon the pun) is that those who are so delighted to use the knife, may they use it to castrate themselves! Ouch! Paul is angry.

## 5:13-26 - How to judge

13For you were called for freedom, brothers. But do not use this freedom as an opportunity for the flesh; rather, serve one another through love. 14For the whole law is fulfilled in one statement, namely, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” 15But if you go on biting and devouring one another, beware that you are not consumed by one another. 16I say, then: live by the Spirit and you will certainly not gratify the desire of the flesh. 17For the flesh has desires against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; these are opposed to each other, so that you may not do what you want. 18But if you are guided by the Spirit, you are not under the law. 19Now the works of the flesh are obvious: immorality, impurity, licentiousness, 20idolatry, sorcery, hatreds, rivalry, jealousy, outbursts of fury, acts of selfishness, dissensions, factions, 21occasions of envy, drinking bouts, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. 22In contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, 23gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law. 24Now those who belong to Christ [Jesus] have crucified their flesh with its passions and desires. 25If we live in the Spirit, let us also follow the Spirit. 26Let us not be conceited, provoking one another, envious of one another.

In this section of his letter, Paul turns his attention also to a second group within the Galatian community, either outsiders who had come in, or members of the community who had gotten so enthralled with the working of the Spirit that they thought that the body, and what one did with one’s body, didn’t really make any difference when it came to salvation. They are called “Spiritists.”

While granting the premise that all are called to freedom, Paul asserts that the freedom they have is not meant for licentiousness, but for love of one another, which fulfills the whole law of Christ. If instead of love for one another, there is fighting going on, Paul tells them to be careful that they don’t destroy one another and the community. So, he says, go ahead and live by the Spirit, and if you really do that you will certainly not be libertine in your behavior. Living by the Spirit does not give license for libertine behavior in the flesh. Paul lists things which are the result of living by the flesh, first of all those pertaining to the “Spiritists.” immorality, impurity, licentiousness, drinking bouts, orgies. Then he addresses the “Judaizers” who were disrupting the community. Idolatry, sorcery, hatreds, rivalry, jealousy, outbursts of fury, acts of selfishness, dissensions, factions. Living in either of those ways will keep one from entering the Kingdom of Heaven.

Then he lists the things which are apparent in the lives of people who are living according to the Spirit. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness (consideration for others), self-control. Those who belong to Christ have crucified the works of the flesh with its passions and desires. If we truly live by the Spirit there will be no conceit, provoking one another or envy of one another.

This passage from the Letter to the Galatians, set as it is at the end of Paul’s diatribe against abuses in that community, has nonetheless become the touchstone for discerning which spirit is directing a person’s life: the Spirit of God or the spirit of self-indulgence.

## 6:1-10 - Life within the community

1Brothers, even if a person is caught in some transgression, you who are spiritual should correct that one in a gentle spirit, looking to yourself, so that you also may not be tempted. 2Bear one another’s burdens, and so you will fulfill the law of Christ. 3For if anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he is deluding himself. 4Each one must examine his own work, and then he will have reason to boast with regard to himself alone, and not with regard to someone else; 5for each will bear his own load.

6One who is being instructed in the word should share all good things with his instructor. 7Make no mistake: God is not mocked, for a person will reap only what he sows, 8because the one who sows for his flesh will reap corruption from the flesh, but the one who sows for the spirit will reap eternal life from the spirit. 9Let us not grow tired of doing good, for in due time we shall reap our harvest, if we do not give up. 10So then, while we have the opportunity, let us do good to all, but especially to those who belong to the family of the faith.

Perhaps realizing that he had been pretty hard on both the “Judaister” and the “Spiritists,” Paul advises the members of the community to exercise leniency in dealing with any of them – and with anyone else who has transgressed – who may repent, because the other members of the community may be tempted in the same way. That leniency and recognition of one’s own frailty, will lead to bearing one another’s burdens, the burden of failure. Why? Because if anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing (the self-righteous), he is deluding himself. All should get their sense of propriety by judging themselves, not by comparing themselves to others. Bear your own load.

Those who receive instruction in Christian belief should share all good things with their instructors. Everyone should heed what he or she sows, because that is what one will reap. So let’s keep doing good. In due time we will reap our reward. Do good to all, but especially to those within the community.

#### 6:11-18 - Postscript

11See with what large letters I am writing to you in my own hand! 12It is those who want to make a good appearance in the flesh who are trying to compel you to have yourselves circumcised, only that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. 13Not even those having themselves circumcised observe the law themselves; they only want you to be circumcised so that they may boast of your flesh. 14But may I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. 15For neither does circumcision mean anything, nor does uncircumcision, but only a new creation. 16Peace and mercy be to all who follow this rule and to the Israel of God.

17From now on, let no one make troubles for me; for I bear the marks of Jesus on my body.

18The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers. Amen.

Supposedly Paul has been dictating this letter to a scribe. But now he grabs the pen and signs the letter with his own hand, and in LARGE LETTERS. And even though he has already dictated the message to his scribe, he can’t let it go. He repeats what he has already written. Perhaps a new item is that he will never boast of anything but the cross of Christ, even though he could boast of everything the “Judaisers” boast of and even more. Instead he bears on his body the marks of Jesus, probably the scars he has from the beatings he has received as an adult believer, not the mark of his circumcision he received as a child.

And then he signs off with a blessing.

## Letter to the Romans

While there are many particulars about this letter which we would like to know but can't, there are some hypotheses which seem reasonable. First, this is the only letter from Paul to a community which he had not founded and which he had not visited. The letter was written a year or two after Paul had written to the Galatians, and it is similar to that letter in content, but not at all similar in tone. In writing Galatians, Paul really lost his cool; he was angry. Romans is a much cooler presentation of some of the ideas found in Galatians.

At the end of his letter, Paul sends greetings to twenty-six people. If Paul had never been to Rome, how did he know so many Roman citizens. Some scholars say he didn't; that Chapter 16 was added by someone else. But a more widely accepted explanation is that there was considerable traffic between Judea and Rome. When and how did Christianity reach Rome? The Emperor Claudius had expelled all the Jews from Rome in 49 A.D., and after his death many would have returned, bringing with them the new faith in Jesus of Nazareth. We know from a Roman historian that in 64 A.D. there were in Rome a distinct group of Jews known as "Christians." So Christ must have been proclaimed quite a bit earlier than that both to Jews and to Roman Gentiles. Paul's letter, written in 57 or 58 A.D., states that he had been wanting to visit Rome "for many years." And he flatters the Roman Christians by telling them that their faith "is being reported over the whole world." Paul could conceivably have known quite a few Jewish Christians who migrated between Judea and Rome.

Why might this information be important for understanding Paul's letter to the Romans? If the belief in Jesus came from Jewish Christians returning from Judea, their belief in Jesus would be tinged with a more conservative appraisal of the Jewish practices. For instance, in Galatians Paul writes, "If you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you." (Gal. 5:2) In Romans 3:1-2, he asks, "What benefit is there in being circumcised? Much in every way." Paul was planning on a mission to the west, and would probably have regarded Rome as his logical base of operations. He therefore treads lightly on matters which might be important to the church in Rome, which were unimportant to the church in Galatia, whose members had no acquaintance with the Jewish religious practices until after they came to believe in Christ.

Because of the considerable traffic between Jerusalem and Rome, Paul is anxious to present his gospel to the Romans in an extensive way, so that through them the word might get to Jerusalem. Paul is planning to leave for Jerusalem shortly, in order to bring the money he has been collecting from the predominantly Gentile churches. He's anxious about how the Jerusalem church will receive him, because his emphasis on Gentile freedom from the Law of Moses is

known in Jerusalem. If the Jerusalem church knows of his letter to the Galatians, they could be upset with Paul. If, on the other hand, the Jerusalem church becomes apprised of his letter to the Romans, they may be more willing to accept Paul and the Gentile money he brings to them.

In summary, what's the situation in Rome? The Gentile Christians had continued to develop their understanding and practice of belief in Jesus as the redeemer while the Jewish Christians, from whom the Gentile Christians in Rome had initially received the good news of Jesus, were in exile because of the edict of Emperor Claudius. Many of the Jewish Christians had now returned to Rome. It is this "mixed community" which Paul addresses in order to ingratiate both himself and, more importantly, his gospel to both elements of the Roman church. Throughout the beginning of the Letter to the Romans, he treads very lightly and with great precision on the matter of the benefit of the Law of Moses vis-a-vis belief in Christ.

He writes from Corinth in the winter of 57-58 A.D.

### 1:1-7 - Greeting

1Paul, a slave of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God, 2which he promised previously through his prophets in the holy scriptures, 3the gospel about his Son, descended from David according to the flesh, 4but established as Son of God in power according to the spirit of holiness through resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord. 5Through him we have received the grace of apostleship, to bring about the obedience of faith, for the sake of his name, among all the Gentiles, 6among whom are you also, who are called to belong to Jesus Christ; 7to all the beloved of God in Rome, called to be holy. Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul's greeting here is longer and more formal than is his usual practice. He presents himself as a slave of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle. Contrast that with Galatians where he begins, "Paul, an apostle, not from human beings nor through a human being but through Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised him from the dead." When he wrote Galatians, he was very angry and wrote very authoritatively. Here he is much more ingratiating.

### 1:8-10 - Thanksgiving

8First, I give thanks to my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is heralded throughout the world. 9God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in proclaiming the gospel of his Son, that I remember you constantly, 10always asking in my prayers that somehow by God's will I may at last find my way clear to come to you.

Rather typical Pauline statement at the beginning of one of his letters.

### 1:11-15 - I want to visit

11For I long to see you, that I may share with you some spiritual gift so that you may be strengthened, 12that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by one another's faith, yours and mine. 13I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I often planned to come to you, though I was prevented until now, that I might harvest some fruit among you, too, as among the rest of the Gentiles. 14To Greeks and non-Greeks alike, to the wise and the ignorant, I am under obligation; 15that is why I am eager to preach the gospel also to you in Rome.

Paul wants to come to Rome to be mutually strengthened by their common faith. He'll get there eventually, but not until he is in chains. And he doesn't want to come to plant the gospel; he wants to harvest some fruit. He delineates two kinds of Gentiles: Greeks and non-Greeks, those who speak Greek (as most Romans did) and those who do not (referred to sometimes as barbarians).

#### 1:16-17 - God's power for salvation

16For I am not ashamed of the gospel. It is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: for Jew first, and then Greek. 17For in it is revealed the righteousness of God from faith to faith; as it is written, "The one who is righteous by faith will live."

Quite a difference between this and what Paul wrote in Galatians. But recall that in Galatia, the only Jews were those Jewish Christians who came into the territory and proclaimed that believers in Christ had to observe some of the prescriptions of the Mosaic Law. In his letter to the Romans, Paul is addressing a congregation which probably started out almost exclusively Jewish, but had been expanded by a large number of Gentile converts.

Despite the fact that there were no modern means of communication, in the two years between Paul's writing to the Galatians and his letter to the Romans, word had traveled about Paul's "anti-Jewish" diatribes in the letter to the Galatians. On his trust in the Gospel Paul will not back down; he's not ashamed of it. But he includes in the group which is saved by the Gospel, both Jew and Greek, placing Jews first.

Many suggestions have been made as to the meaning of "from faith to faith." Perhaps it is best understood as "The gospel is the power of God for salvation of everyone who believes . . . For in it is revealed the righteousness of God from faith from start to finish." Paul then quotes the prophet Habakkuk incorrectly

#### 1:18-32 - Judgment against pagans: they should have known better

18The wrath of God is indeed being revealed from heaven against every impiety and wickedness of those who suppress the truth by their wickedness. 19For what can be known about God is evident to them, because God made it evident to them. 20Ever since the creation of the world, his invisible attributes of eternal power and divinity have been able to be understood and perceived in what he has made. As a result, they have no excuse; 21for although they knew God they did not accord him glory as God or give him thanks. Instead, they became vain in their reasoning, and their senseless minds were darkened. 22While claiming to be wise, they became fools 23and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for the likeness of an image of mortal man or of birds or of four-legged animals or of snakes.

24Therefore, God handed them over to impurity through the lusts of their hearts for the mutual degradation of their bodies. 25They exchanged the truth of God for a lie and revered and worshiped the creature rather than the creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. 26Therefore, God handed them over to degrading passions. Their females exchanged natural relations for unnatural, 27and the males likewise gave up natural relations with females and burned with lust for one another. Males did shameful things with males and thus received in their own persons the due penalty for their perversity. 28And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God handed them over to their undiscerning mind to do what is improper. 29They are filled with every form of wickedness, evil, greed, and malice; full of envy, murder, rivalry, treachery, and spite. They are gossips 30and scandalmongers and they hate God. They are insolent, haughty, boastful, ingenious in their wickedness, and rebellious toward their parents. 31They are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless. 32Although they know the just decree of God that all who practice such things deserve death, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.

In many ways Paul is drawing on his Pharisaic Jewish background when he writes about the wrath of God. God's wrath against the behavior of the pagans is not meted out here and now. But in God's wrath God handed them over to suffer the consequences of their depraved behavior. First of all, they didn't recognize the real God, who should have been discerned by what God created. Then their behavior became depraved. Here Paul is not singling out homosexuality as the most terrible sin, but as a reversal of the obvious order God created. Paul lists a whole catalogue of the offenses committed by those who "became vain in their reasoning, and their senseless minds were darkened."

So that's God's judgment on the Gentiles. What about the Jews?

## 2:1-11 - Judgment against Jews; they're no better

1Therefore, you are without excuse, every one of you who passes judgment. For by the standard by which you judge another you condemn yourself, since you, the judge, do the very same things. 2We know that the judgment of God on those who do such things is true. 3Do you suppose, then, you who judge those who engage in such things and yet do them yourself, that you will escape the judgment of God? 4Or do you hold his priceless kindness, forbearance, and patience in low esteem, unaware that the kindness of God would lead you to repentance? 5By your stubbornness and impenitent heart, you are storing up wrath for yourself for the day of wrath and revelation of the just judgment of God, 6who will repay everyone according to his works: 7eternal life to those who seek glory, honor, and immortality through perseverance in good works, 8but wrath and fury to those who selfishly disobey the truth and obey wickedness. 9Yes, affliction and distress will come upon every human being who does evil, Jew first and then Greek. 10But there will be glory, honor, and peace for everyone who does good, Jew first and then Greek. 11There is no partiality with God.

Paul directs his writing toward an imaginary Jewish listener. The previous section describes the depravity of the Gentiles, and the Jews would pass severe judgment on them. But the Jews are no better just because they have the Law. They use it to judge and condemn other people for their behavior, while doing similar things themselves. Knowing what is right doesn't do any good; it is observing what is right that counts. Holding God's "priceless kindness, forbearance and patience in low esteem," you fail to recognize that God is just giving you time to repent.

God will judge both Jew and Greek on the merits of their behavior, because God is impartial.

## 2:12-16 - God will judge on the basis of internal disposition

12All who sin outside the law will also perish without reference to it, and all who sin under the law will be judged in accordance with it. 13For it is not those who hear the law who are just in the sight of God; rather, those who observe the law will be justified. 14For when the Gentiles who do not have the law by nature observe the prescriptions of the law, they are a law for themselves even though do not have the law. 15They show that the demands of the law are written in their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even defend them 16on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge people's hidden works through Christ Jesus.

The law is really not the touchstone for salvation. Those who sin outside the law will perish outside the law; those who sin under the law will be judged according to the law. Gentiles do not know the law, but when they follow the prescripts of the law because their consciences direct them to, they will be saved because God judges people's hearts and their hidden works.

## 2:17-29 - True circumcision is of the heart

17Now if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast of God 18and know his will and are able to discern what is important since you are instructed from the law, 19and if you are confident that you are a guide for the blind and a light for those in darkness, 20that you are a trainer of the foolish and teacher of the simple, because in the law you have the formulation of knowledge and truth— 21then you who teach another, are you failing to teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal? 22You who forbid adultery, do you commit adultery? You who detest idols, do you rob temples? 23You who boast of the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? 24For, as it is written, “Because of you the name of God is reviled among the Gentiles.”

25Circumcision, to be sure, has value if you observe the law; but if you break the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. 26Again, if an uncircumcised man keeps the precepts of the law, will he not be considered circumcised? 27Indeed, those who are physically uncircumcised but carry out the law will pass judgment on you, with your written law and circumcision, who break the law. 28One is not a Jew outwardly. True circumcision is not outward, in the flesh. 29Rather, one is a Jew inwardly, and circumcision is of the heart, in the spirit, not the letter; his praise is not from human beings but from God.

Justification before God does not come from external observances, such as circumcision, but through doing what is right. Circumcision and observance of the Law has value only for those who actually observe the law, not for those who only teach the law. Circumcision of the heart is what leads to salvation.

Paul is leading up to the main thesis of his letter, namely, that salvation comes by faith in Jesus Christ, for both Jew and Gentile. Luther added the adverb “alone” to this dictum. But Paul didn’t write that. Paul’s message is this: salvation comes through faith in Jesus Christ. There are two paths which lead to hearing and responding to the gospel. The Jews were prepared to hear the gospel of Christ through Moses and the Law. Gentiles are led to hear the gospel of Christ through the preaching of the gospel. Those who arrived at Christ by means of the Law must not impose on the Gentiles the path which led them, the Jews, to Christ. It was important to Paul to show that faith in Christ grew organically out of the Law, but that the Law was not the only way one could come to that faith.

Paul’s further point is that no one, neither Jew nor Gentile, arrived at justification because of the merits of their own behavior. All have sinned.

## 3:1-8 - Dealing with some objections

1What advantage is there then in being a Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? 2Much, in every respect. [For] in the first place, they were entrusted with the utterances of God. 3What if some were unfaithful? Will their infidelity nullify the fidelity of God? 4Of course not! God must be true, though every human being is a liar, as it is written:

“That you may be justified in your words,  
and conquer when you are judged.”

5But if our wickedness provides proof of God’s righteousness, what can we say? Is God unjust, humanly speaking, to inflict his wrath? Of course not! For how else is God to judge the world? 7But if God’s truth redounds to his glory through my falsehood, why am I still being condemned as a sinner? 8And why not say—as we are accused and as some claim we say—that we should do evil that good may come of it? Their penalty is what they deserve.

Paul may seem to be inconsistent here when he insists that there is much value in circumcision, because in Galatians he wrote, “For in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything.” The difference between the two utterances is this. In Galatians he is dealing with the fact that the Galatians came to faith in Christ without having been

led there by the Law. In Romans Paul is talking about the Jews who are led to faith in Christ by means of the Law. It is God's fidelity to the Jews which led them beyond the Law to faith in Christ.

Some were claiming, and said that Paul also was also claiming, that we might as well do evil, because it will reveal the righteousness of God when God punishes us. Nonsense! Just because I'm unfaithful doesn't mean that God will be.

3:9-20 - All have sinned, and no one can justify oneself.

9Well, then, are we better off? Not entirely, for we have already brought the charge against Jews and Greeks alike that they are all under the domination of sin, 10as it is written:

“There is no one just, not one,  
11 there is no one who understands,  
there is no one who seeks God.  
12All have gone astray; all alike are worthless;  
there is not one who does good,  
[there is not] even one.  
13Their throats are open graves;  
they deceive with their tongues;  
the venom of asps is on their lips;  
14their mouths are full of bitter cursing.  
15Their feet are quick to shed blood;  
16ruin and misery are in their ways,  
17and the way of peace they know not.  
18There is no fear of God before their eyes.”

19Now we know that what the law says is addressed to those under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world stand accountable to God, 20since no human being will be justified in his sight by observing the law; for through the law comes consciousness of sin.

The law didn't save anyone from sin; it only let people know that they had sinned. Paul quotes what is called a *testamonium*, an already existing collection of scripture passages on the same subject. It's sort of clever in its construction. Every part of the body is shown to be involved in sin: throats, tongue, lips, mouth, feet and eyes.

So, that's the bad news. All fall under sin, Jews and Gentiles alike. What's the good news?

3:21-31 - Justification apart from the Law

21But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, though testified to by the law and the prophets, 22the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction; 23all have sinned and are deprived of the glory of God. 24They are justified freely by his grace through the redemption in Christ Jesus, 25whom God set forth as an expiation, through faith, by his blood, to prove his righteousness because of the forgiveness of sins previously committed, 26through the forbearance of God—to prove his righteousness in the present time, that he might be righteous and justify the one who has faith in Jesus.

27What occasion is there then for boasting? It is ruled out. On what principle, that of works? No, rather on the principle of faith. 28For we consider that a person is justified by faith apart from works of the law. 29Does God belong to Jews alone? Does he not belong to Gentiles, too? Yes, also to Gentiles, 30for God is one and will justify the circumcised on the basis of faith and the uncircumcised through faith. 31Are we then annulling the law by this faith? Of course not! On the contrary, we are supporting the law.

Even though the Law and the prophets testified to the righteousness of God, that righteousness has been manifest apart from the law, through faith in Jesus Christ. That's true for Jews and Gentiles. They've all sinned. They're all justified by God through faith.

So there is no occasion for boasting, because righteousness doesn't come through one's own efforts to observe the Law, but through believing in Jesus. God belongs to both Jews and Gentiles. Paul asks if he sounds like he is dismissing the Law as irrelevant. He says not. Rather he is supporting the Law, which he will demonstrate in Chapter 4 when he shows that faith as a means of justification (Abraham) came before the Law was given (Moses).

#### 4:1-12 - Abraham

1What then can we say that Abraham found, our ancestor according to the flesh? 2Indeed, if Abraham was justified on the basis of his works, he has reason to boast; but this was not so in the sight of God. 3For what does the scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." 4A worker's wage is credited not as a gift, but as something due. 5But when one does not work, yet believes in the one who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness. 6So also David declares the blessedness of the person to whom God credits righteousness apart from works:

7"Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven  
and whose sins are covered.

8Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord does not record."

9Does this blessedness apply only to the circumcised, or to the uncircumcised as well? Now we assert that "faith was credited to Abraham as righteousness." 10Under what circumstances was it credited? Was he circumcised or not? He was not circumcised, but uncircumcised. 11And he received the sign of circumcision as a seal on the righteousness received through faith while he was uncircumcised. Thus he was to be the father of all the uncircumcised who believe, so that to them [also] righteousness might be credited, 12as well as the father of the circumcised who not only are circumcised, but also follow the path of faith that our father Abraham walked while still uncircumcised.

Although this argument may seem a bit convoluted, it's really quite clever. Although it is true that circumcision came from Abraham for his descendants, he himself was not circumcised when he believed God, and it was that *faith* that was credited to him as righteousness, not *circumcision*. Circumcision was the *sign* that Abraham had faith and therefore was righteous with God, not the *cause* of the righteousness. [So is bearing the sign of having faith without actually having faith a lie?]

Since Abraham was declared righteous before he was circumcised, he is the father of all who believe without being circumcised. He is also the father of the circumcised who follow the path of faith that Abraham walked while still uncircumcised.

A note on the meaning of "righteousness." The word has many nuances of meanings, all of which indicate that something is just or right, or even OK. I suggest that the phrase "made OK" be substituted wherever the word "righteousness" is found. It may not be precise, but it makes sort of clear what is meant.

#### 4:13-25 - Inheritance of the promise comes through faith

13It was not through the law that the promise was made to Abraham and his descendants that he would inherit the world, but through the righteousness that comes from faith. 14For if those who adhere to the law are the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. 15For the law produces wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation. 16For this reason, it depends on faith, so that it may be a gift, and the promise may be guaranteed to all his descendants, not to those who only adhere to the law but to those who follow the faith of Abraham, who is the father

of all of us, 17as it is written, “I have made you father of many nations.” He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into being what does not exist. 18He believed, hoping against hope, that he would become “the father of many nations,” according to what was said, “Thus shall your descendants be.” 19He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body as [already] dead (for he was almost a hundred years old) and the dead womb of Sarah. 20He did not doubt God’s promise in unbelief; rather, he was empowered by faith and gave glory to God 21and was fully convinced that what he had promised he was also able to do. 22That is why “it was credited to him as righteousness.” 23But it was not for him alone that it was written that “it was credited to him”; 24it was also for us, to whom it will be credited, who believe in the one who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, 25who was handed over for our transgressions and was raised for our justification.

Paul could have used a good editor, who would have kept him from saying the same thing in so many different ways. But he didn’t have one, so he goes on about the necessity and the advantage of having faith, although his point has already been made, and quite adequately, one might think. He does, however, open his observations to a new nuance.

God made a covenant with Israel which made them “OK,” righteous. As a sign of that covenant which made Israel “OK,” the Law made requirements as to the keeping of that covenant. Observance of the Law did not make Israel, or individual Jews “OK” with God; rather, because God made Israel “OK,” they observe the Law. The Law did not *make* transgressions; it *revealed what was* a transgression (verse 15). “The law produces wrath” means that the law shows who is deserving of punishment.

The heirs of the covenant are made “OK” because of Abraham’s faith and God’s promise. Without Abraham’s faith, there would be no covenant. The unanswerable question here is how did the ordinary First Century Jew regard the relationship between observing the Law and being “OK” with God. One author astutely compares the situation of the ordinary First Century Jew’s ideas of the importance of observing the Law, with the ordinary Twentieth Century Catholics idea of indulgences. While both Twenty-first Century Jewish and Catholic theologians may be more precise in expounding the relationship between good works and righteousness, that kind of precision did not occur in the First Century. Did both think salvation was earned?

The promise made to Abraham was that he would be the father of many nations. Paul insists that the promise was not only for Abraham, but for all of the children of Abraham, which includes everyone who has faith in the one who raised Jesus from the dead.

## 5:1-11 - Faith, hope and love

1Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2through whom we have gained access [by faith] to this grace in which we stand, and we boast in hope of the glory of God. 3Not only that, but we even boast of our afflictions, knowing that affliction produces endurance, 4and endurance, proven character, and proven character, hope, 5and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the holy Spirit that has been given to us. 6For Christ, while we were still helpless, yet died at the appointed time for the ungodly. 7Indeed, only with difficulty does one die for a just person, though perhaps for a good person one might even find courage to die. 8But God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us. 9How much more then, since we are now justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath. 10Indeed, if, while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, how much more, once reconciled, will we be saved by his life. 11Not only that, but we also boast of God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

Here Paul begins a doctrinal section of his letter. Since Christians have been justified by faith, they have peace with God, which Jesus won by his death and resurrection. However that

does not mean that there will not be troubles for the believers. But Paul says that such troubles don't defeat the believer, they only make him or her stronger, which leads them to have hope. And that hope will not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured into our hearts through the holy Spirit who has been given to us. Jesus died for us while we were still captives of sin. How much more will God's mercy be on those who have now been redeemed by Christ. "Saved through him from the wrath" means saved from what sin deserves. Now that we have been reconciled to God by the death of God's son, we can even boast about our reconciliation to God.

Paul used Abraham as an example of justification by faith; he used Jesus as an example of the tremendous love God has for us. God loved us even when we were sinners.

#### 5:12-14 - Adam

12Therefore, just as through one person sin entered the world, and through sin, death, and thus death came to all, inasmuch as all sinned— 13for up to the time of the law, sin was in the world, though sin is not accounted when there is no law. 14But death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those who did not sin after the pattern of the trespass of Adam, who is the type of the one who was to come.

Paul speaks of sin almost as a virus entering into human life because of the sin of Adam, bringing death with it. The existence of this virus (sin) can be seen by how it affected humankind. It's as though all had sinned in Adam. You can tell that sin has been around all the time, because everyone died, even before the Law of Moses identified certain behaviors as sinful.

This is the passage from which comes the theology of original sin.

#### 5:15-21 - Christ

15But the gift is not like the transgression. For if by that one person's transgression the many died, how much more did the grace of God and the gracious gift of the one person Jesus Christ overflow for the many. 16And the gift is not like the result of the one person's sinning. For after one sin there was the judgment that brought condemnation; but the gift, after many transgressions, brought acquittal. 17For if, by the transgression of one person, death came to reign through that one, how much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of justification come to reign in life through the one person Jesus Christ. 18In conclusion, just as through one transgression condemnation came upon all, so through one righteous act acquittal and life came to all. 19For just as through the disobedience of one person the many were made sinners, so through the obedience of one the many will be made righteous. 20The law entered in so that transgression might increase but, where sin increased, grace overflowed all the more, 21so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through justification for eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Just as Adam represented the whole human race in his sin, Christ represents the whole human race in his "gracious gift." And what was that gracious gift?

A great mystery is revealed in verses 18 and 19. From the Middle Ages onward, the theology of the salvation brought by Jesus has been debated. Was it Jesus' sacrificial suffering and death that brought salvation to the human race; was that what God demanded of him? Of did God demand of Jesus obedience in order to make reparation for the disobedience of Adam? This passage would suggest that what God "demanded" was obedience. And that obedience to the will of his Father caused Jesus' enemies to kill him. That issue is debated to this day.

I opt for the belief that it was Jesus' sacrifice of obedience which made reparation for Adam's sin of disobedience, not that God demanded the sacrificial offering of Jesus' death.

## 6:1-23 - Freedom from sin; life in God

1What then shall we say? Shall we persist in sin that grace may abound? Of course not! 2How can we who died to sin yet live in it? 3Or are you unaware that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? 4We were indeed buried with him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life.

5For if we have grown into union with him through a death like his, we shall also be united with him in the resurrection. 6We know that our old self was crucified with him, so that our sinful body might be done away with, that we might no longer be in slavery to sin. 7For a dead person has been absolved from sin. 8If, then, we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him. 9We know that Christ, raised from the dead, dies no more; death no longer has power over him. 10As to his death, he died to sin once and for all; as to his life, he lives for God. 11Consequently, you too must think of yourselves as [being] dead to sin and living for God in Christ Jesus.

12Therefore, sin must not reign over your mortal bodies so that you obey their desires. 13And do not present the parts of your bodies to sin as weapons for wickedness, but present yourselves to God as raised from the dead to life and the parts of your bodies to God as weapons for righteousness. 14For sin is not to have any power over you, since you are not under the law but under grace.

15What then? Shall we sin because we are not under the law but under grace? Of course not! 16Do you not know that if you present yourselves to someone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? 17But thanks be to God that, although you were once slaves of sin, you have become obedient from the heart to the pattern of teaching to which you were entrusted. 18Freed from sin, you have become slaves of righteousness. 19I am speaking in human terms because of the weakness of your nature. For just as you presented the parts of your bodies as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness for lawlessness, so now present them as slaves to righteousness for sanctification. 20For when you were slaves of sin, you were free from righteousness. 21But what profit did you get then from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death. 22But now that you have been freed from sin and have become slaves of God, the benefit that you have leads to sanctification, and its end is eternal life. 23For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

From here to Chapter 8:13, Paul makes many references to the “body” and the “spirit.” It is doubtful that Paul hated the body. But his references to the body can profitably be understood as “the outer person,” and the spirit as “the inner person.”

It is helpful to recall that baptism in Paul’s day was frequently administered by immersion, as a sign that one had died and gone into the grave with Christ, and was then raised up to a new life. In his death Christ shed his human limitations and yet still remained human. Baptism into Christ’s death is a commitment to live a life of shedding our human limitations of sin and selfishness. As Paul writes in verse 6 “that our sinful body might be done away with, that we might no longer be in slavery to sin.” And in verse 12 he writes that as a result of our baptism, “sin must not reign over your mortal bodies so that you obey their desires.” Consequently, “you too must think of yourselves as [being] dead to sin and living for God in Christ Jesus.”

Paul had expressed the same mystery years earlier when he wrote a second time to the Corinthians, “For the love of Christ impels us, once we have come to the conviction that one died for all; therefore, all have died. He indeed died for all, so that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.” (5:14-15)

In verses 12-14, Paul may be protecting himself from the complaint that he claimed that those who believe in Christ do not need to follow the law, and therefore could live a life of licentiousness. Here he denies that impression.

The rest of this passage spells out the premise that being free from sin allows one to live for God and therefore gain eternal life.

## 7:1-6 - Freedom from the Law

1Are you unaware, brothers (for I am speaking to people who know the law), that the law has jurisdiction over one as long as one lives? 2Thus a married woman is bound by law to her living husband; but if her husband dies, she is released from the law in respect to her husband. 3Consequently, while her husband is alive she will be called an adulteress if she consorts with another man. But if her husband dies she is free from that law, and she is not an adulteress if she consorts with another man.

4In the same way, my brothers, you also were put to death to the law through the body of Christ, so that you might belong to another, to the one who was raised from the dead in order that we might bear fruit for God. 5For when we were in the flesh, our sinful passions, awakened by the law, worked in our members to bear fruit for death. 6But now we are released from the law, dead to what held us captive, so that we may serve in the newness of the spirit and not under the obsolete letter.

In order to understand Paul's argument here, we need to remember that in Baptism we were baptized into Christ's death. Therefore we have died. (I don't know if his reference to the Romans as people who know the law is a reference to the large Jewish population among the Christians.) His argument is that the law doesn't affect people who have died, so the Law no longer binds those who through Baptism have died to the Law. He uses the example of a woman whose husband has died. She is no longer bound by the legal ties to him.

When he refers to "our sinful passions, awakened by the law" he means that the law pointed out where sin existed, and condemned us to death. But since we have died with Christ, the law is now obsolete.

## 7:7-12 - The Law shows us sin

7What then can we say? That the law is sin? Of course not! Yet I did not know sin except through the law, and I did not know what it is to covet except that the law said, "You shall not covet." 8But sin, finding an opportunity in the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetousness. Apart from the law sin is dead. I once lived outside the law, but when the commandment came, sin became alive; 10then I died, and the commandment that was for life turned out to be death for me. 11For sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, deceived me and through it put me to death. 12So then the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.

Here again, as in verse 5, Paul explains that the Law "awakened" sin, and now in verse 7, he says that the only way he knew sin was through the law. But he is careful to say that the law didn't *cause* sin; it merely identified it. It's sort of like the perversity principle which says, "Tell me not to and I'll try it; tell me I have to and I won't." It's not the law's fault that I'm perverse.

## 7:13-25 - Sin

13Did the good, then, become death for me? Of course not! Sin, in order that it might be shown to be sin, worked death in me through the good, so that sin might become sinful beyond measure through the commandment. 14We know that the law is spiritual; but I am carnal, sold into slavery to sin. 15What I do, I do not understand. For I do not do what I want, but I do what I hate. 16Now if I do what I do not want, I concur that the law is good. 17So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. 18For I know that good does not dwell in me, that is, in my flesh. The willing is ready at hand, but doing the good is not. 19For I do not do the good I want, but I do the evil I do not want. 20Now if [I] do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. 21So, then, I discover the principle that when I want to do right, evil is at hand. 22For I take delight in the law of God, in my inner self, 23but I see in my members another principle at war with the law of my mind, taking me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. 24Miserable one that I am! Who will deliver me from this mortal body? 25Thanks be to God

through Jesus Christ our Lord. Therefore, I myself, with my mind, serve the law of God but, with my flesh, the law of sin.

Paul switches to the first person, “I,” and his own experience of seeking justification by observance of the Law. And he refers to sin and its power almost as that virus which has entered into me. I know what is right, because the law tells me, but there’s something in me which keeps me from doing what the law says, and which I want to do. It’s almost a poetic description of what later came to be called concupiscence. Paul knew its power, and he knew other people knew it too.

### 8:1-13 - Flesh and spirit

1Hence, now there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. 2For the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus has freed you from the law of sin and death. 3For what the law, weakened by the flesh, was powerless to do, this God has done: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for the sake of sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, 4so that the righteous decree of the law might be fulfilled in us, who live not according to the flesh but according to the spirit. 5For those who live according to the flesh are concerned with the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the spirit with the things of the spirit. 6The concern of the flesh is death, but the concern of the spirit is life and peace. 7For the concern of the flesh is hostility toward God; it does not submit to the law of God, nor can it; 8and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. 9But you are not in the flesh; on the contrary, you are in the spirit, if only the Spirit of God dwells in you. Whoever does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. 10But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the spirit is alive because of righteousness. 11If the Spirit of the one who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, the one who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also, through his Spirit that dwells in you. 12Consequently, brothers, we are not debtors to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. 13For if you live according to the flesh, you will die, but if by the spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

I think that if we keep in mind that “in the flesh” and “body” means concupiscence, and “spirit of life” means living in the grace of God won by Christ, this section becomes pretty clear. Paul does not think the body is sinful; but through the body evil finds entrance into people’s lives.

The Law tried to tell us how to live justly, but all it did was point out what was sin; it didn’t enable us to live justly. But what the Law could not do, God has done by sending God’s son in human flesh, and in his death Jesus condemned sin once and for all. The Law directed people to righteousness, and that was good. But the Law could not produce righteousness in us. But the Spirit has fulfilled the Law by enabling us to do what the Law commanded but was powerless to make us do. (Paul desperately wants to protect the Law from being belittled, and at the same time he wants to show its deficiency.)

### 8:14-17 - Adopted by God

14For those who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. 15For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you received a spirit of adoption, through which we cry, “Abba, Father!” 16The Spirit itself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, 17and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if only we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

There were two forms of adoption into a family. One was the adoption of a person as a slave in the household; the other was a more profound adoption into the family as a child of those

parents. Paul insists that believers in Christ who are led by the Spirit of God, are adopted as God's children, not a slave in the household so that they should have to fear, but rather they can call God "Father." ("Abba" is a very familial word for "father," meaning almost "daddy.") Those who have been adopted can approach God without any fear.

This is a profound passage about the indwelling of the Spirit. Those who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God because God has adopted them. The Spirit, united with our spirit addresses God as Father! It is the Spirit within us who bears witness that we are in fact children of God, and therefore heirs with Christ, if only we suffer along with Christ that we may be glorified with him.

### 8:18-27 - Hope

18I consider that the sufferings of this present time are as nothing compared with the glory to be revealed for us. 19For creation awaits with eager expectation the revelation of the children of God; 20for creation was made subject to futility, not of its own accord but because of the one who subjected it, in hope 21that creation itself would be set free from slavery to corruption and share in the glorious freedom of the children of God. 22We know that all creation is groaning in labor pains even until now; 23and not only that, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, we also groan within ourselves as we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. 24For in hope we were saved. Now hope that sees for itself is not hope. For who hopes for what one sees? 25But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait with endurance.

26In the same way, the Spirit too comes to the aid of our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit itself intercedes with inexpressible groanings. 27And the one who searches hearts knows what is the intention of the Spirit, because it intercedes for the holy ones according to God's will.

Now he adds that the sufferings of the present are nothing compared with the glory which is to come. In fact everybody and everything is groaning to be freed from corruption and to be adopted. In the previous section Paul wrote that we have been adopted in the Spirit, but now he is writing about the redemption of our bodies. We wait, but we wait in hope. So "hang in there."

Verses 26 and 27 are again profound. Rather than comment on them, I'll include here a translation from the New English Bible, which I have found to be elucidating.

"In the same way the Spirit comes to the aid of our weakness. We do not even know how to pray as we ought, but through our inarticulate groans the Spirit himself is pleading for us, and God who searches our inmost being knows what the Spirit means, because he pleads for God's people in God's own way."

Our praying in our own words with our own concerns may or may not be in conformity with what is good for us and what God wants for us. But that's OK, because through these "inarticulate groans" of ours the Spirit within us is praying for us, and God knows what the Spirit means.

### 8:28-39 - God just won't stop loving!

28We know that all things work for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. 29For those he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, so that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. 30And those he predestined he also called; and those he called he also justified; and those he justified he also glorified.

31What then shall we say to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? 32He who did not spare his own Son but handed him over for us all, how will he not also give us everything else along with him? 33Who will bring a charge against God's chosen ones? It is God who acquits us. 34Who will condemn? It is Christ [Jesus] who died, rather, was raised, who also is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. 35What will separate us from the love of Christ? Will anguish, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or the sword? 36As it is written:

“For your sake we are being slain all the day;  
we are looked upon as sheep to be slaughtered.”

37No, in all these things we conquer overwhelmingly through him who loved us. 38For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor present things, nor future things, nor powers, 39nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Paul gives expression to his faith in the providence of God toward those whom God has called. *All* things will work for good for those who love God, because nothing can stop God's loving from coming to those who love God. *Nothing* can separate us from the love of God which comes to us in Christ Jesus our Lord. This has been so from the beginning because God called, justified, and will glorify those who believe in Jesus.

#### 9:1- 5 - Paul's love for Israel.

I speak the truth in Christ, I do not lie; my conscience joins with the holy Spirit in bearing me witness 2that I have great sorrow and constant anguish in my heart. 3For I could wish that I myself were accursed and separated from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kin according to the flesh. 4They are Israelites; theirs the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; 5theirs the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, is the Messiah. God who is over all be blessed forever. Amen.

In reading this short passage, one should remember that Paul is trying to ingratiate himself with the Romans, many of whom are Jewish Christians, without alienating himself from the Gentiles in the community. If the Romans had received a copy of Paul's letter to the Galatians, the Jewish Christians might have become suspicious of his attitude toward the Law and the Jewish faith. The Galatians had had no previous acquaintance with the Law of Moses or Jewish practices prior to their coming to belief in Christ. So Paul regarded the intrusion of the Jewish Christians with their desire to impose some Jewish religious practices on the Galatians an abomination. But with the Romans, the practice of Christian belief included observance of some of the practices of Judaism. So Paul wanted to make clear his attitude toward the Law of Moses. This passage should make his attitude clear.

Paul's preoccupation with establishing himself in good standing with both the Jewish Christians and the Gentile Christians in Rome will continue to influence what he writes all the way through Chapter 11. This preoccupation produces some profound theological understanding.

#### 9:6-24 - God's choice of Gentiles

6But it is not that the word of God has failed. For not all who are of Israel are Israel, 7nor are they all children of Abraham because they are his descendants; but “It is through Isaac that descendants shall bear your name.” 8This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as descendants. 9For this is the wording of the promise, “About this time I shall return and Sarah will have a son.” 10And not only that, but also when Rebecca had conceived children by one husband, our father Isaac—

11before they had yet been born or had done anything, good or bad, in order that God's elective plan might continue,  
12not by works but by his call—she was told, “The older shall serve the younger.” 13As it is written:

“I loved Jacob  
but hated Esau.”

14What then are we to say? Is there injustice on the part of God? Of course not! 15For he says to Moses:

“I will show mercy to whom I will,  
I will take pity on whom I will.”

16So it depends not upon a person's will or exertion, but upon God, who shows mercy. 17For the scripture says to Pharaoh, “This is why I have raised you up, to show my power through you that my name may be proclaimed throughout the earth.” 18Consequently, he has mercy upon whom he wills, and he hardens whom he wills. 19You will say to me then, “Why (then) does he still find fault? For who can oppose his will?” 20But who indeed are you, a human being, to talk back to God? Will what is made say to its maker, “Why have you created me so?” 21Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for a noble purpose and another for an ignoble one? 22What if God, wishing to show his wrath and make known his power, has endured with much patience the vessels of wrath made for destruction? 23This was to make known the riches of his glory to the vessels of mercy, which he has prepared previously for glory, 24namely, us whom he has called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles.

Perhaps it's a little crass, but it seems that Paul doesn't want to make either Jews or Gentiles in the community at Rome angry with himself or with God – or with each other, for that matter. So he works out this very precise and profound theology of God's right of election. All of which might not seem so important to the modern reader. The delicate tensions with which Paul was coping are no longer important, but the theology is still important for today.

Paul makes a distinction between those who are “of Israel” (descendants of Abraham according to the flesh) and those who “are Israel,” Abraham's descendants according to the promise). Not all are “children of Abraham because they are his descendants” because “It is through Isaac that descendants shall bear your name.” Then using the example of Rebecca and her two son, Esau and Jacob, Paul demonstrates again that salvation is a matter of God's election, not because of what individuals may or may not do.

Then Paul fields a possible objection to this view of things. Is God unfair to select one and reject another? To which Paul says, “It's not for human beings to question why God does what God does.” He has hardened some hearts, and he has shown mercy to others, namely, to us whom he has called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles. So God has clearly chosen and called both Jews and Gentiles. That thought should alleviate any concerns on the part of the mixed community in Rome.

### 9:25-33 - Witness of the prophets

25As indeed he says in Hosea:

“Those who were not my people I will call ‘my people,’  
and her who was not beloved I will call ‘beloved.’

26And in the very place where it was said to them, ‘You are not my people,’  
there they shall be called children of the living God.”

27And Isaiah cries out concerning Israel, “Though the number of the Israelites were like the sand of the sea, only a remnant will be saved;

28for decisively and quickly will the Lord execute sentence upon the earth.”

29And as Isaiah predicted:

“Unless the Lord of hosts had left us descendants,  
we would have become like Sodom  
have been made like Gomorrah.”

30What then shall we say? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have achieved it, that is, righteousness that comes from faith; 31but that Israel, who pursued the law of righteousness, did not attain to that law? 32Why not? Because they did it not by faith, but as if it could be done by works. They stumbled over the stone that causes stumbling, 33as it is written:

“Behold, I am laying a stone in Zion  
that will make people stumble  
and a rock that will make them fall,  
and whoever believes in him shall not be put to shame.”

Paul moves to the testimony of the prophets to further demonstrate his point that God is free to elect whom God wants. Then in verse 30 he takes up the question of the Roman community, which is made up of Jews and Gentiles. The Gentiles arrived at righteousness through faith, but Israel who pursued righteousness through the law did not attain it, because they pursued it through their own efforts, not through faith.

#### 10:1-21 - What about Israel?

1Brothers, my heart’s desire and prayer to God on their behalf is for salvation. 2I testify with regard to them that they have zeal for God, but it is not discerning. 3For, in their unawareness of the righteousness that comes from God and their attempt to establish their own [righteousness], they did not submit to the righteousness of God. 4For Christ is the end of the law for the justification of everyone who has faith.

5Moses writes about the righteousness that comes from [the] law, “The one who does these things will live by them.” 6But the righteousness that comes from faith says, “Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will go up into heaven?’ (that is, to bring Christ down) 7or ‘Who will go down into the abyss?’ (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead).” 8But what does it say?

“The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart”  
(that is, the word of faith that we preach), 9for, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. 10For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. 11For the scripture says, “No one who believes in him will be put to shame.” 12For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all, enriching all who call upon him. 13For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

14But how can they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how can they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone to preach? 15And how can people preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring [the] good news!” 16But not everyone has heeded the good news; for Isaiah says, “Lord, who has believed what was heard from us?” 17Thus faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ. 18But I ask, did they not hear? Certainly they did; for

“Their voice has gone forth to all the earth,  
and their words to the ends of the world.”

19But I ask, did not Israel understand? First Moses says:

“I will make you jealous of those who are not a nation;  
with a senseless nation I will make you angry.”

20Then Isaiah speaks boldly and says:

“I was found [by] those who were not seeking me;  
I revealed myself to those who were not asking for me.”

21But regarding Israel he says, “All day long I stretched out my hands to a disobedient and contentious people.”

Paul continues what he started in 9:1, namely, to establish himself in the good graces of both the Jewish and Gentile Christians in Rome. In order to do that, he continues to explore passages from the Hebrew scriptures which validate his contention that faith in Jesus is, as he says in verse 4, "the end of the law for the justification of everyone who has faith." While scholars debate whether that means that Christ puts an "end" to the Law, or that Christ is the "end" to which the Law pointed, the wording makes it possible to include both meanings.

Seeking righteousness by observing the law is futile; faith in Jesus is the path to salvation for both Jew and Greek. Paul amasses many Old Testament passages to demonstrate his point.

### 11:1-10 - The remnant of Israel

1I ask, then, has God rejected his people? Of course not! For I too am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. 2God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. Do you not know what the scripture says about Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel? 3"Lord, they have killed your prophets, they have torn down your altars, and I alone am left, and they are seeking my life." 4But what is God's response to him? "I have left for myself seven thousand men who have not knelt to Baal." 5So also at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace. 6But if by grace, it is no longer because of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace. 7What then? What Israel was seeking it did not attain, but the elect attained it; the rest were hardened, 8as it is written:

"God gave them a spirit of deep sleep,  
eyes that should not see  
and ears that should not hear,  
down to this very day."

9And David says:

"Let their table become a snare and a trap,  
a stumbling block and a retribution for them;  
10let their eyes grow dim so that they may not see,  
and keep their backs bent forever."

Continuing to explore the meaning of passages from the Old Testament, Paul insists that God has not rejected Israel, but large parts of Israel have rejected God. There is a remnant, however, "chosen by grace" not because of the works of the Law.

### 11:11-24 - The Gentiles' salvation

11Hence I ask, did they stumble so as to fall? Of course not! But through their transgression salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make them jealous. 12Now if their transgression is enrichment for the world, and if their diminished number is enrichment for the Gentiles, how much more their full number. 13Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I glory in my ministry 14in order to make my race jealous and thus save some of them. 15For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead? 16If the first fruits are holy, so is the whole batch of dough; and if the root is holy, so are the branches.

17But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, a wild olive shoot, were grafted in their place and have come to share in the rich root of the olive tree, 18do not boast against the branches. If you do boast, consider that you do not support the root; the root supports you. 19Indeed you will say, "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in." 20That is so. They were broken off because of unbelief, but you are there because of faith. So do not become haughty, but stand in awe. 21For if God did not spare the natural branches, [perhaps] he will not spare you

either. 22See, then, the kindness and severity of God: severity toward those who fell, but God's kindness to you, provided you remain in his kindness; otherwise you too will be cut off. 23And they also, if they do not remain in unbelief, will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. 24For if you were cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated one, how much more will they who belong to it by nature be grafted back into their own olive tree.

Paul's sympathy for the Gentiles, to whom he considers himself the special apostle, does not exclude his sympathy for Israel. In God's providence there is provided salvation for all. The Jewish rejection of salvation through Christ opened the way for Gentile salvation. If the Jewish rejection of Christ brought about the reconciliation of the world, when they accept Christ, it will be like life from the dead. He mixes his metaphors a bit: first fruits and dough, but his meaning is clear in his use of the metaphor of the tree and the branches.

What a sympathetic understanding of the relationship between Israel and the Gentiles! Israel is the root and the tree. Some Jewish branches have cut themselves off, making room for the grafting on to the tree the Gentile branches. But the Gentiles should not boast, because if you don't remain in God's grace, you, too may be cut off. And if the Jews do not remain in unbelief, they will be grafted back onto the tree.

It is hard to imagine a more cogent argument on Paul's part, if his intention in all of this theology is to enter the good graces of both the Jewish and Gentile Christians in Rome. Well done, Paul!

#### 11:25-29 - God's irrevocable call

25I do not want you to be unaware of this mystery, brothers, so that you will not become wise [in] your own estimation: a hardening has come upon Israel in part, until the full number of the Gentiles comes in, 26and thus all Israel will be saved, as it is written:

“The deliverer will come out of Zion,  
he will turn away godlessness from Jacob;  
27and this is my covenant with them  
when I take away their sins.”

28In respect to the gospel, they are enemies on your account; but in respect to election, they are beloved because of the patriarchs. 29For the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable.

Don't boast, Gentile believers. Israel's time of salvation will come. They are enemies of the gospel in order to make room for you. But God's election of them has not been revoked; God's call is irrevocable.

#### 11:30-36 - God's mercy

30Just as you once disobeyed God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience, 31so they have now disobeyed in order that, by virtue of the mercy shown to you, they too may [now] receive mercy. 32For God delivered all to disobedience, that he might have mercy upon all. 33Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How inscrutable are his judgments and how unsearchable his ways!

34“For who has known the mind of the Lord  
or who has been his counselor?”

35“Or who has given him anything  
that he may be repaid?”

36For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.

Paul addresses the Gentiles in Rome by acknowledging that they once disobeyed God, but now have received God's mercy. The Jews have now disobeyed God by not accepting Jesus, the one to which the Law pointed. All were disobedient in the past, but God has mercy on both. In verses 33 to 36 Paul praises God for his wisdom and knowledge, however inscrutable are God's judgements and unsearchable God's ways. All glory to God!

Paul has spent the last three chapters demonstrating that neither Jews nor Gentiles have any reason to be angry with God or with Paul. God did not reject the majority of Jews, rather they rejected God by not accepting Jesus. The Jews have no reason to be angry with Paul, because he did not disparage the Law in writing to the Galatians. The Gentiles have no reason to be angry with Paul simply because he has appreciation for the Law.

Now on to other things. From 12:1 to 15:13 Paul expounds on how all Christians should live, both Jews and Gentiles. His admonitions are pretty straight forward, much less complicated than the theological discussion in which Paul has been engaged in these previous chapters.

### 12:1-2 - A new kind of sacrifice

1I urge you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship. 2Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect.

Having settled any misunderstanding the Romans might have had on his position regarding the relationship between the Law of Moses and faith in Jesus Christ, Paul, still using images relevant to the Law, urges the Romans to make a kind of sacrifice different from those of the Law, a living sacrifice which is spiritual, as contrasted to the offering of dead animals. That sacrifice is to differentiate themselves from the world around them by a renewal of their minds so that they can discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect.

### 12:3-8 - Many parts in one body

3For by the grace given to me I tell everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than one ought to think, but to think soberly, each according to the measure of faith that God has apportioned. 4For as in one body we have many parts, and all the parts do not have the same function, 5so we, though many, are one body in Christ and individually parts of one another. 6Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us exercise them: if prophecy, in proportion to the faith; 7if ministry, in ministering; if one is a teacher, in teaching; 8if one exhorts, in exhortation; if one contributes, in generosity; if one is over others, with diligence; if one does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.

That all are members of the Body of Christ is well accepted. Paul makes the further point that by being members of the body, we are also members of one another. So the gifts each has is for the building up of the body, and therefore, of each other. Each gift is clear in its meaning, except for "if one is over others." Those would be the administrators in the community.

## 12:9-21 - Do it all out of love

9Let love be sincere; hate what is evil, hold on to what is good; 10love one another with mutual affection; anticipate one another in showing honor. 11Do not grow slack in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. 12Rejoice in hope, endure in affliction, persevere in prayer. 13Contribute to the needs of the holy ones, exercise hospitality. 14Bless those who persecute [you], bless and do not curse them. 15Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. 16Have the same regard for one another; do not be haughty but associate with the lowly; do not be wise in your own estimation. 17Do not repay anyone evil for evil; be concerned for what is noble in the sight of all. 18If possible, on your part, live at peace with all. 19Beloved, do not look for revenge but leave room for the wrath; for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” 20Rather, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head.” 21Do not be conquered by evil but conquer evil with good.

Paul gives directions on how to live a life of love. It’s all pretty clear. When he writes, “Do not repay anyone evil for evil; be concerned for what is noble in the sight of all,” one can picture what the opposite would be like. It would be bickering and back-biting. But if in the face of evil done to you, you do not retaliate, your nobility will be evident to all.

You may remember that earlier it was said that “wrath” means “deserving punishment.” What Paul means here is let God settle accounts; don’t look for revenge. Instead humiliate your enemy by doing good to him or her. To seek revenge for hurts would be to be conquered by evil; rather conquer evil with good.

## 13:1-7 - Obedience

1Let every person be subordinate to the higher authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been established by God. 2Therefore, whoever resists authority opposes what God has appointed, and those who oppose it will bring judgment upon themselves. 3For rulers are not a cause of fear to good conduct, but to evil. Do you wish to have no fear of authority? Then do what is good and you will receive approval from it, 4for it is a servant of God for your good. But if you do evil, be afraid, for it does not bear the sword without purpose; it is the servant of God to inflict wrath on the evildoer. 5Therefore, it is necessary to be subject not only because of the wrath but also because of conscience. 6This is why you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, devoting themselves to this very thing. 7Pay to all their dues, taxes to whom taxes are due, toll to whom toll is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due.

Paul seems to simply take it for granted that because this community exists in Rome, it is very aware of Imperial authority, and he just takes it for granted that legitimate civil authority is sanctioned by God and must be obeyed. There is no need to fear authority unless one is doing evil. So if you don’t want to fear authority, then do what is good, and authority won’t bother you. Authority itself is a servant of God, given for the good of all. But if you do evil, then be afraid. Authority does bear the sword; that is in order to “inflict wrath” on the evil doer. Again, that means to give punishment. But fear of punishment is not the only reason to obey; your conscience will tell you to do the same.

## 13:8-10 - Love is the authority to be obeyed

8Owe nothing to anyone, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. 9The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; you shall not kill; you shall not steal; you shall not covet,” and

whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this saying, [namely] “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” 10Love does no evil to the neighbor; hence, love is the fulfillment of the law.

That’s pretty clear. Paul quotes several of the commandments from the Law of Moses which must be obeyed, and then writes about “whatever other commandments;” these are prescriptions of Roman law. Love of one’s neighbor will motivate even the observance of civil law.

### 13:11-14 - Because the end is near

11And do this because you know the time; it is the hour now for you to awake from sleep. For our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed; 12the night is advanced, the day is at hand. Let us then throw off the works of darkness [and] put on the armor of light; 13let us conduct ourselves properly as in the day, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in promiscuity and licentiousness, not in rivalry and jealousy. 14But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the desires of the flesh.

The background for this admonition is twofold. First the night was considered a time for carousing and drunkenness; now the day is at hand, so the things of the darkness must be set aside. Secondly the day which is at hand is the day of the Lord’s return.

### 14:1-12 - Stop judging

1Welcome anyone who is weak in faith, but not for disputes over opinions. 2One person believes that one may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. 3The one who eats must not despise the one who abstains, and the one who abstains must not pass judgment on the one who eats; for God has welcomed him. 4Who are you to pass judgment on someone else’s servant? Before his own master he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand. 5[For] one person considers one day more important than another, while another person considers all days alike. Let everyone be fully persuaded in his own mind. 6Whoever observes the day, observes it for the Lord. Also whoever eats, eats for the Lord, since he gives thanks to God; while whoever abstains, abstains for the Lord and gives thanks to God. 7None of us lives for oneself, and no one dies for oneself. 8For if we live, we live for the Lord, and if we die, we die for the Lord; so then, whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s. 9For this is why Christ died and came to life, that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living. 10Why then do you judge your brother? Or you, why do you look down on your brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God; 11for it is written:

“As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bend before me,  
and every tongue shall give praise to God.”

12So [then] each of us shall give an account of himself [to God].

Those who are weak in faith may have been those who were scrupulous about observing special Jewish feast days and dietary regulations. Welcome such people into your company, but not for the sake of arguing with them or trying to change them. It’s likely that some of the Jewish Christians in Rome still adhered to some of the Jewish dietary laws, while others did not. They should not judge each other.

In verse 4 when Paul writes “Before his own master he stands or falls,” by “master” he means God. Each one will be held accountable to God who will judge. So the rest of you stop judging. The word translated as “master” is the same word which is translated in the rest of this section as “Lord.”

## 14:13-23 - Consideration for others

13Then let us no longer judge one another, but rather resolve never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother. 14I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; still, it is unclean for someone who thinks it unclean. 15If your brother is being hurt by what you eat, your conduct is no longer in accord with love. Do not because of your food destroy him for whom Christ died. 16So do not let your good be reviled. 17For the kingdom of God is not a matter of food and drink, but of righteousness, peace, and joy in the holy Spirit; 18whoever serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by others. 19Let us then pursue what leads to peace and to building up one another. 20For the sake of food, do not destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to become a stumbling block by eating; 21it is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble. 22Keep the faith [that] you have to yourself in the presence of God; blessed is the one who does not condemn himself for what he approves. 23But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because this is not from faith; for whatever is not from faith is sin.

When sharing a meal there is more to consider than whether something is considered clean or unclean. Paul believes nothing is unclean in itself. However, if someone thinks that some foods are unclean, they are unclean for them. People should judge their conduct in such circumstances, not only on the objective cleanliness of the food, but also on the social dimension of sharing a meal, possibly a meal connected with the celebration of the Eucharist. So, for the sake of your freedom to eat what you want, don't destroy a brother or sister for whom Christ died. Your ability to eat what you want is good, but don't let it be reviled because others can't think as you do.

In their own consciences, before God they are free to eat whatever they want. Keep that between you and God. You're blessed by the opinion you hold. However, verse 23 needs a bit of consideration. The word which is translated "faith" in this instance means "conviction." So, if one acts not according to one's convictions, one sins. If the social element of your eating causes you to have doubts about making use of your freedom, it's wrong to go ahead.

## 15:1-6 - Consideration for others

1We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak and not to ourselves; 2let each of us please our neighbor for the good, for building up. 3For Christ did not please himself; but, as it is written, "The insults of those who insult you fall upon me." 4For whatever was written previously was written for our instruction, that by endurance and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. 5May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to think in harmony with one another, in keeping with Christ Jesus, 6that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

When Paul speaks of "the strong," he means those whose faith allows them to be exempt from the Jewish dietary laws; in that group he includes himself. The Greek word which is translated here as "put up with" has two meanings: to bear (a burden) and to endure. Perhaps Paul means both, but the English would suggest the second meaning. So the strong are to endure the scruples of those who still feel bound by those dietary laws. That's good for the building up of the community. The phrase in Greek can also mean "to edify someone." So a "strong" person observing what the "weak" feels obliged to do will edify the weak person. Christ "put up with" a lot, rather than pleasing himself. The quotation from Psalm 69 is a lament of a just person who "put up with" the insults which were cast on him because he was part of a group.

Verses 5 and 6 are a prayer for endurance, encouragement and harmony within the community.

## 15:7-13 - God's fidelity and mercy

7Welcome one another, then, as Christ welcomed you, for the glory of God. 8For I say that Christ became a minister of the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, to confirm the promises to the patriarchs, 9but so that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written:

“Therefore, I will praise you among the Gentiles  
and sing praises to your name.”

10And again it says:

“Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people.”

11And again:

“Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles,  
and let all the peoples praise him.”

12And again Isaiah says:

“The root of Jesse shall come,  
raised up to rule the Gentiles;  
in him shall the Gentiles hope.”

13May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the holy Spirit.

Christ became, as Paul said of himself in First Corinthians, all things to all people. “To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law.” He ministered to the circumcised to show that God was truthful in his promises to the patriarchs, and he ministered to the Gentiles so they would glorify God for his mercy. Here he came up with a lot of scripture to prove his point. And again he offers a prayer for the community that they will have all joy and peace in their practice of the faith, presumably both with and without adherence to the Jewish dietary laws.

## 15:14-21 - Paul, apostle to the Gentiles

14I myself am convinced about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and able to admonish one another. 15But I have written to you rather boldly in some respects to remind you, because of the grace given me by God 16to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in performing the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering up of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the holy Spirit. 17In Christ Jesus, then, I have reason to boast in what pertains to God. 18For I will not dare to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to lead the Gentiles to obedience by word and deed, 19by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit [of God], so that from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum I have finished preaching the gospel of Christ. 20Thus I aspire to proclaim the gospel not where Christ has already been named, so that I do not build on another's foundation, 21but as it is written:

“Those who have never been told of him shall see,  
and those who have never heard of him shall understand.”

Paul has spent the last few sections of this letter trying to provide for the Jewish members of the Christian community. He now turns his attention to the members of the community who are not Jewish, with whom he must have felt a certain affinity, even though he himself was Jewish. He knows they are good. He wrote rather boldly in places, just to remind them of their goodness.

He is beginning to wind down his letter, and he does so by reminding the Romans that he has been appointed the minister of the gospel to the Gentiles. He compares his efforts to those of

the priest in the temple, in that he is offering up the Gentiles to God in an acceptable manner, sanctified by the holy Spirit. But he won't take personal credit for what Christ has done through him.

After noting all the areas in which he has already preached, he says he aspires to proclaim the gospel where Christ has not yet been preached. He is not talking about this letter to the Romans, because Christ has already been preached in Rome. He is referring to his intention to travel to Rome to establish a base of operations while he goes on to preach the gospel in Spain.

#### 15:22-33 - Plans for the near future

22That is why I have so often been prevented from coming to you. 23But now, since I no longer have any opportunity in these regions and since I have desired to come to you for many years, 24I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain and to be sent on my way there by you, after I have enjoyed being with you for a time. 25Now, however, I am going to Jerusalem to minister to the holy ones. 26For Macedonia and Achaia have decided to make some contribution for the poor among the holy ones in Jerusalem; 27they decided to do it, and in fact they are indebted to them, for if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to serve them in material blessings. 28So when I have completed this and safely handed over this contribution to them, I shall set out by way of you to Spain; 29and I know that in coming to you I shall come in the fullness of Christ's blessing.

30I urge you, [brothers,] by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in the struggle by your prayers to God on my behalf, 31that I may be delivered from the disobedient in Judea, and that my ministry for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the holy ones, 32so that I may come to you with joy by the will of God and be refreshed together with you. 33The God of peace be with all of you. Amen.

How friendly can a guy get! He's really looking forward to visiting the community in Rome, but not to preach the gospel to them, but to visit and to enjoy being with them. But first he must bring to Jerusalem the collection he has been taking up among the Gentiles. Paul says that these Gentiles wanted to be of material help to the believers in Jerusalem, because it was from the Jerusalem church that the good news spread to the Gentiles. After Jerusalem, Paul will be on his way to Rome.

Which, of course, happened, but not as soon as Paul had planned, nor in the way he had planned. He will be brought to Rome as a prisoner.

Paul is not sure what kind of reception he's going to get, either in Jerusalem or in Rome. In Jerusalem there are a lot of his former associates who would consider him a traitor because he went from being among their number in persecuting the church, to now proclaiming Jesus, the founder of that church. The Jewish Christians in the community too may have been offended by his letter to the Galatians. Perhaps he hopes that the Romans will send a good word about him to Jerusalem.

And he's not sure of his reception in Rome either. He's quite sure they have seen the letter he wrote to the Galatians, in which he spoke very harshly of things pertaining to the Jewish belief and practice, some of which is still observed by Roman Jewish Christians.

That seems like the end of the letter. But there are a whole lot of post-scripts still to come.

#### 16:1-2 - Phoebe

1I commend to you Phoebe our sister, who is [also] a minister of the church at Cenchreae, 2that you may receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the holy ones, and help her in whatever she may need from you, for she has been a benefactor to many and to me as well.

Without any certainty who Phoebe is, she is identified as a minister (*diakonon*) in the church at Cenchreae, a few miles from the place from which Paul is writing. Perhaps she is going to carry this letter to Rome.

#### 16:3-16 - To all the rest

3Greet Prisca and Aquila, my co-workers in Christ Jesus, 4who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I am grateful but also all the churches of the Gentiles; 5greet also the church at their house. Greet my beloved Epänetus, who was the firstfruits in Asia for Christ. 6Greet Mary, who has worked hard for you. 7Greet Andronicus and Junia, my relatives and my fellow prisoners; they are prominent among the apostles and they were in Christ before me. 8Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord. 9Greet Urbanus, our co-worker in Christ, and my beloved Stachys. 10Greet Apelles, who is approved in Christ. Greet those who belong to the family of Aristobulus. 11Greet my relative Herodion. Greet those in the Lord who belong to the family of Narcissus. 12Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphaena and Tryphosa. Greet the beloved Persis, who has worked hard in the Lord. 13Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother and mine. 14Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the brothers who are with them. 15Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the holy ones who are with them. 16Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you.

That's 26 people! We've heard about Prisca and Aquila before in First Corinthians when Paul was writing from Ephesus. They were Jews banished from Rome by Emperor Claudius, who had by now returned to their home in Rome. But most of the rest are unknown. It is noteworthy that the names are both Hebrew and Greek, reflecting the make-up of the Roman community. That Paul would know so many of them is explained by the traffic between Rome and Corinth from whence Paul writes.

Of some special note are the names of Andronicus and his wife Junia, whom Paul calls apostles, by which the church at that time meant those who had seen the Lord. Paul's claim to apostleship was his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus. Andronicus and Junia may have been among the 5,000 to whom Jesus appeared in Jerusalem after his resurrection.

The mention of so many members of the Roman community would tend to cement relationships between Paul and the members of the community.

#### 16:17-20 - Factions

17I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who create dissensions and obstacles, in opposition to the teaching that you learned; avoid them. 18For such people do not serve our Lord Christ but their own appetites, and by fair and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the innocent. 19For while your obedience is known to all, so that I rejoice over you, I want you to be wise as to what is good, and simple as to what is evil; 20then the God of peace will quickly crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you.

Although Paul has heard all kinds of good things about the Roman community, he warns against the development of factions. What is translated here from the Greek in verse 18 as "appetites" is the Greek word for "belly." Paul may again be referring to any tension which may arise within the community because some insist on observing the Jewish dietary laws.

### 16:21-23 - The letter ends . . . again!

21 Timothy, my co-worker, greets you; so do Lucius and Jason and Sosipater, my relatives. 22 I, Tertius, the writer of this letter, greet you in the Lord. 23 Gaius, who is host to me and to the whole church, greets you. Erastus, the city treasurer, and our brother Quartus greet you.

It's the only time that the scribe who took Paul's dictation identifies himself. Perhaps he, too, was known in Rome.

### 16:24-27 - Doxology

[24] (Missing) 25 [Now to him who can strengthen you, according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery kept secret for long ages 26 but now manifested through the prophetic writings and, according to the command of the eternal God, made known to all nations to bring about the obedience of faith, 27 to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ be glory forever and ever. Amen.]

It's a nice ending, even though some dispute whether it belongs here or somewhere else at the end of the letter, or whether or not it belongs to Paul's letter at all. Some think it was added by a copyist to prepare it for reading to a community.

Anyway, Amen.

## Transition

The letters we have just considered (I Thessalonians, Galatians, Philippians, Philemon, I and II Corinthians and Romans) are almost universally thought to have been written by Paul. The remaining letters which bear Paul's name are either disputed as to Paul's authorship or definitely not to be included among Paul's writings. These were written after Paul's death by those who thought they understood what Paul's thoughts would be. The undisputed letters are written to address very real and even pressing issues within the Christian communities to which they were addressed. The later letters have a more universal tone, written to expound some teaching, rather than to address current problems. Scholars well versed in the Greek language can detect differences within the style of writing in the letters which point to authors other than Paul. These letters convey development of, but fidelity to, Paul's thought.

The undisputed Pauline letters generally have a tone of expecting the return of the Lord Jesus in the near future. The later letters attributed to Paul seem to have a more futuristic outlook, making provision for the "church" to continue through the ages. They also bear witness to a more structured church with definite roles for presbyters, deacons and bishops. The dating of these compositions varies from scholar to scholar, and opinions can be as divergent as several decades.

So how was it determined which letters would be included in the list of genuinely inspired writings? There were three criteria which developed during the Second and Third Centuries. And decisions about what to include varied between the Western and Eastern churches. Generally there were three criteria which were applied to the documents.

First, their apostolic attribution. If the name of an apostle were attached to the document, it was considered to be significant and needed to be included in the list of accepted works.

Second, the addressee had to be of some significant importance. This included major churches and even individuals very significant in those or other churches. Thus, Philemon, Timothy, Titus were considered.

Third, the writings' conformity to "the rule of faith" had to be verified. Some writings, especially some "gospels" were at first thought to be authentically inspired works, until they were examined more closely and found to contain ideas inimical to the rule of faith.

Who collected all these letters which were addressed to such a divergent group of addressees. Perhaps the writer, Paul in most cases, kept a copy of the letters he sent. Not likely. Others suggest that Paul's disciples collected them, beginning even while Paul was still alive and still writing. Onesimus, mentioned in the letter to Philemon, may have been one such collector.

The letters to the different churches were copied and those copies shared with other churches. So there was some considerable circulation of copies of Paul's letters. It wasn't until the end of the Second Century that a complete collection of all thirteen letters attributed to Paul can be verified.

We will now take up a brief study of the letters attributed to Paul, but which were most likely, and in many instances, most definitely, not written or dictated by him. II Thessalonians remains debated by some as to its origin and date. I have included it in the collection of pseudoPauline letters, largely because Chapter 2 is so complicated, and that doesn't match with Paul's other writings.

The content of the letters we will consider does bear resemblance to the content of the letters we know Paul wrote, but they were penned or dictated by others. These letters represent what others say Paul says. However, I will continue to use the name "Paul" for the person who wrote these letters under that name. But, with the exception of Second Thessalonians which is disputed, I will designate the author with the name "pPaul" for pseudo-Paul.

With those understandings we will examine the content of II Thessalonians – date unknown, perhaps around 100 A.D., II Timothy – late 60's or 90's A.D., Colossians – 80's A.D., Ephesians – 90's A.D., Titus – 90's A.D., I Timothy – 90's A.D., From this one gets the idea that toward the end of the First Century writing letters in some famous person's name was rather common. Study of extra-biblical letters verifies this assumption.

### Second Letter to Timothy (Pastoral letter)

No, this is not a mistake. What is called the Second Letter to Timothy is thought to have been written before what is called the First Letter to Timothy. Here's why.

The things we don't know about this letter fill more pages in books than do the things we think we do know. The possibilities seem endless, ranging from who wrote the letter, to from where it emanated, to whom it was addressed, to when it was written. What we will rule out is that this letter was written by Paul the Apostle himself prior to his death. So our author is pseudo-Paul, hereafter indicated by "pPaul." That the content of the letter is considered by the author to represent what Paul would have thought and written had he lived long enough is generally accepted. A disciple of Paul's is projecting his master's insights into a future Paul himself did not live to see.

OK, so Paul didn't write it. But when was it written? Again the variety of opinion is almost staggering. I again opt for Raymond E. Brown's substantiated suggestion that II Timothy was written in Rome shortly after Paul's martyrdom in the mid 60's. I'll spare you the substantiating material which has amassed around this opinion. Let's imagine (not substantiated) that our writer was with Paul at the time of his martyrdom. He is writing a pseudonymous last will and testament of Paul the Apostle.

So, here we are, reading Second Timothy prior to reading First Timothy, on the supposition that this letter was written first by an author other than the one (or two) who wrote Titus and First Timothy.

Nothing I have studied more eloquently places this letter in its proper place and perspective in the annals of Christian literature than Raymond E. Brown's introduction to his analysis of the letter.

The complicated debate about sequence, authorship, and date should not be allowed to obscure the power of this letter read simply as it is presented: an eloquently passionate appeal of the greatest Christian apostle that his work continue beyond his death through generations of disciples. Paul has committed his life to God in Christ, and amidst his sufferings he knows that God will protect what has been thus entrusted (II Tim 1:12). He may be chained; but the gospel he has proclaimed, which is the word of God, cannot be chained (2:9). Some scholars have complained that the Paul of II Tim has become a boaster; rather he is portrayed as offering the only argument left him in prison and at the brink of death

– the example of a life lived in a way that could encourage those whom he addresses. If Paul has contributed enormously to making the love of Christ (in both senses) real to Christians, in no small way II Tim has contributed to making Paul loved.

### 1:1-2 - Address and greeting

1 Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God for the promise of life in Christ Jesus, 2 to Timothy, my dear child: grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

On the assumption that this letter was written by a disciple of Paul's, pPaul, who was with him at the time of Paul's martyrdom, pPaul might well have known, not only Paul, but also Timothy, and might have known how dear Timothy was to Paul.

### 1:3-5 - Thanksgiving

3 I am grateful to God, whom I worship with a clear conscience as my ancestors did, as I remember you constantly in my prayers, night and day. 4 I yearn to see you again, recalling your tears, so that I may be filled with joy, 5 as I recall your sincere faith that first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and that I am confident lives also in you.

Acts 16:1 tells us that Timothy's mother was a Jewish Christian. His father was a Gentile. Here pPaul alludes to his and Timothy's common ancestry in the Jewish faith.

### 1:6-14 - Timothy's gifts

6 For this reason, I remind you to stir into flame the gift of God that you have through the imposition of my hands. 7 For God did not give us a spirit of cowardice but rather of power and love and self-control. 8 So do not be ashamed of your testimony to our Lord, nor of me, a prisoner for his sake; but bear your share of hardship for the gospel with the strength that comes from God.

9 He saved us and called us to a holy life, not according to our works but according to his own design and the grace bestowed on us in Christ Jesus before time began, 10 but now made manifest through the appearance of our savior Christ Jesus, who destroyed death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel, 11 for which I was appointed preacher and apostle and teacher. 12 On this account I am suffering these things; but I am not ashamed, for I know him in whom I have believed and am confident that he is able to guard what has been entrusted to me until that day. 13 Take as your norm the sound words that you heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. 14 Guard this rich trust with the help of the holy Spirit that dwells within us.

Note the use of the word "us." While it might be a generic indicator of the Christians, here it seems to be a familial bond shared by pPaul and Timothy.

Whatever gifts Timothy has are from God, not earned. The "through the imposition of my hands" indicates some sort of official designation to an office in the community, possibly what came to be known as ordination. What God gave to both Paul and Timothy was a gift of power, love and self-control. Timothy ought not be ashamed of his own testimony to the Lord, not of Paul, but rather put up with whatever hardships come from proclaiming the gospel.

pPaul recounts the saving power of God in both his and Timothy's lives, attributing all

good works to the grace of God. He writes that we should hold on to our common faith with the help of the holy Spirit that dwells within us.

### 1:15-18 - Disappointment and gratitude

15You know that everyone in Asia deserted me, including Phygelus and Hermogenes. 16May the Lord grant mercy to the family of Onesiphorus because he often gave me new heart and was not ashamed of my chains. 17But when he came to Rome, he promptly searched for me and found me. 18May the Lord grant him to find mercy from the Lord on that day. And you know very well the services he rendered in Ephesus.

Great disappointment that two friends deserted him. And gratitude for the ones who stood by him.

### 2:1-13 - Instructions to Timothy

1So you, my child, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. 2And what you heard from me through many witnesses entrust to faithful people who will have the ability to teach others as well. 3Bear your share of hardship along with me like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. 4To satisfy the one who recruited him, a soldier does not become entangled in the business affairs of life. 5Similarly, an athlete cannot receive the winner's crown except by competing according to the rules. 6The hardworking farmer ought to have the first share of the crop. 7Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything.

8Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David: such is my gospel, 9for which I am suffering, even to the point of chains, like a criminal. But the word of God is not chained. 10Therefore, I bear with everything for the sake of those who are chosen, so that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, together with eternal glory. 11This saying is trustworthy:

If we have died with him  
we shall also live with him;  
12if we persevere  
we shall also reign with him.  
But if we deny him  
he will deny us.  
13If we are unfaithful  
he remains faithful,  
for he cannot deny himself.

pPaul reminds Timothy of the grace of Christ Jesus which he has received, and asks that he teach other faithful people what he had learned from Paul so they can pass it on to others. The three images of dedication to a mission are given: the soldier, the athlete and the farmer. Think about their efforts to receive their reward and you will understand that you are to act similarly.

pPaul goes on to a summary statement of the gospel he has preached, for which he is suffering in chains. But the message of the gospel is not chained; it will continue beyond him.

The trustworthy saying is encouragement to keep going despite the possibility of suffering and death, because God is faithful.

### 1:14-26 - Warning: distinguish true from false teachers

14Remind people of these things and charge them before God to stop disputing about words. This serves no useful purpose since it harms those who listen. 15Be eager to present yourself as acceptable to God, a workman who causes no disgrace, imparting the word of truth without deviation. 16Avoid profane, idle talk, for such people will

become more and more godless, 17and their teaching will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, 18who have deviated from the truth by saying that [the] resurrection has already taken place and are upsetting the faith of some. 19Nevertheless, God’s solid foundation stands, bearing this inscription, “The Lord knows those who are his”; and, “Let everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord avoid evil.”

20In a large household there are vessels not only of gold and silver but also of wood and clay, some for lofty and others for humble use. 21If anyone cleanses himself of these things, he will be a vessel for lofty use, dedicated, beneficial to the master of the house, ready for every good work. 22So turn from youthful desires and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord with purity of heart. 23Avoid foolish and ignorant debates, for you know that they breed quarrels. 24A slave of the Lord should not quarrel, but should be gentle with everyone, able to teach, tolerant, 25correcting opponents with kindness. It may be that God will grant them repentance that leads to knowledge of the truth, 26and that they may return to their senses out of the devil’s snare, where they are entrapped by him, for his will.

The first of four kinds of teachers to avoid are presented in verses 14 and 15. Arguing over *words* is an indication that one has not grasped the *truth*. Rather, impart the word of truth without beating around the bush (without deviation). The second kind of teachers to avoid (verses 16 to 21) are those who spread the false notion that the resurrection has already taken place. They are the vessels in a household used for less worthy purposes. pPaul names his nemesis figures, Hymenaeus and Philetus. However, if they cleanse themselves from their heresy, they will be useful. The third group (verse 22) are the immature who are controlled by youthful desires (which pPaul does not numerate). And the fourth group are those who by arguing breed quarrels (verses 23 to 26).

Whether it is only the last group mentioned, or all four groups, there is hope that God will grant them repentance and they will return to their senses. They are entrapped by the devil to do the devil’s will.

### 3:1-9 - Dangers of the last days

1But understand this: there will be terrifying times in the last days. 2People will be self-centered and lovers of money, proud, haughty, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, irreligious, 3callous, implacable, slanderous, licentious, brutal, hating what is good. 4traitors, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, 5as they make a pretense of religion but deny its power. Reject them. 6For some of these slip into homes and make captives of women weighed down by sins, led by various desires, 7always trying to learn but never able to reach a knowledge of the truth. 8Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so they also oppose the truth—people of depraved mind, unqualified in the faith. 9But they will not make further progress, for their foolishness will be plain to all, as it was with those two.

The last days, perhaps the days when this letter was written, will be filled with a lot of depravity. The long list is given. In Greek these words have an alliteration which produces a pleasant sound when read. The added problem is that some of this stuff will be done in the name of religion. Particularly susceptible to this false religious teaching of certain magicians who prey on women who are always anxious to hear new things, but are unable to distinguish truth from falsehood.

In verse 8, two names are given which do not appear in the Book of Exodus, but were the names given later to the magicians of Pharaoh who contended with Moses and Aaron in the duel of the rods changing into snakes (Exodus 7:11 ff). The current false teachers won’t get far. Their

foolishness will be plain to all.

### 3:10-17 - The relation of Timothy to Paul

10You have followed my teaching, way of life, purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, 11persecutions, and sufferings, such as happened to me in Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra, persecutions that I endured. Yet from all these things the Lord delivered me. 12In fact, all who want to live religiously in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. 13But wicked people and charlatans will go from bad to worse, deceivers and deceived. 14But you, remain faithful to what you have learned and believed, because you know from whom you learned it, 15and that from infancy you have known [the] sacred scriptures, which are capable of giving you wisdom for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. 16All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for refutation, for correction, and for training in righteousness, 17so that one who belongs to God may be competent, equipped for every good work.

If Timothy is going to imitate Paul in faithful preaching of the gospel as was Paul, he too will suffer persecution; in fact all who “live religiously in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” Timothy is urged to remain faithful to what he has learned from Paul. Timothy has also known the scriptures (the Old Testament); these, too, will give wisdom about salvation from faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and very useful for preparing the preacher to deliver the message.

### 4:1-5 - Solemn charge

1I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingly power: 2proclaim the word; be persistent whether it is convenient or inconvenient; convince, reprimand, encourage through all patience and teaching. 3For the time will come when people will not tolerate sound doctrine but, following their own desires and insatiable curiosity, will accumulate teachers 4and will stop listening to the truth and will be diverted to myths. 5But you, be self-possessed in all circumstances; put up with hardship; perform the work of an evangelist; fulfill your ministry.

Does this really need commentary. I think not. “Insatiable curiosity” translates “itching ears” in Greek.

### 4:6-8 - Paul’s faith

6For I am already being poured out like a libation, and the time of my departure is at hand. 7I have competed well; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith. 8From now on the crown of righteousness awaits me, which the Lord, the just judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me, but to all who have longed for his appearance.

No commentary needed, except to note that a libation was a “joyful sacrifice” of wine being poured on the altar. Using images again from athletics, Paul sums up his life. The crown of righteousness is compared to the laurel crowns awarded to successful athletes. This will be true for all believers.

### 4:9-18 - Paul abandoned

9Try to join me soon, 10for Demas, enamored of the present world, deserted me and went to Thessalonica,

Crescens to Galatia, and Titus to Dalmatia. 11 Luke is the only one with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is helpful to me in the ministry. 12 I have sent Tychicus to Ephesus. 13 When you come, bring the cloak I left with Carpus in Troas, the papyrus rolls, and especially the parchments.

14 Alexander the coppersmith did me a great deal of harm; the Lord will repay him according to his deeds. 15 You too be on guard against him, for he has strongly resisted our preaching.

16 At my first defense no one appeared on my behalf, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them! 17 But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength, so that through me the proclamation might be completed and all the Gentiles might hear it. And I was rescued from the lion's mouth. 18 The Lord will rescue me from every evil threat and will bring me safe to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory forever and ever. Amen.

Permit the use of imagination here. This letter is being penned by a close disciple of Paul, who may have been with him in Rome while Paul was awaiting execution. This disciple, pPaul, has so wrapped himself in the mantle of Paul that he can express in the first person the anxieties and faith Paul experienced as his life was coming to an end. The rescue Paul looks for is from every evil threat, but he is confident that the Lord will bring him safe to his heavenly kingdom.

#### 4:19-22 - Final greeting

19 Greet Prisca and Aquila and the family of Onesiphorus. 20 Erastus remained in Corinth, while I left Trophimus sick at Miletus. 21 Try to get here before winter. Eubulus, Pudens, Linus, Claudia, and all the brothers send greetings.

22 The Lord be with your spirit. Grace be with all of you.

Of Prisca and Aquila we have heard before. They were Jewish Christians, originally from Rome, who were expelled from the city by Emperor Claudius and worked with Paul in Corinth. We know that after Claudius' death they returned to Rome. Supposedly this letter is being written from Rome. Can we conclude that the date of this letter is so early that Prisca and Aquila had not yet returned to Rome? Or did our author simply want to honor these two friends of Paul?

Erastus is spoken of in Acts 18:22. Linus is sometimes thought to be the successor of Saint Peter as the bishop of Rome.

## Letter to the Colossians

Although not written by Paul himself, but by a disciple of his, one scholar notes that Colossians “is certainly a worthy representative of the Pauline heritage.”

Colossae was one of three cities which had close connections with each other; the other two were Laodicea and Ephesus. The city was possibly evangelized by Epaphras, a native of the city, and a sometimes companion of Paul’s. Onesimus, and probably also his master, Philemon were also from Colossae. The dominant suggestion is that Colossians was written by a “school of Paul” located in Ephesus.

Acts 19:10 relates that while Paul was at Ephesus, after he had been rejected by the synagogue there, he began to teach a group of his followers by daily discussions in the lecture hall of Tyrannus, which he did for two years, “with the result that all the inhabitants of the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord, Jews and Greeks alike,” which would have included Colossae.

In Chapter 2, we learn that there are people in Colossae who are disturbing the church with what pPaul calls “empty, seductive philosophy according to human tradition, according to the elemental powers of the world.” Just who those people are is unknown, but pPaul’s refutation of them would suggest that they were a mixture of philosophical, mystical and pagan influences, together with astrology.

### 1:1-2 - Greeting

<sup>1</sup>Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, <sup>2</sup>to the holy ones and faithful brothers in Christ in Colossae: grace to you and peace from God our Father.

This greeting is typical of many of Paul’s undisputed letters, and also of the standard form of a letter at the time.

### 1:3-8 - Thanksgiving

<sup>3</sup>We always give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, <sup>4</sup>for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and the love that you have for all the holy ones <sup>5</sup>because of the hope reserved for you in heaven. Of this you have already heard through the word of truth, the gospel, <sup>6</sup>that has come to you. Just as in the whole world it is bearing fruit and growing, so also among you, from the day you heard it and came to know the grace of God in truth, <sup>7</sup>as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow slave, who is a trustworthy minister of

Christ on your behalf. 8and who also told us of your love in the Spirit.

This thanksgiving is also characteristic of letters of the time, and of Paul's typical format. Although Paul has never been to Colossae, pPaul seems to have a warm affection toward the people there. Epaphras evangelized the community initially, and apparently has kept close ties there. He has told pPaul about the community's growth in love.

#### 1:9-14 - Keep on going

9Therefore, from the day we heard this, we do not cease praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding 10to live in a manner worthy of the Lord, so as to be fully pleasing, in every good work bearing fruit and growing in the knowledge of God, 11strengthened with every power, in accord with his glorious might, for all endurance and patience, with joy 12giving thanks to the Father, who has made you fit to share in the inheritance of the holy ones in light. 13He delivered us from the power of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, 14in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

All these things for which pPaul is thankful will have bearing on his message of encouragement to the Colossians when he takes up the matter of the trouble-makers who have arisen among them or who have come into their community.

#### 1:15-20 - Hymn

15He is the image of the invisible God,  
the firstborn of all creation.  
16For in him were created all things in heaven and on earth,  
the visible and the invisible,  
whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers;  
all things were created through him and for him.  
17He is before all things,  
and in him all things hold together.  
18He is the head of the body, the church.  
He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead,  
that in all things he himself might be preeminent.  
19For in him all the fullness was pleased to dwell,  
20and through him to reconcile all things for him,  
making peace by the blood of his cross  
[through him], whether those on earth or those in heaven.

The hymn was probably already known to the Colossians. Phrases from it could represent, not only things true of Christ, but also ideas of Greek philosophy, gnosticism and Old Testament themes about Wisdom. pPaul is setting the stage for refuting the false teachers who have arisen from the community or who invaded the community. Since the hymn was probably already known to the Colossians, they would be able to see how it refuted those who were teaching things which were false.

It is thought that there were two things added to the already existing hymn by pPaul. In

verse 18 the words “the church,” and in verse 20 the words “through the blood of his cross.”

What do we know about these false teachers? Not much is certain. Judging from the refutation given by pPaul we can conclude that “these opponents had combined belief in Christ with Jewish and Pagan ideas to shape a hierarchical system of heavenly beings in which Christ was subordinated to angelic powers to whom worship was due,” according to Raymond E. Brown. pPaul will take up these issues as his letter progresses. But if one re-reads the hymn, one can see that in itself the hymn refutes what appears to have been the teachings of pPaul’s opponents. The hymn places Christ before all and above all.

### 1:21-23 - Application to the Colossians

21And you who once were alienated and hostile in mind because of evil deeds 22he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through his death, to present you holy, without blemish, and irreproachable before him, 23provided that you persevere in the faith, firmly grounded, stable, and not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been preached to every creature under heaven, of which I, Paul, am a minister.

The reconciliation won by Christ applies to what the Colossians, Gentiles apparently, since pPaul describes them as once “alienated and hostile in mind,” had experienced for themselves in their conversion to the gospel. But they must persevere in the faith they received and not shift their allegiance to the false preachers.

### 1:24-29 - Christ in us

24Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ on behalf of his body, which is the church, 25of which I am a minister in accordance with God’s stewardship given to me to bring to completion for you the word of God, 26the mystery hidden from ages and from generations past. But now it has been manifested to his holy ones, 27to whom God chose to make known the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles; it is Christ in you, the hope for glory. 28It is he whom we proclaim, admonishing everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. 29For this I labor and struggle, in accord with the exercise of his power working within me.

Since pPaul has already stated in the hymn that Christ is everything, what could he possibly mean by “what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ on behalf of his body, which is the church?” That’s debated. One scholar suggests that the translation is not accurate, and would substitute, “I complete what is needed of the Christian sufferings in my flesh for his body, which is the church.” That makes pretty good sense; is it what pPaul meant?

Apparently the false teachers were proposing a sort of mystery cult. Ppaul takes their own word “mystery” and says that the mystery of Christ was made manifest to his holy ones. There’s nothing secret about the mystery of Christ, whereas the mysteries which were being promulgated by the false teachers were things supposedly known only to the initiated.

### 2:1-3 - Application to the Colossians

1For I want you to know how great a struggle I am having for you and for those in Laodicea and all who have not seen me face to face, 2that their hearts may be encouraged as they are brought together in love, to have all the richness of fully assured understanding, for the knowledge of the mystery of God, Christ, 3in whom are hidden all

the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

pPaul outlines his own (internal?) struggle that he is having for the Colossians and the Laodiceans and all the rest who don't know him personally. He claims these struggles as signs of his apostolic authority. He wants to encourage them "to have all the richness of fully assured understanding, for the knowledge of the mystery of God, Christ." In Christ are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, not in the teachings of those opponents of his. Look at what he wants for them: assured understanding, knowledge and wisdom. He sort of says, "Don't be fooled into thinking that in something or someone other than Christ is to be found the mystery of God."

## 2:4-8 - General warning against the false teachers

4I say this so that no one may deceive you by specious arguments. 5For even if I am absent in the flesh, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing as I observe your good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ. 6So, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, walk in him, 7rooted in him and built upon him and established in the faith as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. 8See to it that no one captivate you with an empty, seductive philosophy according to human tradition, according to the elemental powers of the world and not according to Christ.

If it isn't too disrespectful, this might be considered pPaul's set up for the kill, his more specific attack on his opponents. It is a general warning not to be deceived by any kind of argument of "empty, seductive philosophy according to human tradition, according to the elemental powers of the world." Rather hold fast to the "good order and firmness of your faith in Christ."

## 2:9-15 - Christ is sovereign

9For in him dwells the whole fullness of the deity bodily, 10and you share in this fullness in him, who is the head of every principality and power. 11In him you were also circumcised with a circumcision not administered by hand, by stripping off the carnal body, with the circumcision of Christ. 12You were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. 13And even when you were dead [in] transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, he brought you to life along with him, having forgiven us all our transgressions; 14obliterating the bond against us, with its legal claims, which was opposed to us, he also removed it from our midst, nailing it to the cross; 15despoiling the principalities and the powers, he made a public spectacle of them, leading them away in triumph by it.

Remember, as far as can be discerned, the opponents were proposing a view of things which included a secret and mystical arrangement of the universe of which only the initiated were aware, which include angels and other powers which ruled everything, and Christ was subordinate to those powers and rulers. This passage is pPaul's refutation of that position.

So, pPaul asserts that the fullness of God dwelt in Jesus, even in his body. Jesus is the head of every form of spiritual being. Playing on the initiation rites of Jews and Christians, pPaul says that the Gentile Colossians were "circumcised" not by having a bit of their flesh cut off, but with the circumcision of Christ, namely by baptism through which they were buried with Christ and raised to life in him. And that happened for you, Colossians, while you were uncircumcised physically. That's how your sins were forgiven. By his cross, Christ obliterated any legal claims that sin had against you, and showed that any principalities that might think they had some control over earthly matters were killed off by Christ's redeeming crucifixion.

## 2:16-23 - Traditions contrary to Christ

16Let no one, then, pass judgment on you in matters of food and drink or with regard to a festival or new moon or sabbath. 17These are shadows of things to come; the reality belongs to Christ. 18Let no one disqualify you, delighting in self-abasement and worship of angels, taking his stand on visions, inflated without reason by his fleshly mind, 19and not holding closely to the head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and bonds, achieves the growth that comes from God. 20If you died with Christ to the elemental powers of the world, why do you submit to regulations as if you were still living in the world? 21“Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!” 22These are all things destined to perish with use; they accord with human precepts and teachings. 23While they have a semblance of wisdom in rigor of devotion and self-abasement [and] severity to the body, they are of no value against gratification of the flesh.

Judging from pPaul’s refutation of his opponents, the false teachings seem to have included ascetical practices and observances of special days and seasons deemed by pPaul as useless at best. They are mere shadows; Christ is the real thing. Don’t be dismissed by all this ascetical and mystic stuff made up by merely human minds which do not put Christ at the center of things, because Christ is the one through whom comes the growth from God. If you died with Christ in baptism to the things of this world, why do you get all caught up in all these worldly things, like regulations about not handling, not tasting, not touching certain things? All this stuff has no value for combating self-indulgence.

## 3:1-4 - In Christ you died to the world

1If then you were raised with Christ, seek what is above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. 2Think of what is above, not of what is on earth. 3For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. 4When Christ your life appears, then you too will appear with him in glory.

This is the general principle for what will follow. Stop being concerned about all this mystic mumbo-gumbo about earthly things. In baptism you died to all that; you are now in Christ. And when Christ appears, you too will appear with him in glory. Now to some particulars on how to live in Christ.

## 3:5-17 - How to live a new life

5Put to death, then, the parts of you that are earthly: immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and the greed that is idolatry. 6Because of these the wrath of God is coming [upon the disobedient]. 7By these you too once conducted yourselves, when you lived in that way. 8But now you must put them all away: anger, fury, malice, slander, and obscene language out of your mouths. 9Stop lying to one another, since you have taken off the old self with its practices 10and have put on the new self, which is being renewed, for knowledge, in the image of its creator. 11Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all and in all. 12Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, 13bearing with one another and forgiving one another, if one has a grievance against another; as the Lord has forgiven you, so must you also do. 14And over all these put on love, that is, the bond of perfection. 15And let the peace of Christ control your hearts, the peace into which you were also called in one body. And be thankful. 16Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as in all wisdom you teach and admonish one another, singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. 17And whatever you do, in word or in deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

In verse 5, pPaul identifies some of the things which belong to earth, and therefore should find no place among those who have died and been raised with Christ. You used to live that way, he says, but now there is a new way for you to live, which pPaul lists in verses 9 and 10. In verse 11, he rules out divisions within the community.

In reading verses 12 and 13, think of someone getting dressed in long, flowing loose-fitting garments, putting on one over the other. Now with verse 14 think of a belt or cincture put around the waist in order to hold all those garments together. That “bond of perfection” is love; love will keep all the other virtues together in such a way that it will all fit. In verses 15 to 17 pPaul describes what life will be like for those who live in Christ.

Living in this way, the Colossians will have no need for the mystic and ascetical way of life proposed by the opponents.

### 3:18-4:1 - Particulars codes of behavior

18Wives, be subordinate to your husbands, as is proper in the Lord. 19Husbands, love your wives, and avoid any bitterness toward them. 20Children, obey your parents in everything, for this is pleasing to the Lord. 21Fathers, do not provoke your children, so they may not become discouraged.

22Slaves, obey your human masters in everything, not only when being watched, as currying favor, but in simplicity of heart, fearing the Lord. 23Whatever you do, do from the heart, as for the Lord and not for others, 24knowing that you will receive from the Lord the due payment of the inheritance; be slaves of the Lord Christ. 25For the wrongdoer will receive recompense for the wrong he committed, and there is no partiality.

4:1Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, realizing that you too have a Master in heaven.

Without challenging the existence of the social codes of his time, pPaul gives instructions on how to live “in Christ” within those social codes. Verses 18 to 21 represent family codes.

Verses 22 to 4:1 represent household codes. Slaves in the First Century must be understood in a way very different from what Americans understand of their own history. Slaves could include everything from estate managers to builders of roads and monuments. Slaves could become indentured to masters in many ways, even by personal contracts, and not as the American slaves became indentured to their masters.

### 4:2-6 - Closing advice

2Persevere in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving; 3at the same time, pray for us, too, that God may open a door to us for the word, to speak of the mystery of Christ, for which I am in prison, 4that I may make it clear, as I must speak. 5Conduct yourselves wisely toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity. 6Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you know how you should respond to each one.

On the most widely accepted theory that this is not really a letter written by Paul, but by a disciple of his, this passage is a device by which the author wraps himself in Paul’s cloak, placing himself back in the 60’s and in prison. The advice he gives regards how to behave in such a way that outsiders will be impressed with the Christian community.

#### 4:7-14 - pPaul's co-workers

7Tychicus, my beloved brother, trustworthy minister, and fellow slave in the Lord, will tell you all the news of me. 8I am sending him to you for this very purpose, so that you may know about us and that he may encourage your hearts, 9together with Onesimus, a trustworthy and beloved brother, who is one of you. They will tell you about everything here.

10Aristarchus, my fellow prisoner, sends you greetings, as does Mark the cousin of Barnabas (concerning whom you have received instructions; if he comes to you, receive him), 11and Jesus, who is called Justus, who are of the circumcision; these alone are my co-workers for the kingdom of God, and they have been a comfort to me. 12Epaphras sends you greetings; he is one of you, a slave of Christ [Jesus], always striving for you in his prayers so that you may be perfect and fully assured in all the will of God. 13For I can testify that he works very hard for you and for those in Laodicea and those in Hierapolis. 14Luke the beloved physician sends greetings, as does Demas.

One hates to think it, let alone say it or write it, but this section may be a ruse, designed by pPaul to identify himself with Paul. The names of eight of the ten people mentioned here are also found in the Letter to Philemon, which is accepted as genuinely written by Paul and is dated in the 50's.

#### 4:15-18 - Message for the Laodiceans

15Give greetings to the brothers in Laodicea and to Nympha and to the church in her house. 16And when this letter is read before you, have it read also in the church of the Laodiceans, and you yourselves read the one from Laodicea. 17And tell Archippus, "See that you fulfill the ministry that you received in the Lord." 18The greeting is in my own hand, Paul's. Remember my chains. Grace be with you.

More duplicity, apparently. The author has gone to great lengths to identify himself with the real Paul, using names from the Letter to Philemon to enhance his image.



## Letter to the Ephesians

Among the letters attributed to Paul, the Letter to the Ephesians falls among those which 80% of scholars think were written by one of Paul's disciples. In terms of Pauline thought, the writer of this letter was Paul's supreme interpreter, his star pupil. So again, I will call the author "pPaul." The letter as it stands seems definitely to be the work of one person, and it seems to have survived intact. There is one addition accepted by some scholars which can really throw the reader for a loop, and that is the words "in Ephesus" in 1:1. So, even the audience named in the address in the letter is suspect. Most likely the letter was intended for several of the churches in Asia Minor. The carrier of the letter would insert the name of the church in which he was delivering the letter. That carrier was probably Tychicus.

The best guess, or dominant scholarship, puts the origin of the letter in Ephesus, with the content influenced by the Letter to the Colossians (which is also thought to have originated in Ephesus) and some other letters actually written by Paul. The date of the letter is thought to be somewhere between 80 and 100 A.D.

So who actually wrote the letter? We really don't know. It's purely my imagination which places before my mind an extremely bright twenty-two year old disciple in the school of Paul, who has imbibed the teaching of Paul so thoroughly that he is alive with enthusiasm for what he has been taught, and who has at hand an already collected group of Paul's letters. He can hardly control his exuberance as he puts onto his papyrus the teaching of the master for the benefit of a second generation of Pauline enthusiasts. He's one of those students whose teachers would say simply, "He's got it." His writing is in sharp contrast to that of the original angry Paul who wrote Galatians and that of the original worried and lugubrious Paul who wrote Romans.

The letter is probably, next to Romans, the most influential of the Pauline writings in terms of its influence on Christian spirituality and theology.

The letter to the Colossians focused heavily on christology, the role of Christ in the life of the Christian churches. Ephesians focuses more on ecclesiology, the church as a whole instead of on individual churches, indicating a development in the self-understanding of the Christian community by the late First Century. In Ephesians the church is "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets." In First Corinthians, Christ is the only foundation of the church. The understanding in Ephesians that Christ is the head of his body, the church, is quite an advance from First Corinthians and Romans, where the various members make up the body of Christ without mention of Christ's headship.

The position of the Gentiles in Ephesians has changed from that portrayed in Romans, where their conversion is thought eventually to provoke the Jews to jealousy so that they will one day be restored to their position as the elect of God. In Ephesians Jews and Gentiles together have been “reconciled to God in one body through the cross,” and are “becoming one new person instead of two” now that “the dividing wall of hostility” has been breached.

### 1:1-2 - Address and greeting

1 Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the holy ones who are [in Ephesus] faithful in Christ Jesus: 2 grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The designation of the sender of the letter as “Paul” must be understood as a disciple of Paul’s claiming to convey a message which he knows accords with what Paul had taught. I shall continue to designate the writer as “pPaul,” understanding the writer to be pseudo-Paul.

As indicated by the brackets in verse 1, the addressees named “in Ephesus” is disputed. This appears to be a letter addressed to a more universal church, which is not surprising, because throughout the letter the church which is written about is clearly not a local church, but the universal church.

The greeting is a perfect mimic of the genuine Pauline letters.

### 1:3-14 - Blessing

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavens, 4 as he chose us in him, before the foundation of the world, to be holy and without blemish before him. In love 5 he destined us for adoption to himself through Jesus Christ, in accord with the favor of his will, 6 for the praise of the glory of his grace that he granted us in the beloved.

7 In him we have redemption by his blood, the forgiveness of transgressions, in accord with the riches of his grace 8 that he lavished upon us. In all wisdom and insight, 9 he has made known to us the mystery of his will in accord with his favor that he set forth in him 10 as a plan for the fullness of times, to sum up all things in Christ, in heaven and on earth.

11 In him we were also chosen, destined in accord with the purpose of the One who accomplishes all things according to the intention of his will, 12 so that we might exist for the praise of his glory, we who first hoped in Christ. 13 In him you also, who have heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and have believed in him, were sealed with the promised holy Spirit, 14 which is the first installment of our inheritance toward redemption as God’s possession, to the praise of his glory.

That first paragraph really needs to be read a few times in order to get its message and its profound beauty. By God’s free choice, we have been destined to be God’s children before the foundation of the world. Simply for the praise of the glory of his grace, God destined us for adoption to himself through Jesus Christ.

“In him” we have redemption by his blood, the forgiveness of sins.

“In him” we (Jews) were chosen that our very existence would bring praise to his Glory.

“In him” you (Gentiles) who heard the word of truth and believed were sealed with the holy Spirit he promised which made you God’s possession.

And all this is for the purpose of the praise of God’s (Jesus’) glory.

## 1:15-23 - The church

15Therefore, I, too, hearing of your faith in the Lord Jesus and of your love for all the holy ones, 16do not cease giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, 17that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation resulting in knowledge of him. 18May the eyes of [your] hearts be enlightened, that you may know what is the hope that belongs to his call, what are the riches of glory in his inheritance among the holy ones, 19and what is the surpassing greatness of his power for us who believe, in accord with the exercise of his great might, 20which he worked in Christ, raising him from the dead and seating him at his right hand in the heavens, 21far above every principality, authority, power, and dominion, and every name that is named not only in this age but also in the one to come. 22And he put all things beneath his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, 23which is his body, the fullness of the one who fills all things in every way.

Our exuberant young pPaul addresses his audience with enthusiasm over what he has heard of them, their faith in Christ and their love for each other. He prays for their continued enlightenment in knowledge of God so that they will recognize the hope of glory to which God's power will lead them, that same power which raised Jesus from the dead and placed him at God's right hand over all creation, and which gave Jesus as head to the church, which is his body.

## 2:1-10 - God's generosity

1You were dead in your transgressions and sins 2in which you once lived following the age of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the disobedient. 3All of us once lived among them in the desires of our flesh, following the wishes of the flesh and the impulses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like the rest. 4But God, who is rich in mercy, because of the great love he had for us, 5even when we were dead in our transgressions, brought us to life with Christ (by grace you have been saved), 6raised us up with him, and seated us with him in the heavens in Christ Jesus, 7that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. 8For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not from you; it is the gift of God; 9it is not from works, so no one may boast. 10For we are his handiwork, created in Christ Jesus for the good works that God has prepared in advance, that we should live in them.

pPaul starts out by saying that "you" were once dead in your transgressions and sins, because of the "power in the air," that is, the evil that existed between God and humanity, but then he writes that "all of us" once lived that way, therefore deserving "wrath," that is, punishment. But out of mercy and love God brought us to life with Christ. So, it is by God's grace that we have been saved, not by our own works. It is through faith that we have been saved, and that faith isn't our doing either. It's God's gift. So no one can boast. We are God's handiwork in Christ Jesus to do the good works that God had prepared in advance, namely that we should live in those good works.

## 2:11-22 - One in Christ

11Therefore, remember that at one time you, Gentiles in the flesh, called the uncircumcision by those called the circumcision, which is done in the flesh by human hands, 12were at that time without Christ, alienated from the community of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, without hope and without God in the world. 13But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have become near by the blood of Christ. 14For he is our peace, he who made both one and broke down the dividing wall of enmity, through his flesh, 15abolishing the law with its commandments and legal claims, that he might create in himself one new person in place of the two, thus establishing peace, 16and might reconcile both with God, in one body, through the cross, putting that enmity to death by it. 17He

came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near, 18for through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.

19So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the holy ones and members of the household of God, 20built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the capstone. 21Through him the whole structure is held together and grows into a temple sacred in the Lord; 22in him you also are being built together into a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.

In the chronology of Pauline writing, this section reaches a new height in proclaiming the union in one body and Jews and Gentiles. It proclaims the universal church. Previous to Christ's saving acts, the Gentiles had no connection to the covenant which God had made with Israel for its salvation. But now you have been included in the new "one person" established by the cross of Christ. Law has been abolished; the enmity between Jew and Greek has been put to death. The peace of Christ has been preached to both Jew and Greek, so now both have access in one Spirit to the Father.

This is a whole new understanding of God's people. It used to be that the Israelites were God's people, and the Gentiles were grafted onto that vine. Now that vine has been done away with, and all are equally "fellow citizens with the holy ones and members of the household of God." This household of God is no longer a vine with some grafted onto it; it is now a new building built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus as the capstone. The equality of Jews and Gentiles in this building is complete, and all are "being built together into a dwelling place of God in the Spirit."

This may be the earliest statement in Christian literature of this new understanding of God's call of all people into equality in Christ. The following verses in 3:1 to 6 may confirm that.

### 3:1-13 - pPaul's commission

1Because of this, I, Paul, a prisoner of Christ [Jesus] for you Gentiles—2if, as I suppose, you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for your benefit, 3[namely, that] the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly earlier. 4When you read this you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, 5which was not made known to human beings in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit, 6that the Gentiles are coheirs, members of the same body, and copartners in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

7Of this I became a minister by the gift of God's grace that was granted me in accord with the exercise of his power. 8To me, the very least of all the holy ones, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the inscrutable riches of Christ, 9and to bring to light [for all] what is the plan of the mystery hidden from ages past in God who created all things, 10so that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the principalities and authorities in the heavens. 11This was according to the eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord, 12in whom we have boldness of speech and confidence of access through faith in him. 13So I ask you not to lose heart over my afflictions for you; this is your glory.

In keeping with my image of the writer as a twenty-two years old "kid," I, of course, understand this section as his attempt to claim credentials for continuing to proclaim the mystery of Christ. So it is silly to try to find any historical imprisonment of Paul's that he mentions here. I wonder if the proclamation of the equality of Jew and Gentile in the body of Christ with Christ as the head was such a new idea that the writer felt it necessary to claim some credentials in order to bolster that proclamation.

Our modern cultural expectations of an author are so different from those of the First

Century, that judgment on our author's motivation must be suspended. In order to have this kind of familiarity with the life of Paul, the author must have had some legitimate connection with Paul or with the "school of Paul."

### 3:14-21 - Prayer

14For this reason I kneel before the Father, 15from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, 16that he may grant you in accord with the riches of his glory to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in the inner self, 17and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, rooted and grounded in love, 18may have strength to comprehend with all the holy ones what is the breadth and length and height and depth, 19and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. 20Now to him who is able to accomplish far more than all we ask or imagine, by the power at work within us, 21to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

There is no reason here for us to think that the author is still "impersonating" Paul. What we have is the writer's own sincere prayer for the recipients of his letter. His prayer is about the church, made up of Jews and Gentiles.

The prayer is that God will strengthen the "inner self," that is, the heart, and that Christ will dwell in the hearts of those who have faith, and that they will be rooted and grounded in love. Even though the love of Christ is beyond comprehension, pPaul prays that the Ephesians will know that love.

The final doxology in verses 20 and 21 professes faith that the power of God at work in the believers will accomplish even more than we can ask or imagine. To this God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus forever.

This ends the teaching section of the letter. The exhortation section begins in the next chapter.

### 4:1-6 - Unity

1I, then, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to live in a manner worthy of the call you have received, 2with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another through love, 3striving to preserve the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace: 4one body and one Spirit, as you were also called to the one hope of your call; 5one Lord, one faith, one baptism; 6one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

While this passage doesn't need much commentary, there are several striking things about it. In 1:4 pPaul wrote that God chose "us" in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and without blemish before God. Now he tells us to live in a manner worthy of that call, and he lists thirteen behaviors to describe that holiness, all of them stressing unity. Without even a mention of Jews and Gentiles, pPaul looks for unity throughout the community.

### 4:7-16 - Diversity

7But grace was given to each of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. 8Therefore, it says:

"He ascended on high and took prisoners captive;  
he gave gifts to men."

9What does "he ascended" mean except that he also descended into the lower [regions] of the earth? 10The one who

descended is also the one who ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.

11And he gave some as apostles, others as prophets, others as evangelists, others as pastors and teachers, 12to equip the holy ones for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, 13until we all attain to the unity of faith and knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the extent of the full stature of Christ, 14so that we may no longer be infants, tossed by waves and swept along by every wind of teaching arising from human trickery, from their cunning in the interests of deceitful scheming. 15 Rather, living the truth in love, we should grow in every way into him who is the head, Christ, 16from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, with the proper functioning of each part, brings about the body's growth and builds itself up in love.

Since Christ has ascended he has filled all things, and he gave different ministries to different people, all for the sake of building up the body of Christ. In I Corinthians, Chapter 12, the same list is given, but in Corinth there was at the time tension and competition among those who have the different gifts. Here the diverse gifts are melded into perfect unity by living the truth in love. Since pPaul has the collection of Paul's writing, might he be referring to I Corinthians when he writes that the Ephesians should, "no longer be infants, tossed by waves and swept along by every wind of teaching arising from human trickery, from their cunning in the interests of deceitful scheming."

#### 4:17-24 - Renewed in Christ

17So I declare and testify in the Lord that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds; 18darkened in understanding, alienated from the life of God because of their ignorance, because of their hardness of heart, 19they have become callous and have handed themselves over to licentiousness for the practice of every kind of impurity to excess. 20That is not how you learned Christ, 21assuming that you have heard of him and were taught in him, as truth is in Jesus, 22that you should put away the old self of your former way of life, corrupted through deceitful desires, 23and be renewed in the spirit of your minds, 24and put on the new self, created in God's way in righteousness and holiness of truth.

When pPaul writes that the Ephesians "must no longer live as the Gentiles do," he is speaking of pagans, not Gentile Christians, although he is recalling their former way of life before coming to belief in Christ. Whether pPaul means this as an exhortation to the Gentile Christians or as a statement about how they have changed since they have "learned Christ," is hard to discern. Most likely it is the second, although if there are some in the area who do not yet believe in Christ, it is an invitation to do so. In that case he couches his statement, "assuming that you have heard of him and were taught in him." Perhaps there are some who have not yet heard.

#### 4:25-5:5 - The new rules

25Therefore, putting away falsehood, speak the truth, each one to his neighbor, for we are members one of another. 26Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun set on your anger, 27and do not leave room for the devil. 28The thief must no longer steal, but rather labor, doing honest work with his [own] hands, so that he may have something to share with one in need. 29No foul language should come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for needed edification, that it may impart grace to those who hear. 30And do not grieve the holy Spirit of God, with which you were sealed for the day of redemption. 31All bitterness, fury, anger, shouting, and reviling must be removed from you, along with all malice. 32[And] be kind to one another, compassionate, forgiving one another as God has forgiven you in Christ.

5:1So be imitators of God, as beloved children, 2and live in love, as Christ loved us and handed himself over for us as a sacrificial offering to God for a fragrant aroma. 3Immorality or any impurity or greed must not even be

mentioned among you, as is fitting among holy ones, 4no obscenity or silly or suggestive talk, which is out of place, but instead, thanksgiving. 5Be sure of this, that no immoral or impure or greedy person, that is, an idolater, has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.

These moral instructions have a common motivation: “live in love, as Christ loved us.” There’s nothing more to say by way of explanation; it’s all pretty clear.

### 5:5-20 - Live in the light

6Let no one deceive you with empty arguments, for because of these things the wrath of God is coming upon the disobedient. 7So do not be associated with them. 8For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light, 9for light produces every kind of goodness and righteousness and truth. 10Try to learn what is pleasing to the Lord. 11Take no part in the fruitless works of darkness; rather expose them, 12for it is shameful even to mention the things done by them in secret; 13but everything exposed by the light becomes visible, 14for everything that becomes visible is light. Therefore, it says:

“Awake, O sleeper  
and arise from the dead,  
and Christ will give you light.”

15Watch carefully then how you live, not as foolish persons but as wise, 16making the most of the opportunity, because the days are evil. 17Therefore, do not continue in ignorance, but try to understand what is the will of the Lord. 18And do not get drunk on wine, in which lies debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, 19addressing one another [in] psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and playing to the Lord in your hearts, 20giving thanks always and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father.

Even very large and detailed commentaries have little to say about this section, because the meaning is generally so clear. One thing I find interesting is the part where pPaul writes, “do not get drunk on wine, in which lies debauchery” but rather have a different kind of party with “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and playing to the Lord in your hearts, 20giving thanks always and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father.” pPaul is not against partying; he just wants it to be something other than an orgy.

### 5:21-33 - Household codes

21Be subordinate to one another out of reverence for Christ. 22Wives should be subordinate to their husbands as to the Lord. 23For the husband is head of his wife just as Christ is head of the church, he himself the savior of the body. 24As the church is subordinate to Christ, so wives should be subordinate to their husbands in everything. 25Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ loved the church and handed himself over for her 26to sanctify her, cleansing her by the bath of water with the word, 27that he might present to himself the church in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. 28So [also] husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. 29For no one hates his own flesh but rather nourishes and cherishes it, even as Christ does the church, 30because we are members of his body.

31“For this reason a man shall leave [his]  
father and [his] mother and be joined to his wife,  
and the two shall become one flesh.”

32This is a great mystery, but I speak in reference to Christ and the church. 33In any case, each one of you should love his wife as himself, and the wife should respect her husband.

Back in Colossians there were also household codes. The pPaul who authored that letter did not challenge them. There seems to have been some advancement in thinking about the

household codes since then. Remember, this pPaul may not be the pPaul who wrote Colossians. First of all, the general admonition here is to be subordinate *to one another*. The application to family follows. “Wives should be subordinate to their husbands as to the Lord.” The analogy supporting that admonition is that the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is head of the church. (Remember that Christ’s headship is a new theological feature in this letter.) So the husband must love his wife, even as Christ loved the church and handed himself over for her. Having previously identified Christ as the head of his body, the church, pPaul applies that analogy to married life. The church is subordinate to Christ, who loves the church and gave himself over for her, so the wife is to be subordinate to the husband. But the ultimate motivation stands as “be subordinate to one another” and the husband must “love his wife as himself.” There seems to be something more mutual in this rendition of the household codes than the one in Colossians.

#### 6:1-4 - Children

<sup>1</sup>Children, obey your parents [in the Lord], for this is right. <sup>2</sup>“Honor your father and mother.” This is the first commandment with a promise, <sup>3</sup>“that it may go well with you and that you may have a long life on earth.” <sup>4</sup>Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up with the training and instruction of the Lord.

The overall principle of verse 21: “Be subordinate to one another out of reverence for Christ” seems to have “softened” the household codes. Yes, children are to obey parents, but this time the injunction is given a motive, “that all may go well with you.” And fathers are admonished not to provoke their children to anger. There is a different spirit here than when the same codes were articulated in Colossians.

#### 6:5-9 - Slaves

<sup>5</sup>Slaves, be obedient to your human masters with fear and trembling, in sincerity of heart, as to Christ, <sup>6</sup>not only when being watched, as currying favor, but slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, <sup>7</sup>willingly serving the Lord and not human beings, <sup>8</sup>knowing that each will be requited from the Lord for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free. <sup>9</sup>Masters, act in the same way toward them, and stop bullying, knowing that both they and you have a Master in heaven and that with him there is no partiality.

Without challenging the existence of slavery within society, pPaul’s instructions about the institution is really quite humane. Slaves are given reason to serve other than in “fear and trembling.” The striking part is that masters should behave toward slaves in the same way that slaves are to behave toward their masters. The motive is that Christ is the master of both. Quite an advance over what is found in Colossians.

The radical thrust of the gospel is to put pressure on those in authority and who wield power.

#### 6:10-17 - Against evil

<sup>10</sup>Finally, draw your strength from the Lord and from his mighty power. <sup>11</sup>Put on the armor of God so that you may be able to stand firm against the tactics of the devil. <sup>12</sup>For our struggle is not with flesh and blood but with the principalities, with the powers, with the world rulers of this present darkness, with the evil spirits in the heavens.

13Therefore, put on the armor of God, that you may be able to resist on the evil day and, having done everything, to hold your ground. 14So stand fast with your loins girded in truth, clothed with righteousness as a breastplate, 15and your feet shod in readiness for the gospel of peace. 16In all circumstances, hold faith as a shield, to quench all [the] flaming arrows of the evil one. 17And take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the , which is the word of God.

pPaul's analogy for resisting evil is the clothing of a Roman soldier. But the Christian struggle is not against human beings, but against the powers of darkness. In 1:20-21 we heard that the exalted Christ has been seated above all such powers. That's called realized eschatology. But the final victory has not yet been achieved, so we keep fighting.

#### 6:18-20 - Prayer

18With all prayer and supplication, pray at every opportunity in the Spirit. To that end, be watchful with all perseverance and supplication for all the holy ones 19and also for me, that speech may be given me to open my mouth, to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel 20for which I am an ambassador in chains, so that I may have the courage to speak as I must.

In order to keep fighting, prayer is required, prayer for all the holy ones, and also for pPaul, that he may be bold in his proclamation of the gospel. He says he is an ambassador in chains. Because we have no idea about who pPaul is or from where he is writing, we may take this as another impersonation of Paul.

#### 6:21-24 - Conclusion

21So that you also may have news of me and of what I am doing, Tychicus, my beloved brother and trustworthy minister in the Lord, will tell you everything. 22I am sending him to you for this very purpose, so that you may know about us and that he may encourage your hearts.

23Peace be to the brothers, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 24Grace be with all who love our Lord Jesus Christ in immortality.

Tychicus, mentioned also at the end of the Letter to the Colossians, will bring news of pPaul. The final greeting is as the beginning, a wish for peace.

#### Author's note

This letter is assumed to have been written after Paul's death by a disciple, perhaps of the so called "school of Paul." I have imagined this writer to be a bright young man who has imbibed the teachings of this Pauline school, and undertook to apply Paul's teaching to circumstances which had changed significantly since Paul's death, circumstances in both church and society at large.

This author has wrapped himself snugly in the mantel of Paul in order to enhance the likelihood of his work being accepted. If he were indeed a member of the "school of Paul," others in the school would certainly have prevented the dissemination of this letter if they judged that it did not accord with the teaching of Paul.

The conclusion: the writer is not Paul, but the message is his.





## Second Letter of Paul to the Thessalonians

It would be convenient if all the experts and scholars of scripture would agree on such things as the author and the date of this letter and from where it was written. This convenience is denied us. While understanding the message of the letter is somewhat dependent on knowing the author and the date and the intended recipient, its main message can be gleaned from the text without certitude about those things. Some scholars think the letter was written by Paul after the First Letter to the Thessalonians, while Paul was still in Corinth; others think it was written toward the end of the First Century by a disciple of Paul, who was by that time long dead, and the disciple is merely mimicking Paul's style in writing the letter.

Although some scripture scholars don't take a position on the question of when and by whom, I will follow most, but not all, modern scholarship and opt for a later date – around 100 A.D. and authorship by Paul's disciples. I will, however, use the name "Paul" for the writer of this letter in my reflections, knowing full well that the letter may not have been written by Paul. Whatever the history of this letter, it doesn't make all that much difference in understanding the message of the letter.

### 1:1-2 - Greeting

1 Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy to the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: 2 grace to you and peace from God [our] Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul's typical greeting to one of the churches. If we accept the later date for the composition of this letter, the author is mimicking Paul, not only in vocabulary and style, but also in content. By the later time calculated for the writing of this letter, all three of the supposed writers would have been long dead.

### 1:3-4 - Thanksgiving

3 We ought to thank God always for you, brothers, as is fitting, because your faith flourishes ever more, and the love of every one of you for one another grows ever greater. 4 Accordingly, we ourselves boast of you in the churches of God regarding your endurance and faith in all your persecutions and the afflictions you endure.

Again, this is a typical beginning for Paul's letters. In favor of the opinion that this letter

was written later, the author speaks of the “your endurance and faith in all your persecutions and the afflictions you endure,” seemingly indicating that it’s been a long time since Paul first wrote to the community.

### 1:5-10 -About the final judgement

5This is evidence of the just judgment of God, so that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God for which you are suffering. 6For it is surely just on God’s part to repay with afflictions those who are afflicting you, 7and to grant rest along with us to you who are undergoing afflictions, at the revelation of the Lord Jesus from heaven with his mighty angels, 8in blazing fire, inflicting punishment on those who do not acknowledge God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. 9These will pay the penalty of eternal ruin, separated from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his power, 10when he comes to be glorified among his holy ones and to be marveled at on that day among all who have believed, for our testimony to you was believed.

He now includes statements about the penalties which will fall on those who oppose his beloved Thessalonians. In the rest of this letter Paul will be talking about the end-time; he hints at his theme here in the thanksgiving he offers. What’s Paul thankful for? First of all, for the faith and love which is evident within the Thessalonian community. And second, he is thankful for his own part in grounding the community in that faith, and in the endurance they are displaying in the face of persecution. He claims that he boasts about the Thessalonians in other communities which he visits.

Those who are persecuting the community will be repaid for their iniquity at the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is about that end-time that the author will write at length in this letter.

### 1:11-12 - Prayer

11To this end, we always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling and powerfully bring to fulfillment every good purpose and every effort of faith, 12 that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, in accord with the grace of our God and Lord Jesus Christ.

For Paul all accomplishment of tasks undertaken in faith is to be attributed to the grace of God at work in believers, rather than to the efforts of the people involved. In their good works, the name of our Lord Jesus is glorified.

Did you ever have the experience of listening to someone narrate an incident about which the person was all enthused, and you didn’t understand it? And the person doing the narrating could tell you didn’t get it? And so they say, “Well, I guess you had to be there.” That’s Chapter 2 of Second Thessalonians. The whole of Chapter 2 is about the cataclysmic struggle of the end-time (the parousia) and admonitions and instructions on how to regard it. But most people, including some scripture scholars, admit that they don’t really get it.

### 2:1-2 - Warning

1We ask you, brothers, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our assembling with him, 2not to be shaken out of your minds suddenly, or to be alarmed either by a “spirit,” or by an oral statement, or by a letter allegedly from us to the effect that the day of the Lord is at hand.

First of all, no matter what the source – a “spirit,” an “oral statement,” or by “a letter allegedly from us” – don’t get upset. One can tell that the end is not yet. How can you tell? Because there are things which have to happen before the end-time arrives.

The general message of this letter is this: for some reason – a spirit (perhaps members of the community prophesying), an oral statement (perhaps something the Thessalonians thought Paul had said), or a letter allegedly from us – the community thought that the coming of Christ was definitive in the sense that now all of God’s plan had been revealed and completed, so now the end was near. The truth of the matter is that the sending of His Son into the world *was* definitive, but only in the sense that the end of the age had begun, not that all things were about to come to an end.

### 2:3-5 - The lawless one must come first

3Let no one deceive you in any way. For unless the apostasy comes first and the lawless one is revealed, the one doomed to perdition, 4who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god and object of worship, so as to seat himself in the temple of God, claiming that he is a god — 5do you not recall that while I was still with you I told you these things?

If this and the rest of Chapter 2 doesn’t make sense to you, join the crowd. One commentator, an expert in the study of scripture, wrote, “While it is true that no one can say with certainty what event Paul refers to in this paragraph, it is also true that vagueness of language is a feature of apocalyptic style which does not spell out its allusions.” I think that means that the writer didn’t even want people to understand what he was writing. We are definitely not to try to identify the lawless one and the one who is restraining with any actual persons.

However, it seems that someone has been telling the Thessalonians that the end-time has already come. The author of this letter is saying that is not true, because there are a lot of things which must happen first, and they haven’t happened. His description of those things which must happen first involve the “lawless one” and the “one who restrains,” but no one knows exactly what that means.

### 2:6-12 - Restraining the lawless one

6And now you know what is restraining, that he may be revealed in his time. 7 For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work. But the one who restrains is to do so only for the present, until he is removed from the scene. 8And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord [Jesus] will kill with the breath of his mouth and render powerless by the manifestation of his coming, 9the one whose coming springs from the power of Satan in every mighty deed and in signs and wonders that lie, 10and in every wicked deceit for those who are perishing because they have not accepted the love of truth so that they may be saved. 11Therefore, God is sending them a deceiving power so that they may believe the lie, 12that all who have not believed the truth but have approved wrongdoing may be condemned.

About all one can safely say about this is that it is apocalyptic, a word of encouragement, describing upheaval and events which will affect the whole world, but without identifying precisely what that upheaval and those events are. The message is just that if you are persecuted

now and scared for awhile, don't worry, all will turn out alright for those who continue to believe, but for the persecutors it will be really bad.

### 2:13-15 - More thanksgiving

13But we ought to give thanks to God for you always, brothers loved by the Lord, because God chose you as the first fruits for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in truth. 14To this end he has [also] called you through our gospel to possess the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. 15Therefore, brothers, stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught, either by an oral statement or by a letter of ours.

Paul's gratitude to God is his response to God's having chosen the Thessalonians to be sanctified and to believe in the truth. He urges his readers to remain faithful to what they have been taught, either by (his) preaching or from his previous letter.

### 2:16-17 - Prayer

16May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who has loved us and given us everlasting encouragement and good hope through his grace, 17encourage your hearts and strengthen them in every good deed and word.

If there is a point that the Thessalonians should take from this brief prayer, it is that their hope needs to be realized, not only in contemplating the word, but must show itself in deeds.

### 3:1-5 - A call for prayer

1Finally, brothers, pray for us, so that the word of the Lord may speed forward and be glorified, as it did among you, 2and that we may be delivered from perverse and wicked people, for not all have faith. 3But the Lord is faithful; he will strengthen you and guard you from the evil one. 4We are confident of you in the Lord that what we instruct you, you [both] are doing and will continue to do. 5May the Lord direct your hearts to the love of God and to the endurance of Christ.

Paul must be looking forward to his continued ministry of preaching the Gospel. He asks for the Thessalonians' prayer for the success of his ministry, which seems to be opposed by some "perverse and wicked people." Recognizing that anyone's faithful response to the word can only come about because of the grace of God, that grace was there among the Thessalonians; Paul asks his flock to pray that what happened for them will happen to those to whom Paul will preach in the future.

### 3:6-15 - Work

6We instruct you, brothers, in the name of [our] Lord Jesus Christ, to shun any brother who conducts himself in a disorderly way and not according to the tradition they received from us. 7For you know how one must imitate us. For we did not act in a disorderly way among you, 8nor did we eat food received free from anyone. On the contrary, in toil and drudgery, night and day we worked, so as not to burden any of you. 9Not that we do not have the right. Rather, we wanted to present ourselves as a model for you, so that you might imitate us. 10In fact, when we were with you, we instructed you that if anyone was unwilling to work, neither should that one eat. 11We hear that some are conducting themselves among you in a disorderly way, by not keeping busy but minding the business of others. 12Such people we instruct and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to work quietly and to eat their own food. 13But you,

brothers, do not be remiss in doing good. 14If anyone does not obey our word as expressed in this letter, take note of this person not to associate with him, that he may be put to shame. 15Do not regard him as an enemy but admonish him as a brother.

Paul now gets down to the second piece of business which prompted him to write this letter. The first was to dispel the notion *in their minds* that the end-time had already come. Now he moves to the second reason he's writing, namely to address their *behavior* here and now.

Who are the brothers who are conducting themselves "in a disorderly way and not according to the tradition they received from us?" They are those who are living in idleness, refusing to work. That might be connected with the problem of thinking that the end-time has already come, with some people reasoning that since the end-time is already here, why work? Paul reminds the Thessalonians of "the tradition they received from us," namely Paul's example. Paul worked hard while he was with them, so that they did not have to support him, although he had the right to be taken care of. He told them while he was with them that if one does not work, that one should not eat.

In general we can say that both letters to the Thessalonians carry a warning or correction from Paul. The Thessalonians' concerns for the hereafter led them to neglect sufficient concern for the here and now. Perhaps the lesson for us is that our concern for spiritual things, like personal spiritual growth, ought not distract us from care of our physical and material world and its occupants here and now. There may always be a tug-a-war between religiosity and true religion, between practicing Christians and the merely devotional Christians.

Paul's instruction on how to regard the idle busybodies in the community is very humane. The others should exclude them from participation within the community (perhaps the community meals), but not treat them as enemies.

### 3:16-18 - Final blessing

16May the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with all of you. 17This greeting is in my own hand, Paul's. This is the sign in every letter; this is how I write. 18The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with all of you.

Apparently Paul signed the letter personally, even if a scribe had written the rest of the letter. Paul's parting wish is for peace. "The Lord be with all of you" is a profound blessing. The word "Lord" means the risen Christ. In his resurrection Jesus has been made Lord of every event of human history. So, no matter what may be happening within the Thessalonians' community, Paul's blessing reminds them that the Lord is in their midst and has dominion over all events.

The final word is the assurance that Paul is the author of all that has been written here. He must have had a distinctive way of signing his letters.

Those who think that this letter was written shortly after the first one to the Thessalonians, use this passage to bolster their position. But so do those who think the letter was written much later.



### Letter to Titus (Pastoral letter)

In studying the letters attributed to Paul, I have grown used to the idea that there is not unanimity concerning their authorship, their date, their addressees. But the three Pastoral Letters (Titus, I Timothy and II Timothy) are the subjects of more controversy concerning those elements than any of the other letters attributed to Paul. For me to lay out the various positions taken by scholars would take up more space than the letters do themselves. Consequently, after having read all the opinions I could find, I'll select the one which either makes the most sense to me, or which attracts adherence from the majority of scholars.

Taking into account some of the things mentioned in the Letter to Titus, one would get the impression that Paul is alive and writing or dictating the letter. But it was common practice in the First Century that an unknown author might write under the pseudonym of a well-known person in order for the letter or other writing to gain acceptance. This seems definitely to have been the case with the Letter to the Ephesians. One scholar indicates that this was an accepted and acceptable fiction in the First Century. The recipients of the letters would have known full well that Paul was dead, and it was a disciple writing in order to extend into a later period what Paul *would have said* if he were given the chance.

After a thorough study of the possibilities for the authorship and date of this letter, it seems safest to say that Paul was not the author, and the date of composition was after Paul's death, even as late as the 90's or later. Most scholars, but not all, would also accept that the Letter to Titus was the first of the three Pastoral Letters to have been written. I have opted for a different opinion which places II Timothy as the earliest of the three letters.

All this might be esoteric when it comes to understanding what *someone* wrote *from somewhere* at *some time* to *some audience*. The content of the letter is not dependent on its circumstances. We will assume that at least Titus and I Timothy were written by the same disciple of Paul.

#### 1:1-4 - Greeting

1 Paul, a slave of God and apostle of Jesus Christ for the sake of the faith of God's chosen ones and the recognition of religious truth, 2 in the hope of eternal life that God, who does not lie, promised before time began, 3 who indeed at the proper time revealed his word in the proclamation with which I was entrusted by the command of God our savior, 4 to Titus, my true child in our common faith: grace and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our savior.

Again, I'll designate the writer as pPaul, for pseudo-Paul, the writer being a follower of Paul. The long formal greeting suggests that the writer doesn't know the recipient personally, or that there is not one recipient, but the letter is meant to be shared among the churches. Any disciple of Paul's who knew his life's story would have been familiar with the name "Titus," even if pPaul had not met Titus.

#### 1:5-9 - Titus in Crete; appointments

5For this reason I left you in Crete so that you might set right what remains to be done and appoint presbyters in every town, as I directed you, 6on condition that a man be blameless, married only once, with believing children who are not accused of licentiousness or rebellious. 7For a bishop as God's steward must be blameless, not arrogant, not irritable, not a drunkard, not aggressive, not greedy for sordid gain, 8but hospitable, a lover of goodness, temperate, just, holy, and self-controlled, 9holding fast to the true message as taught so that he will be able both to exhort with sound doctrine and to refute opponents.

It's useless to try to coordinate this statement with anything we know of Paul's journeys. About Paul's acquaintance with Crete, all we know is that the ship he was on stopped in a harbor there on its way to bring Paul to Rome as a prisoner. (Acts 27:8-12)

Titus is not an overseer/bishop/presbyter on Crete; he is pPaul's emissary charged with ordering the life of the church on Crete. He is to appoint overseers/bishops/presbyters who have all those qualities which pPaul enumerates.

#### 1:10-16 - The opponents

10For there are also many rebels, idle talkers and deceivers, especially the Jewish Christians. 11It is imperative to silence them, as they are upsetting whole families by teaching for sordid gain what they should not. 12One of them, a prophet of their own, once said, "Cretans have always been liars, vicious beasts, and lazy gluttons." 13That testimony is true. Therefore, admonish them sharply, so that they may be sound in the faith, 14instead of paying attention to Jewish myths and regulations of people who have repudiated the truth. 15To the clean all things are clean, but to those who are defiled and unbelieving nothing is clean; in fact, both their minds and their consciences are tainted. 16They claim to know God, but by their deeds they deny him. They are vile and disobedient and unqualified for any good deed.

The opponents are hard to identify beyond that they appear to be Jewish Christians, who are clinging to some Mosaic Law practices mixed with some philosophy. pPaul quotes one of the Cretans' own philosophers from the 6th Century B.C. to disparage the trouble-makers. The vagueness of the descriptions of the opponents might suggest that pPaul had in mind any aberrant teaching which might come along. In the phrase "upsetting whole families" we might find a reference to the house churches on Crete. There was apparently an overarching organization of the church which monitors several smaller house churches.

The opponents are dismissed as "unqualified for any good deed." In several passages in Titus and I and II Timothy, faithful Christians are described in the opposite way, as having "readiness for any good work."

## 2:1-10 - Christian behavior

1As for yourself, you must say what is consistent with sound doctrine, namely, 2that older men should be temperate, dignified, self-controlled, sound in faith, love, and endurance. 3Similarly, older women should be reverent in their behavior, not slanderers, not addicted to drink, teaching what is good, 4so that they may train younger women to love their husbands and children, 5to be self-controlled, chaste, good homemakers, under the control of their husbands, so that the word of God may not be discredited.

6Urge the younger men, similarly, to control themselves, 7showing yourself as a model of good deeds in every respect, with integrity in your teaching, dignity, 8and sound speech that cannot be criticized, so that the opponent will be put to shame without anything bad to say about us.

9Slaves are to be under the control of their masters in all respects, giving them satisfaction, not talking back to them 10or stealing from them, but exhibiting complete good faith, so as to adorn the doctrine of God our savior in every way.

Similar to the house codes in Colossians and Ephesians, the rules of behavior here simply assume the existence of culturally established mores. Titus is supposed to order things within the church and within the individual house churches. These are his instructions, which pPaul writes are consistent with sound doctrine. Observing these directives would allow the Christians to differentiate themselves from the purely rational philosophical dictates of the people who surround them. Those opponents won't have anything bad to say about the Christians.

One more time we need to remember that “slaves” at the end of the First Century bore little semblance to Black slaves brought to America.

## 2:11-15 - A transformed life

11For the grace of God has appeared, saving all 12and training us to reject godless ways and worldly desires and to live temperately, justly, and devoutly in this age, 13as we await the blessed hope, the appearance of the glory of the great God and of our savior Jesus Christ, 14who gave himself for us to deliver us from all lawlessness and to cleanse for himself a people as his own, eager to do what is good.

15Say these things. Exhort and correct with all authority. Let no one look down on you.

Having given the rules for behavior in the previous section, pPaul now gives the motivation for observing them. Empowered by the grace of God, the community can do all pPaul advises them to do.

The phrase “eager to do what is good” as applied to Christians is contrasted to “unqualified for any good deed” attributed to the opponents in 1:16.

The admonition to Titus is to exhort and correct with authority.

## 3:1-8a - Further instructions to Titus

1Remind them to be under the control of magistrates and authorities, to be obedient, to be open to every good enterprise. 2They are to slander no one, to be peaceable, considerate, exercising all graciousness toward everyone. 3For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, deluded, slaves to various desires and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful ourselves and hating one another.

4But when the kindness and generous love  
of God our savior appeared,

5not because of any righteous deeds we had done  
but because of his mercy,  
he saved us through the bath of rebirth  
and renewal by the holy Spirit,  
6whom he richly poured out on us  
through Jesus Christ our savior,  
7so that we might be justified by his grace  
and become heirs in hope of eternal life.

8This saying is trustworthy.

Again we have the contrast of the Christian who is “open to every good enterprise” in contrast to the opponents who are “unqualified for any good deed.”

One of the motives for good Christian behavior is to remember where they came from. They, too, “were once foolish, disobedient, deluded, slaves to various desires and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful ourselves and hating one another.” But by the grace of God they have been changed. The quotation is a string of sayings from previous Pauline writings, some of them from Paul, others from pPaul, suggesting that the writer has at hand a collection of those writings.

### 3:8b-11 - Advice to Titus

8b I want you to insist on these points, that those who have believed in God be careful to devote themselves to good works; these are excellent and beneficial to others. 9Avoid foolish arguments, genealogies, rivalries, and quarrels about the law, for they are useless and futile. 10After a first and second warning, break off contact with a heretic, 11realizing that such a person is perverted and sinful and stands self-condemned.

Again pPaul uses the contrast between those “unqualified for any good deed” and those who “devote themselves to good works.” Why devote themselves to good works? Doing so will be beneficial to others, and win esteem for the community, provided the members of the community don’t get involved in “foolish arguments, genealogies, rivalries and quarrels about the law.” The “genealogies and quarrels about the law” and the “heretics” are probably those who want to mix faith in Christ with Jewish practices of the Law.

### 3:12-15 - Business matters, closing and greeting

12When I send Artemas to you, or Tychicus, try to join me at Nicopolis, where I have decided to spend the winter. 13Send Zenas the lawyer and Apollos on their journey soon, and see to it that they have everything they need. 14But let our people, too, learn to devote themselves to good works to supply urgent needs, so that they may not be unproductive.

15All who are with me send you greetings. Greet those who love us in the faith.  
Grace be with all of you.

We’ve heard of Tychicus and Apollos in previous letters, but not the others mentioned here. One would think that Tychicus and Apollos would have been dead by this time. But the point of pPaul’s mention of them may be to identify himself with Paul.

Greetings to you from those who are with me. And grace be with you all.

### First Letter to Timothy (Pastoral letter)

The three letters which have received the label “Pastoral” because they discuss the care and ordering (by pastors) of already established churches, are Titus and I and II Timothy. There is no indication that there is any connection among them.

Raymond E. Brown begins his treatment of this letter this way: “Some biographical details about Timothy, drawn from Acts and the rest of the Pauline corpus, can be useful since they may have shaped the writer’s image of the recipient.” That simple sentence alerts us to several realities about this letter.

First, there was indeed a Timothy. His existence and his relationship to Paul can be verified. What we can know about Timothy from Acts of the Apostles and others of Paul’s letters *can be useful* since they may have shaped the *writer’s image of the recipient*. Second, whether Timothy is still alive is not determined; the author is writing to a recipient whose *image* has been shaped by previous writings. Third, Brown presupposes that the writer is someone other than Paul, who would not need his own letters or the Acts of the Apostles to shape his image of Timothy. So we can conclude that Paul did not write the letter.

There are some who insist that the letter was written by Paul, in the supposition that after his imprisonment in Rome which is described at the end of Acts of the Apostles, he was released and continued his missionary activity, during which he wrote I Timothy. Not likely for lots of reasons, many of which will be explained as we examine the text of the letter.

To recap what “biographical details about Timothy, drawn from Acts and the rest of the Pauline corpus” look like, here’s a sample.

Timothy lived in Lystra in southeast Asia Minor. He was presumably converted to Christ by Paul around 46 A.D. when Paul was ministering in that area. Paul returned to the area around 50 A.D., at which time Timothy joined Paul and stayed with him for the rest of Paul’s career. Some of the biographical material in this letter accords with what is found in Acts of the Apostles and genuine Pauline letters; but a lot of it does not. In order to account for the discrepancies, some posit a fourth journey by Paul, after his Roman imprisonment described at the end of Acts, during which this letter was written. According to most scholars, this is not likely, so a much later date is assigned to the writing of this letter.

From this letter we get a picture of Timothy as a young man, sometimes not in good health.

There are three main themes in the letter: church order and structure, false and true teachings, and community relations. It would be nice if these were treated consecutively instead of scattered and intermingled throughout the letter, but they aren’t.

## 1:1-2 - Opening formula

1 Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by command of God our savior and of Christ Jesus our hope, 2 to Timothy, my true child in faith: grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

Since so much is known about the relationship between Paul and Timothy, pPaul writes here in the same warm way he has always referred to Timothy.

## 1:3-11 - The theme of false and true teaching (Part 1)

3 I repeat the request I made of you when I was on my way to Macedonia, that you stay in Ephesus to instruct certain people not to teach false doctrines 4 or to concern themselves with myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculations rather than the plan of God that is to be received by faith. 5 The aim of this instruction is love from a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith. 6 Some people have deviated from these and turned to meaningless talk, 7 wanting to be teachers of the law, but without understanding either what they are saying or what they assert with such assurance.

8 We know that the law is good, provided that one uses it as law, 9 with the understanding that law is meant not for a righteous person but for the lawless and unruly, the godless and sinful, the unholy and profane, those who kill their fathers or mothers, murderers, 10 the unchaste, sodomites, kidnapers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is opposed to sound teaching, 11 according to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, with which I have been entrusted.

Apparently some mystic interpretations and speculations have become part of the teaching which was going on in Ephesus. These are supplanting true instruction in the faith. The aim of genuine Christian teaching is love, good conscience and sincere faith.

Some want to be teachers of the law, but without understanding that the law has been supplanted by the gospel. Those responsible for the speculations that are to be suppressed by Timothy do not present the Old Testament from the Christian viewpoint. The Christian values found in the Old Testament are not expressed as a system of law but as the first stage in God's revelation of his saving plan, which is brought to fulfillment in the good news of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. The law is for all those bad people pPaul mentions in verses 9 and 10.

## 1:12-17 - pPaul's gratitude

12 I am grateful to him who has strengthened me, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he considered me trustworthy in appointing me to the ministry. 13 I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and an arrogant man, but I have been mercifully treated because I acted out of ignorance in my unbelief. 14 Indeed, the grace of our Lord has been abundant, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. 15 This saying is trustworthy and deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. Of these I am the foremost. 16 But for that reason I was mercifully treated, so that in me, as the foremost, Christ Jesus might display all his patience as an example for those who would come to believe in him for everlasting life. 17 To the king of ages, incorruptible, invisible, the only God, honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

Paul's personal experience, claimed here by pPaul, is the ultimate example of God's mercifully dealing with sinners. And then a minor doxology.

## 1:18-20 - Responsibility of Timothy

18I entrust this charge to you, Timothy, my child, in accordance with the prophetic words once spoken about you. Through them may you fight a good fight 19by having faith and a good conscience. Some, by rejecting conscience, have made a shipwreck of their faith, 20among them Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme.

Timothy has been entrusted with the task to correct false teaching and promulgate the truth. The “prophetic words once spoken about you” refer to Timothy’s ordination, which will be referenced in 4:14. Because of that ordination he must carry on the good fight with faith and a good conscience.

Both Hymenaeus and Alexander are mentioned as thorns in pPaul’s side in II Timothy. In others of Paul’s letters the “handing over to Satan” is meant to bring about a conversion.

## 2:1-15 - Theme of community relations and belief (Part 1)

1First of all, then, I ask that supplications, prayers, petitions, and thanksgivings be offered for everyone, 2for kings and for all in authority, that we may lead a quiet and tranquil life in all devotion and dignity. 3This is good and pleasing to God our savior, 4who wills everyone to be saved and to come to knowledge of the truth.

5For there is one God.

There is also one mediator between God and the human race,  
Christ Jesus, himself human,

6who gave himself as ransom for all.

This was the testimony at the proper time. 7For this I was appointed preacher and apostle (I am speaking the truth, I am not lying), teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth. 8It is my wish, then, that in every place the men should pray, lifting up holy hands, without anger or argument. 9Similarly, [too,] women should adorn themselves with proper conduct, with modesty and self-control, not with braided hairstyles and gold ornaments, or pearls, or expensive clothes, 10but rather, as befits women who profess reverence for God, with good deeds. 11A woman must receive instruction silently and under complete control. 12I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man. She must be quiet. 13For Adam was formed first, then Eve. 14Further, Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and transgressed. 15But she will be saved through motherhood, provided women persevere in faith and love and holiness, with self-control.

The first part of this section (1-6) is both practical and profound. Get along in civil society so that civil society will get along with you. “This was the testimony at the proper time” is a severely truncated sentence. It is probably bearing testimony to the truth of the passage quoted in verses 5 and 6.

In verse 7, pPaul claims his apostolic authority to teach in faith and truth. So the instructions which follow are not just off-the-cuff; they’re serious. In considering verses 8 to 15, modern people would consider this guy a real misogynist kill-joy. We could leave it at that. But some serious scholars have dealt with the passage with a more humane understanding. It’s convoluted, but here goes.

pPaul has some gripe with women. All women? Probably not. But with some wealthy women in the community (“gold ornaments, or pearls, or expensive clothes”). In Catholic, but more so in Protestant, parishes there are frequently the matrons who understand that no one thinks or does the proper things except themselves, particularly the pastor.

pPaul is writing to his emissary in Ephesus, Timothy, about order in the congregation. The instructions for men and women in worship are disproportionately corrective of women. His

prohibition that “I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man. She must be quiet,” is reflective of the order in the synagogue, but pPaul seems to extend the prohibition beyond worship, as the reference to Eve suggests.

There is another way to interpret this passage, that is, as the author’s attack on false teaching, not on women. These were wealthy women, and this may be connected to the castigation of self-indulgent widows having the leisure to flit about from house to house, as is described in 5:6, 13. If the false teachers were making these women the targets of their message, that would explain the charge that the teachers were seeking monetary gains (6:5) from these rich widows. So it wasn’t women in general about whom pPaul was writing, but those who became the spokespersons of the error for which they had been enticed by these false teachers. These women are the ones who are prohibited from teaching and holding authority. The women who do this false teaching are compared to Eve who was deceived and then deceived Adam.

Raymond E. Brown continues, “The salvation of women through bearing children may have been an invocation of the authority of Genesis 3:16, in order to contradict the teachers who forbade marriage (I Tim 4:3).”

### 3:1-7 - Church structure and order (Part 1) Qualifications for bishops

1This saying is trustworthy: whoever aspires to the office of bishop desires a no’ sble task. 2Therefore, a bishop must be irreproachable, married only once, temperate, self-controlled, decent, hospitable, able to teach, 3not a drunkard, not aggressive, but gentle, not contentious, not a lover of money. 4He must manage his own household well, keeping his children under control with perfect dignity; 5for if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how can he take care of the church of God? 6He should not be a recent convert, so that he may not become conceited and thus incur the devil’s punishment. 7He must also have a good reputation among outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, the devil’s trap.

Apparently there were among the presbyters one who oversaw the rest. To aspire for that office is to aspire for a noble task. It doesn’t say that the aspiring is noble; it’s the task which is noble. The qualities for a bishop are quite clear. Conceit will incur the “devil’s punishment.” Disgrace is called “the devil’s trap.” This might mean that Satan tried to become God and was therefore banished from God’s presence.

### 3:8-13 - Church structure and order (Part 1, cont’d) Deacons

8Similarly, deacons must be dignified, not deceitful, not addicted to drink, not greedy for sordid gain, 9holding fast to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. 10Moreover, they should be tested first; then, if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons. 11Women, similarly, should be dignified, not slanderers, but temperate and faithful in everything. 12Deacons may be married only once and must manage their children and their households well. 13Thus those who serve well as deacons gain good standing and much confidence in their faith in Christ Jesus.

With the mention of women in the midst of these instructions, one wonders if there were women deacons. Most commentators think so.

### 3:14-4:10 - The theme of false and true teaching (Part 2)

14I am writing you about these matters, although I hope to visit you soon. 15But if I should be delayed, you should know how to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of truth. 16Undeniably great is the mystery of devotion,

Who was manifested in the flesh,  
vindicated in the spirit,  
seen by angels,  
proclaimed to the Gentiles,  
believed in throughout the world,  
taken up in glory.

There really is no instruction here. pPaul writes that Timothy knows how to behave in the household of God. The mystery of that household is most likely taken from a familiar liturgical hymn.

#### 4:1-5 - The theme of false and true teaching (Part 2, cont'd) False asceticism

1Now the Spirit explicitly says that in the last times some will turn away from the faith by paying attention to deceitful spirits and demonic instructions 2through the hypocrisy of liars with branded consciences. 3They forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. 4For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected when received with thanksgiving, 5for it is made holy by the invocation of God in prayer.

pPaul is not speaking about slaves when he writes about “branded consciences.” Slaves, especially those who had tried to run away, were branded. Here it’s the consciences of those who are urging a false asceticism that are not free. But pPaul knows and teaches that all things God made are good, and it is made holy by receiving it with gratitude.

#### 4:6-10 -The theme of false and true teaching (Part 2, cont'd) Counsel to Timothy

6If you will give these instructions to the brothers, you will be a good minister of Christ Jesus, nourished on the words of the faith and of the sound teaching you have followed. 7Avoid profane and silly myths. Train yourself for devotion, 8for, while physical training is of limited value, devotion is valuable in every respect, since it holds a promise of life both for the present and for the future. 9This saying is trustworthy and deserves full acceptance. 10For this we toil and struggle, because we have set our hope on the living God, who is the savior of all, especially of those who believe.

“Profane and silly myths” influence the behavior of some. He may be writing about the bodily asceticism of the athlete as one of those profane and silly myths. More important is to train oneself in devotion, because that makes one fit for the hereafter as well as the present.

#### 4:11-16 - The theme of false and true teaching (Part 2, cont'd) Exhortation to Timothy

11Command and teach these things. 12Let no one have contempt for your youth, but set an example for those who believe, in speech, conduct, love, faith, and purity. 13Until I arrive, attend to the reading, exhortation, and teaching. 14Do not neglect the gift you have, which was conferred on you through the prophetic word with the imposition of hands of the presbyterate. 15Be diligent in these matters, be absorbed in them, so that your progress may be evident to everyone. 16Attend to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in both tasks, for by doing so you will save both yourself and those who listen to you.

Timothy was young, but Paul sure had faith in his ability to lead a community, first by his example, then by his teaching. The “reading, exhortation and teaching” made up a liturgical service modeled on the synagogue. Reading from the Old Testament, followed by a homily.

Timothy’s gift is the ordination which took place. The prophetic word is the discernment of a candidate for the office and the laying on of hands by the elders was the sign that the candidate had been chosen to lead the community, ordination, if you wish.

### 5:1-2 - Dealing with each other

1Do not rebuke an older man, but appeal to him as a father. Treat younger men as brothers, 2older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters with complete purity.

This little section got into the letter without fitting into any of the major themes. But it’s good advice.

### 5:3-16 - Theme of church structure and order (Part 2) Widows

3Honor widows who are truly widows. 4But if a widow has children or grandchildren, let these first learn to perform their religious duty to their own family and to make recompense to their parents, for this is pleasing to God. 5The real widow, who is all alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day. 6But the one who is self-indulgent is dead while she lives. 7Command this, so that they may be irreproachable. 8And whoever does not provide for relatives and especially family members has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

9Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years old, married only once, 10with a reputation for good works, namely, that she has raised children, practiced hospitality, washed the feet of the holy ones, helped those in distress, involved herself in every good work. 11But exclude younger widows, for when their sensuality estranges them from Christ, they want to marry 12and will incur condemnation for breaking their first pledge. 13And furthermore, they learn to be idlers, going about from house to house, and not only idlers but gossips and busybodies as well, talking about things that ought not to be mentioned. 14So I would like younger widows to marry, have children, and manage a home, so as to give the adversary no pretext for maligning us. 15For some have already turned away to follow Satan. 16If any woman believer has widowed relatives, she must assist them; the church is not to be burdened, so that it will be able to help those who are truly widows.

Any woman whose husband died was a widow. However, not every widow was a *widow*, a special dedicated group, the really truly widows! If a widow had family who was capable of taking care of her, the family should do so. But the widow who is all alone and continues in prayer day and night is the real widow. Such a one was enrolled in the list of widows. In order to be so enrolled she had to be over sixty years old whose children were already raised. She performs hospitable and lowly tasks. But do not enroll younger widows, they might still find a husband. Better they should re-marry. A real widow’s relatives should take care of her so the community isn’t burdened with her upkeep.

### 5:17-22a - Theme of church structure and order (Part 2, cont’d)

17Presbyters who preside well deserve double honor, especially those who toil in preaching and teaching. 18For the scripture says, “You shall not muzzle an ox when it is threshing,” and, “A worker deserves his pay.” 19Do not accept an accusation against a presbyter unless it is supported by two or three witnesses. 20Reprimand publicly

those who do sin, so that the rest also will be afraid. 21I charge you before God and Christ Jesus and the elect angels to keep these rules without prejudice, doing nothing out of favoritism. 22Do not lay hands too readily on anyone,

It could be understood that among the presbyters there were some of a higher rank than the rest; we might call them bishops or overseers. These were the ones who do the preaching and teaching. Accusations against a presbyter must be verified two or three witnesses. Those who sin should be reprimanded publicly as a lesson to others. Don't show favoritism, and don't be too quick to ordain someone.

### 5:22b-6:2 - Theme of community relations and belief (Part 2)

22b and do not share in another's sins. Keep yourself pure. 23Stop drinking only water, but have a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent illnesses. 24Some people's sins are public, preceding them to judgment; but other people are followed by their sins. 25Similarly, good works are also public; and even those that are not cannot remain hidden.

6:1Those who are under the yoke of slavery must regard their masters as worthy of full respect, so that the name of God and our teaching may not suffer abuse. 2Those whose masters are believers must not take advantage of them because they are brothers but must give better service because those who will profit from their work are believers and are beloved.

Timothy is advised to take care of himself. Then the thought returns to the selection of presbyteral candidates. Some are obviously unfit, others will be found out only in time. The same is true of good candidates. Some are obviously good candidates; others' fitness takes a bit of time to reveal itself.

Slavery itself was not a social issue yet; it was just accepted as part of the culture. There is no thought that it is an evil. But the advice is to Christianize even one's indentured service. Since some of those masters, like the slaves themselves, are Christian, slaves should regard them more as brothers to be served than as masters to be obeyed.

### 6:3-10 - The theme of false and true teaching (Part 3)

3Whoever teaches something different and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the religious teaching 4is conceited, understanding nothing, and has a morbid disposition for arguments and verbal disputes. From these come envy, rivalry, insults, evil suspicions, 5and mutual friction among people with corrupted minds, who are deprived of the truth, supposing religion to be a means of gain. 6Indeed, religion with contentment is a great gain. 7For we brought nothing into the world, just as we shall not be able to take anything out of it. 8If we have food and clothing, we shall be content with that. 9Those who want to be rich are falling into temptation and into a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires, which plunge them into ruin and destruction. 10For the love of money is the root of all evils, and some people in their desire for it have strayed from the faith and have pierced themselves with many pains.

There were at the time, not only Christian teachers of false doctrine, but many who made a handsome living out of teaching nonsense and collecting money for doing so. Christian teachers and preachers are not to be found among that number. The true teacher is one who is content with the necessities of life and the satisfaction of having borne witness to the truth. The false teachers' love for money is leading them into evil. And there is the logic which says that we bring nothing into this world, and we will take nothing with us when we depart, so why bother going after money? That approach is going to lead to nothing but pain.

## 6:11-16 - Exhortation for Timothy

11But you, man of God, avoid all this. Instead, pursue righteousness, devotion, faith, love, patience, and gentleness. 12Compete well for the faith. Lay hold of eternal life, to which you were called when you made the noble confession in the presence of many witnesses. 13I charge [you] before God, who gives life to all things, and before Christ Jesus, who gave testimony under Pontius Pilate for the noble confession, 14to keep the commandment without stain or reproach until the appearance of our Lord Jesus Christ 15that the blessed and only ruler will make manifest at the proper time, the King of kings and Lord of lords, 16who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, and whom no human being has seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal power. Amen.

“Man of God” is a title used in the Old Testament for Moses and for some of the prophets, calling to mind the spiritual authority which Timothy possesses. He is to avoid all that crass seeking after money mentioned in the previous segment. He is to lay hold of the eternal life to which he was called in his profession of faith at his baptism. It is not thought to have been at his ordination; indeed it’s not noted that he was ordained. Jesus himself gave testimony to that faith when he was before Pilate. The message to Timothy is “Hang in there.

A doxology finishes this section.

## 6:17-19 - Wealth

17Tell the rich in the present age not to be proud and not to rely on so uncertain a thing as wealth but rather on God, who richly provides us with all things for our enjoyment. 18Tell them to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous, ready to share, 19thus accumulating as treasure a good foundation for the future, so as to win the life that is true life.

There were some wealthy people in the congregation to which Timothy belonged. The mention of money in the previous sections probably brought this to the author’s mind here at the end of his letter. The message is pretty clear.

## 6:20-21- Final warning

20O Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you. Avoid profane babbling and the absurdities of so-called knowledge. 21By professing it, some people have deviated from the faith.  
Grace be with all of you.

A final warning to guard those entrusted to you. Avoid the futile philosophical and religious arguments which surround you under the guise of knowledge. Adherence to it has caused some to depart from true faith.

## Letter to the Hebrews

No, neither Paul nor one of his disciples wrote this letter, even though by the Second Century it was attributed to Paul. No one knows the author. The date is surmised to be around 60 A.D. or 80 A.D., with the latter date being the more probable. From the contents of the letter itself, one can deduce that the purpose of the letter is “preventing the addressees from abandoning faith in Christ in favor of the idealized values of the Israelite cult.” (Raymond E. Brown) The work is more like a written homily or sermon than a letter. The final verses in Chapter 13 give it the appearance of a letter, however.

Clearly the addressees are the “Hebrews.” Just who that might be is debated, but the majority of scholars think that the addressees are Jewish Christians who have an appreciation for and even a fascination with the Hebrew traditions and worship practices. The entire letter could be summed up by saying that Jesus is better than anything you have ever seen. The author will appeal to the things about the Jewish beliefs and rituals which they hold dear, and demonstrate that Jesus fulfills the promises of the Old Testament and surpasses them. That thesis is spelled out by one comparison after another contrasting the new covenant in Jesus with the old covenants in Abraham and Moses.

### 1:1-4 - Introduction

1In times past, God spoke in partial and various ways to our ancestors through the prophets; 2in these last days, he spoke to us through a son, whom he made heir of all things and through whom he created the universe,

3who is the refulgence of his glory,

the very imprint of his being,

and who sustains all things by his mighty word.

When he had accomplished purification from sins,

he took his seat at the right hand of the Majesty on high,

4as far superior to the angels

as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

Herein lies the entire message of the letter. Indisputably it was God who spoke to the ancestors through the prophets; but to us, God has spoken through God’s son, who is not a reflected light, but the refulgence of God’s glory, “the very imprint of his being.” If this had been written in modern times, the image would be that of the stamping machine which makes coins. The perfect replica of the imprinter appears on the coin. In the First Century, the image may have been that of the seal of the ring which was imprinted in the hot wax to seal a letter. The exact

duplicate is produced. The word “image” doesn’t do justice to the metaphor. It is much more substantial than that.

This exact duplicate of God “accomplished the purification from sin, and took his seat at the right hand of the Majesty on high, as far superior to the angels, as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.” In the Jewish vision of the connection between the world where God lives and our world, it was the angels who were the mediators between the two. The proclamation here is that Jesus is as far superior to the angels as the name he inherited is more excellent than theirs, because the name Jesus inherited is “Lord,” the very name of God.

In these few opening verses, we have summed up the content of the entire Letter to the Hebrews. The following 13 chapters will expound, even explode, that theme.

#### 1:4-14 - Superior to the the angels

4as far superior to the angels  
as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

5For to which of the angels did God ever say:

“You are my son; this day I have begotten you”?

Or again:

“I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me”?

6And again, when he leads the first-born into the world, he says:

“Let all the angels of God worship him.”

7Of the angels he says:

“He makes his angels winds  
and his ministers a fiery flame”;

8but of the Son:

“Your throne, O God, stands forever and ever;  
and a righteous scepter is the scepter of your kingdom.

9You loved justice and hated wickedness;  
therefore (O) God, your God, anointed you  
with the oil of gladness above your companions”;

10and:

“At the beginning, O Lord, you established the earth,  
and the heavens are the works of your hands.

11They will perish, but you remain;  
and they will all grow old like a garment.

12You will roll them up like a cloak,  
and like a garment they will be changed.

But you are the same, and your years will have no end.”

13But to which of the angels has he ever said:

“Sit at my right hand  
until I make your enemies your footstool”?

14Are they not all ministering spirits sent to serve, for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?

Verse 4 belongs grammatically to the previous sentence, but it also introduces the new theme of Jesus’ transcendence.

This section of quotations from the Hebrew scriptures is unique in the New Testament, because in verse 8 Jesus is called “God.” And scholars say that verse 9 ought to be punctuated this way: “therefore, God, your God anointed you . . .” once again calling Jesus by the name “God.” The whole point of Chapter 1 is the absolute supremacy of Jesus because he is God.

Verse 14 sort of “puts the angels in their place.” They are servants, not lords.

## 2:1-4 - Therefore

1Therefore, we must attend all the more to what we have heard, so that we may not be carried away. 2For if the word announced through angels proved firm, and every transgression and disobedience received its just recompense, 3how shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation? Announced originally through the Lord, it was confirmed for us by those who had heard. 4God added his testimony by signs, wonders, various acts of power, and distribution of the gifts of the holy Spirit according to his will.

There are consequences for us of this exalted christology. We’ve got to hang on to what we have been taught. If the message announced by angels to Moses and the prophets was firm, how much more ought we pay attention to what was heard by the apostles, confirmed by God through signs and wonders and acts of power and the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and handed down to us? This clearly indicates that the letter is written for a second generation of Christians. If the people to whom this was originally addressed were wavering in their belief in Christ, and if they were being fascinated by Jewish rituals, this admonition spoke directly to them.

## 2:5-18 - Exaltation through abasement

5For it was not to angels that he subjected the world to come, of which we are speaking. 6Instead, someone has testified somewhere:

“What is man that you are mindful of him,  
or the son of man that you care for him?  
7You made him for a little while lower than the angels;  
you crowned him with glory and honor,  
8subjecting all things under his feet.”

In “subjecting” all things [to him], he left nothing not “subject to him.” Yet at present we do not see “all things subject to him,” 9but we do see Jesus “crowned with glory and honor” because he suffered death, he who “for a little while” was made “lower than the angels,” that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

10For it was fitting that he, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the leader to their salvation perfect through suffering. 11He who consecrates and those who are being consecrated all have one origin. Therefore, he is not ashamed to call them “brothers,” 12saying:

“I will proclaim your name to my brothers,  
in the midst of the assembly I will praise you”;

13and again:

“I will put my trust in him”;

and again:

“Behold, I and the children God has given me.”

14Now since the children share in blood and flesh, he likewise shared in them, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, 15and free those who through fear of death had been subject to slavery all their life. 16Surely he did not help angels but rather the descendants of Abraham; 17therefore, he had to become like his brothers in every way, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest before God to expiate the sins of the people. 18Because he himself was tested through what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.

Using the quotation from Psalm 8, the author identifies Jesus as the one who for a little while was made less than the angels. Remember, in the Hebrew view of things, the angels were the mediators of God’s blessings to humanity. The author uses the psalm to admit that “for a little

while” Jesus was less than the angels, but as the psalm says further, then “you crowned him with glory and honor, subjecting all things under his feet,” even the angels.

The point the author makes is that Jesus had to become what all people are in order to die for the people. Jesus didn’t do this for the sake of the angels, but for the children of Abraham. He had to become like human beings in every way so he could be a merciful high priest before God. Because he was tested, he could now help others who are tested. There are few places in the New Testament where the mystery of the incarnation is so vigorously attested.

### 3:1-6 - Superior to Moses

1Therefore, holy “brothers,” sharing in a heavenly calling, reflect on Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession, 2who was faithful to the one who appointed him, just as Moses was “faithful in [all] his house.” 3But he is worthy of more “glory” than Moses, as the founder of a house has more “honor” than the house itself. 4Every house is founded by someone, but the founder of all is God. 5Moses was “faithful in all his house” as a “servant” to testify to what would be spoken, 6but Christ was faithful as a son placed over his house. We are his house, if [only] we hold fast to our confidence and pride in our hope.

Our author is getting a little poetic, and maybe a little esoteric, in his images, as he extolls the primacy of Christ. “Our confession” means our faith. This is the only place in the New Testament where Jesus is called an “apostle,” one sent as God’s final word to us. The comparison to Moses who, according to the Book of Numbers 12:7, was “faithful in [all] his house,” leads to the author’s demonstration that Jesus is worthy of more glory than Moses, because he is the *founder* of the house. Back in verse 1:9, Jesus was designated as “God.” Perhaps here the author is again referring to Jesus when he writes that “the founder of all is God.” Jesus is the son placed over his house, which we are. Once again the comparison and contrast is made between Moses and Jesus, and Jesus is shown to surpass Moses. If we remember the audience to whom this letter is addressed, we can see the point of the comparison.

### 3:7-19 - A warning

7Therefore, as the holy Spirit says:

“Oh, that today you would hear his voice,  
8Harden not your hearts as at the rebellion  
in the day of testing in the desert,  
9where your ancestors tested and tried me  
and saw my works 10for forty years.

Because of this I was provoked with that generation  
and I said, ‘They have always been of erring heart,  
and they do not know my ways.’

11As I swore in my wrath,  
‘They shall not enter into my rest.’”

12Take care, brothers, that none of you may have an evil and unfaithful heart, so as to forsake the living God. 13Encourage yourselves daily while it is still “today,” so that none of you may grow hardened by the deceit of sin. 14We have become partners of Christ if only we hold the beginning of the reality firm until the end, 15for it is said:

“Oh, that today you would hear his voice:  
‘Harden not your hearts as at the rebellion.’”

16Who were those who rebelled when they heard? Was it not all those who came out of Egypt under Moses? 17With

whom was he “provoked for forty years”? Was it not those who had sinned, whose corpses fell in the desert? 18And to whom did he “swear that they should not enter into his rest,” if not to those who were disobedient? 19And we see that they could not enter for lack of faith.

At the beginning of Chapter 2, the writer made application to his audience of the teaching he had written in Chapter 1. Here’s the same thing. In 3:1-6 he gave a teaching about the relation between Moses and Jesus; now he gives an application of that teaching to the lives of his audience. The application is this: don’t be as hard of heart as the people were whom Moses led in the desert.

Verse 14 uses the image of the beginning of the Christian journey and the necessity of carrying on that journey to the end. The author spells out what happened to the Israelites during their journey as a warning to his Christian audience. The message: don’t lose faith.

It’s almost ironic that the author is using the history of the Hebrew people to admonish Jewish Christians who are tending to emulate the Jewish practices that losing faith in Jesus will cause them to end up excluded from the Promised Land, just as their ancestors were.

#### 4:1-13 - God and the Sabbath rest

1Therefore, let us be on our guard while the promise of entering into his rest remains, that none of you seem to have failed. 2For in fact we have received the good news just as they did. But the word that they heard did not profit them, for they were not united in faith with those who listened. 3For we who believed enter into [that] rest, just as he has said:

As I swore in my wrath,  
“They shall not enter into my rest,”

and yet his works were accomplished at the foundation of the world. 4For he has spoken somewhere about the seventh day in this manner, “And God rested on the seventh day from all his works”; 5and again, in the previously mentioned place, “They shall not enter into my rest.” 6Therefore, since it remains that some will enter into it, and those who formerly received the good news did not enter because of disobedience, 7he once more set a day, “today,” when long afterwards he spoke through David, as already quoted:

“Oh, that today you would hear his voice:  
‘Harden not your hearts.’”

8Now if Joshua had given them rest, he would not have spoken afterwards of another day. 9Therefore, a sabbath rest still remains for the people of God. 10And whoever enters into God’s rest, rests from his own works as God did from his. 11Therefore, let us strive to enter into that rest, so that no one may fall after the same example of disobedience. 12Indeed, the word of God is living and effective, sharper than any two-edged sword, penetrating even between soul and spirit, joints and marrow, and able to discern reflections and thoughts of the heart. 13No creature is concealed from him, but everything is naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must render an account.

The warning after having given the example of Moses in 3:1-6 continues. “Entering into rest” is the metaphor for three things in this passage. The first is the rest God entered into after he had completed the creation of the world. The second is the exodus to the Promised land as a place of rest. The third is the journey through life toward rest in heaven on which we all are embarked. The warning is that we should not neglect to hear the word as the Israelites did on their journey. So the quote in verse 3 “they shall not enter into my rest” should be read in such a way as to emphasize the word “they.” It does not apply to us; we can still enter into God’s rest. Verse 6 is about us: “Therefore, since it remains that some will enter into it [God’s rest] and those who formerly received the good news did not enter because of disobedience, he once more set a day, ‘today,’” when entering into God’s rest would again be possible. The author then emphasizes the

practice of the Sabbath rest, which we should not abuse.

The passage in verse 12 about the effectiveness of the word of God is one of the most beloved passages in this letter. Perhaps the connection with what immediately precedes it is the fact that several passages of scripture have been cited in support of the points the author has tried to make.

#### 4:14-5:10 - Superiority of Jesus' priesthood

14Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. 15For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has similarly been tested in every way, yet without sin. 16So let us confidently approach the throne of grace to receive mercy and to find grace for timely help.

1Every high priest is taken from among men and made their representative before God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. 2He is able to deal patiently with the ignorant and erring, for he himself is beset by weakness 3and so, for this reason, must make sin offerings for himself as well as for the people. 4No one takes this honor upon himself but only when called by God, just as Aaron was. 5In the same way, it was not Christ who glorified himself in becoming high priest, but rather the one who said to him:

“You are my son;  
this day I have begotten you”;

6just as he says in another place:

“You are a priest forever  
according to the order of Melchizedek.”

7In the days when he was in the flesh, he offered prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. 8Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered; 9and when he was made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, 10declared by God high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

The exhortation “let us hold fast to our confession” again points to the message of the whole letter. Our confession is our belief in Jesus Christ. Even though some are becoming fascinated with the Jewish rituals, we must hold fast to Jesus' role in our salvation. That role is now portrayed in terms of the role of the high priest in Jewish liturgical functions.

Like the high priests of the Jewish religion, our high priest, Jesus, is able to identify with us mere mortals and to sympathize with our weaknesses. The temple high priest offered sacrifices for himself and for the rest of the people. He identified with the rest of the community members. As high priests didn't take the office on themselves, so Jesus did not take it on himself. He was appointed by God.

Verse 7 is a profound statement given here in an unfortunate English translation. Jesus offered prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to the one who was able to save him *from out of* death. And he was heard! He died, but in his resurrection, God brought him out of death. In the Greek/English lexicon, the italicized words are the first translation given for the Greek word used here, “*ek*.”

“Son though he was he learned obedience from what he suffered.” This perhaps is meant to cement the concept that it is as one of us that Jesus could become our high priest. The Greek word for obedience is *hypakoe*, which is made up of two words, *hyp*, a prefix which is the basis for the English word “hyper,” and the word *akoe* which means “to listen.” It was in Jesus' hyper-listening through suffering that he came to learn the depths of what it means to be human. In this Jesus was made perfect (as a human being), and he became the source of salvation to all other

human beings who obey – “hyper-listen” – to him. Therefore he was “declared by God high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.”

### 5:11-6:8 - A teacher’s rebuke

11About this we have much to say, and it is difficult to explain, for you have become sluggish in hearing. 12Although you should be teachers by this time, you need to have someone teach you again the basic elements of the utterances of God. You need milk, [and] not solid food. 13Everyone who lives on milk lacks experience of the word of righteousness, for he is a child. 14But solid food is for the mature, for those whose faculties are trained by practice to discern good and evil.

1Therefore, let us leave behind the basic teaching about Christ and advance to maturity, without laying the foundation all over again: repentance from dead works and faith in God, 2instruction about baptisms and laying on of hands, resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment. 3And we shall do this, if only God permits. 4For it is impossible in the case of those who have once been enlightened and tasted the heavenly gift and shared in the holy Spirit 5and tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, 6and then have fallen away, to bring them to repentance again, since they are recrucifying the Son of God for themselves and holding him up to contempt. 7Ground that has absorbed the rain falling upon it repeatedly and brings forth crops useful to those for whom it is cultivated receives a blessing from God. 8But if it produces thorns and thistles, it is rejected; it will soon be cursed and finally burned.

In verse 11, the Greek word *akoe* shows up again. The audience, says the author, has become sluggish in “hearing.” The author is saying, basically, “OK, now, listen up!”

Then he says that he will not cover the basics in his further writings, but he enunciates six basics of the faith: (1) repentance from dead works and (2) faith in God, (3) instruction about baptisms and (4) laying on of hands, (5) resurrection of the dead and (6) eternal judgment. He’s just taking for granted that his audience has knowledge of those things, he says, perhaps with a bit of tongue-in-cheek.

A note on the plural of “baptisms” in verse 2. The author is referring to Christian baptism, and the washing rites used in the Jewish rituals.

He worries that those who have already assented to and experienced the benefits of the faith in Jesus, but are now drifting away, might be difficult to “convert” again. They are like a field which has been plentifully watered, but may no longer be producing the fruit which was expected. Without acceptable results, that field will be burned.

He will now spend the next five chapters describing Jesus and his sacrifice in terms of his fulfillment and furthering of the Levitical priesthood and the temple sacrifices.

### 6:9-12 - A teacher’s encouragement

9But we are sure in your regard, beloved, of better things related to salvation, even though we speak in this way. 10For God is not unjust so as to overlook your work and the love you have demonstrated for his name by having served and continuing to serve the holy ones. 11We earnestly desire each of you to demonstrate the same eagerness for the fulfillment of hope until the end, 12so that you may not become sluggish, but imitators of those who, through faith and patience, are inheriting the promises.

After his rebuke of his audience, he now turns to a bit of commendation, even flattery. In faith and patience, they should continue toward inheriting the promises made to Abraham and to believers in the gospel.

## 6:13-20 - God's promise

13When God made the promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, "he swore by himself," 14and said, "I will indeed bless you and multiply" you. 15And so, after patient waiting, he obtained the promise. 16Human beings swear by someone greater than themselves; for them an oath serves as a guarantee and puts an end to all argument. 17So when God wanted to give the heirs of his promise an even clearer demonstration of the immutability of his purpose, he intervened with an oath, 18so that by two immutable things, in which it was impossible for God to lie, we who have taken refuge might be strongly encouraged to hold fast to the hope that lies before us. 19This we have as an anchor of the soul, sure and firm, which reaches into the interior behind the veil, 20where Jesus has entered on our behalf as forerunner, becoming high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.

God made a promise to Abraham, and then he reasserted that promise with an oath. Those are the two immutable things which God has given, and for which reason we can hope for the things which are promised. The author again compares Jesus' ministry with the temple. The Holy of Holies was separated from the rest of the temple by a veil. Jesus has entered into that Holy of Holies *on our behalf*, as a forerunner whom we are to follow. The reference to a "priest according to the order of Melchizedek" will be amplified in the next chapter. The priest Melchizedek, we must remember, has no parents, and no ending. He just appeared out of nowhere to bless Abraham.

## 7:1-28 - Melchizedek, a type of Christ

If we were Jewish Christians enamored of our Jewish heritage, we could digest this whole passage and it would probably make immediate sense to us. But we aren't, and it doesn't. So we'll take it one bite at a time.

1This "Melchizedek, king of Salem and priest of God Most High," "met Abraham as he returned from his defeat of the kings" and "blessed him." 2And Abraham apportioned to him "a tenth of everything." His name first means righteous king, and he was also "king of Salem," that is, king of peace. 3Without father, mother, or ancestry, without beginning of days or end of life, thus made to resemble the Son of God, he remains a priest forever.

In verses 1 to 3, Melchizedek's person and career prefigure those of Jesus: "righteous king," "King of peace," "without beginning of days or end of life," and "he remains a priest forever."

4See how great he is to whom the patriarch "Abraham [indeed] gave a tenth" of his spoils. 5The descendants of Levi who receive the office of priesthood have a commandment according to the law to exact tithes from the people, that is, from their brothers, although they also have come from the loins of Abraham. 6But he who was not of their ancestry received tithes from Abraham and blessed him who had received the promises. 7Unquestionably, a lesser person is blessed by a greater. 8In the one case, mortal men receive tithes; in the other, a man of whom it is testified that he lives on. 9One might even say that Levi himself, who receives tithes, was tithed through Abraham, 10for he was still in his father's loins when Melchizedek met him.

Unwilling to leave his argument there, the author presses on to show that since Levi who received tithes from his brothers, paid tithes to Melchizedek because he "was still in his father's loins" when Abraham paid tithes to Melchizedek, Melchizedek must be greater than the Levite priests, and Jesus must be greater than any previous priest.

The author goes on to make a further point involving Melchizedek. Even our father Abraham paid tithes to him. Jews paid tithes to the Levite priests, even though those priests were equally the children of Abraham. But Melchizedec was not a descendent of Abraham, and Abraham paid tithes to him, and he blessed Abraham; the greater person always blessed the lesser one. In comparing Jesus to Melchizedec, the author is demonstrating a superiority of Jesus over all the Jewish heritage, going all the way back to Abraham, the father of the nation.

11If, then, perfection came through the levitical priesthood, on the basis of which the people received the law, what need would there still have been for another priest to arise according to the order of Melchizedek, and not reckoned according to the order of Aaron? 12When there is a change of priesthood, there is necessarily a change of law as well. 13Now he of whom these things are said belonged to a different tribe, of which no member ever officiated at the altar. 14It is clear that our Lord arose from Judah, and in regard to that tribe Moses said nothing about priests. 15It is even more obvious if another priest is raised up after the likeness of Melchizedek, 16who has become so, not by a law expressed in a commandment concerning physical descent but by the power of a life that cannot be destroyed. 17For it is testified:

“You are a priest forever  
according to the order of Melchizedek.”

One might think that the author had sufficiently made his point. But no, he goes on. If the Levitical priests were good enough, there would have been no need for another priest to arise. And if another priest arose, that would change the law under which the previous, but insufficient, priesthood functioned. Jesus’ ancestry was not of the priestly line. He came from the tribe of Judah, not from Aaron.

The gist of the whole argument is that as Melchizedec came out of nowhere and is a priest forever, so did Jesus come, not from a priestly tribe, but “out of nowhere.” It was by divine decree – “You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.” – not by blood line, that Jesus was appointed priest forever.

18On the one hand, a former commandment is annulled because of its weakness and uselessness, 19for the law brought nothing to perfection; on the other hand, a better hope is introduced, through which we draw near to God. 20And to the degree that this happened not without the taking of an oath—for others became priests without an oath, 21but he with an oath, through the one who said to him:

“The Lord has sworn, and he will not repent:  
‘You are a priest forever’”—

22to that same degree has Jesus [also] become the guarantee of an [even] better covenant. 23Those priests were many because they were prevented by death from remaining in office, 24but he, because he remains forever, has a priesthood that does not pass away. 25Therefore, he is always able to save those who approach God through him, since he lives forever to make intercession for them.

The contrast between the old law which was annulled because it couldn’t lead to perfection, and the “better hope” which is introduced through Jesus, whose significance is demonstrated because it was confirmed by an oath, again shows the superiority of a new covenant. In the old covenant priests died and could not remain in the office of priesthood. However, Jesus lives forever, and so his priesthood does not pass away, and therefore through Jesus’ priesthood, people can approach God forever.

26It was fitting that we should have such a high priest: holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners, higher than the heavens. 27He has no need, as did the high priests, to offer sacrifice day after day, first for his own sins and then for those of the people; he did that once for all when he offered himself. 28For the law appoints men subject to

weakness to be high priests, but the word of the oath, which was taken after the law, appoints a son, who has been made perfect forever.

The author exhorts his readers by asserting that it was fitting that we have such a high priest who doesn't need to offer sacrifices over and over again. Jesus' sacrifice – himself – once for all has made further sacrifices unnecessary. The law appointed men who were subject to weakness as high priests. But by God's oath, which came after the law, and therefore supplanted the law with its priesthood, the son has been appointed high priest forever.

#### 8:1-6 - Superiority of Jesus and ministry in the heavenly tabernacle

Note that here and in the rest of the letter the author speaks of the tabernacle, not the temple. The tabernacle was the tent of worship which accompanied them during the Exodus.

1The main point of what has been said is this: we have such a high priest, who has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, 2a minister of the sanctuary and of the true tabernacle that the Lord, not man, set up. 3Now every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices; thus the necessity for this one also to have something to offer. 4If then he were on earth, he would not be a priest, since there are those who offer gifts according to the law. 5They worship in a copy and shadow of the heavenly sanctuary, as Moses was warned when he was about to erect the tabernacle. For he says, "See that you make everything according to the pattern shown you on the mountain." 6Now he has obtained so much more excellent a ministry as he is mediator of a better covenant, enacted on better promises.

This son (mentioned in 7:28) has taken his seat in the heavenly tabernacle made by God, of which the earthly tabernacle was but a shadow. Priests needed to have something to offer, and those priests on earth make offerings according to the law. This is a mere shadow of the sanctuary of the heavenly tabernacle where Jesus ministers. His is a more excellent ministry serving a better covenant based on better promises.

#### 8:7-13 - New covenant is superior to the old covenant

7For if that first covenant had been faultless, no place would have been sought for a second one. 8But he finds fault with them and says:

"Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord,  
when I will conclude a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.

9It will not be like the covenant I made with their fathers  
the day I took them by the hand to lead them forth from the land of Egypt;  
for they did not stand by my covenant  
and I ignored them, says the Lord.

10But this is the covenant I will establish with the house of Israel  
after those days, says the Lord:

I will put my laws in their minds  
and I will write them upon their hearts.  
I will be their God,  
and they shall be my people.

11And they shall not teach, each one his fellow citizen  
and kinsman, saying, 'Know the Lord,'  
for all shall know me,  
from least to greatest.

12For I will forgive their evildoing  
and remember their sins no more.”

13When he speaks of a “new” covenant, he declares the first one obsolete. And what has become obsolete and has grown old is close to disappearing.

Verse 6 spoke of a “better covenant” than the old one, and our author now borrows from Jeremiah (31:31-34) to make his point that the old covenant is passing away and being supplanted by the new covenant in Jesus.

Chapter 9 will now compare and contrast the worship of the old covenant and the sacrifice of Jesus.

### 9:1-10 - Worship of the first covenant

1Now [even] the first covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly sanctuary. 2For a tabernacle was constructed, the outer one, in which were the lampstand, the table, and the bread of offering; this is called the Holy Place. 3Behind the second veil was the tabernacle called the Holy of Holies, 4in which were the gold altar of incense and the ark of the covenant entirely covered with gold. In it were the gold jar containing the manna, the staff of Aaron that had sprouted, and the tablets of the covenant. 5Above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the place of expiation. Now is not the time to speak of these in detail.

6With these arrangements for worship, the priests, in performing their service, go into the outer tabernacle repeatedly, 7but the high priest alone goes into the inner one once a year, not without blood that he offers for himself and for the sins of the people. 8In this way the holy Spirit shows that the way into the sanctuary had not yet been revealed while the outer tabernacle still had its place. 9This is a symbol of the present time, in which gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the worshiper in conscience 10but only in matters of food and drink and various ritual washings: regulations concerning the flesh, imposed until the time of the new order.

The author is recalling to his audience’s mind the places and rituals of the Old Law, particularly the Day of Atonement. He is setting the stage for what he will present in the next section. If people understand these Old Testament realities, they will be prepared to receive what the author will say about Jesus and his ministry.

Get the picture of the traveling tabernacle. It was a large tent whose entrance was covered by a veil. Within that tent was another, also closed off by a veil. The outer tent was the Holy Place; the inner tent was the Holy of Holies. The priests entered twice daily into the Holy Place to offer prayers and incense, to tend the lamps and lamp stands, and to replace the loaves on the table of the bread of the offering once a week. The repetition of these rituals showed that they did not expiate the sins of the people.

The high priest, on the other hand, entered once a year into the Holy of Holies, bringing with him the blood of the sacrifices of the animals, to sprinkle on the altar. Blood was a powerful symbol of life. The sprinkling of blood was thought to remove from the people the sins committed during the previous year. Our author sees this arrangement, which was still the Jewish practice of his day, as a symbol that as long as the activity in the outer tabernacle continued, the ultimately redemptive sacrifice had not yet been offered, and would not be “until the time of the new order,” of which he will write in the following segment.

### 9:11-28 - The sacrifice of Jesus

11But when Christ came as high priest of the good things that have come to be, passing through the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made by hands, that is, not belonging to this creation, 12he entered once for all into the sanctuary, not with the blood of goats and calves but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption. 13For if the blood of goats and bulls and the sprinkling of a heifer's ashes can sanctify those who are defiled so that their flesh is cleansed, 14how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from dead works to worship the living God.

The contrast here is between the *ritual* cleansing brought about by the “blood of goats and calves” with Jesus’ blood which was effective for “obtaining eternal redemption,” which can *actually* “cleanse our consciences from dead works to worship the living God.”

15For this reason he is mediator of a new covenant: since a death has taken place for deliverance from transgressions under the first covenant, those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance. 16Now where there is a will, the death of the testator must be established. 17For a will takes effect only at death; it has no force while the testator is alive. 18Thus not even the first covenant was inaugurated without blood. 19When every commandment had been proclaimed by Moses to all the people according to the law, he took the blood of calves [and goats], together with water and crimson wool and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people, 20saying, “This is ‘the blood of the covenant which God has enjoined upon you.’” 21In the same way, he sprinkled also the tabernacle and all the vessels of worship with blood. 22According to the law almost everything is purified by blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.

With the sacrifice of Jesus’ own blood a new covenant has been established, which can actually take away the sins committed under the old covenant, which the old sacrifices could not take away. The next bit about the will (or testament) and the death of the testator is a little convoluted, but it seems to mean this: “Jesus, the eternal Son, who, with the Father, has established the new covenant, is at the same time the testator whose death has brought it into force.” (Myles M. Bourke)

23Therefore, it was necessary for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified by these rites, but the heavenly things themselves by better sacrifices than these. 24For Christ did not enter into a sanctuary made by hands, a copy of the true one, but heaven itself, that he might now appear before God on our behalf. 25Not that he might offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters each year into the sanctuary with blood that is not his own; 26if that were so, he would have had to suffer repeatedly from the foundation of the world. But now once for all he has appeared at the end of the ages to take away sin by his sacrifice. 27Just as it is appointed that human beings die once, and after this the judgment, 28so also Christ, offered once to take away the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to take away sin but to bring salvation to those who eagerly await him.

The best way to understand verse 23 is to read it emphasizing the word “copies” to contrast that with “the heavenly things themselves.” The same applies to verse 24; emphasize the words “a copy of the true one” to contrast it with “heaven itself.” Jesus didn’t appear *on behalf of the people* to only those *precious things in the Holy of Holies*, as the high priest did each year; Jesus appeared before *God on our behalf*. And Jesus doesn’t have to do this repeatedly (every year); he has appeared before God once and for all. Verse 27 is based on the fact that death is an unrepeatabe act. So Jesus’ death is unrepeatabe, and repetition is unnecessary.

The passage about Jesus’ reappearance is reflective of the high priest’s reappearance after he offered the sacrifice in the Holy of Holies. That reappearance of Jesus will be at the parousia.

10:1-18 - Only one sacrifice

1Since the law has only a shadow of the good things to come, and not the very image of them, it can never make perfect those who come to worship by the same sacrifices that they offer continually each year. 2Otherwise, would not the sacrifices have ceased to be offered, since the worshipers, once cleansed, would no longer have had any consciousness of sins? 3But in those sacrifices there is only a yearly remembrance of sins, 4for it is impossible that the blood of bulls and goats take away sins. 5For this reason, when he came into the world, he said:

“Sacrifice and offering you did not desire,  
but a body you prepared for me;  
6holocausts and sin offerings you took no delight in.  
7Then I said, ‘As is written of me in the scroll  
Behold, I come to do your will, O God.’”

8First he says, “Sacrifices and offerings, holocausts and sin offerings, you neither desired nor delighted in.” These are offered according to the law. 9Then he says, “Behold, I come to do your will.” He takes away the first to establish the second. 10By this “will,” we have been consecrated through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

Once again, the way one reads this passage can help reveal the meaning of it. So when reading verse 1, emphasize the words “only a shadow” and the words “not the very image.” And this shadow can never make its worshipers perfect, so the sacrifice has to be offered every year. If it did make the worshipers perfect, it wouldn’t have to be offered each year. But those sacrifices only remember and remind the worshipers of sin, because the blood of animals can’t take away sin. However in coming into the world, Jesus said that the offering which would take away sin was the offering of obedience.

11Every priest stands daily at his ministry, offering frequently those same sacrifices that can never take away sins. 12But this one offered one sacrifice for sins, and took his seat forever at the right hand of God; 13now he waits until his enemies are made his footstool. 14For by one offering he has made perfect forever those who are being consecrated. 15The holy Spirit also testifies to us, for after saying:

16“This is the covenant I will establish with them after those days, says the Lord:  
‘I will put my laws in their hearts,  
and I will write them upon their minds,’”

17he also says:

“Their sins and their evildoing  
I will remember no more.”

18Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer offering for sin.

Whereas the daily ministering of the priests could not take away sin, Jesus’ sacrifice took away sin, and he is now seated forever at the right hand of God (having passed into that Holy of Holies) and awaits the destruction of his enemies. This one offering has made us perfect. In testimony of this the author quotes Jeremiah 31-34. So, the conclusion is that the ritual sacrifices which have fascinated the “Hebrews” are now totally unnecessary.

10:19-39 - So, shape up!

19Therefore, brothers, since through the blood of Jesus we have confidence of entrance into the sanctuary 20by the new and living way he opened for us through the veil, that is, his flesh, 21and since we have “a great priest over the house of God,” 22let us approach with a sincere heart and in absolute trust, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed in pure water. 23Let us hold unwaveringly to our confession that gives us hope, for he who made the promise is trustworthy. 24We must consider how to rouse one another to love and good works. 25We should not stay away from our assembly, as is the custom of some, but encourage one another, and this all the more as you see the day drawing near.

Through Jesus offering we can enter into the sanctuary, and can do so with great confidence and trust because of the sacrifice Jesus has offered. The “our bodies washed in pure water” refers to baptism, and the confession of the act of faith in Jesus, for it is his sacrifice which gives us hope that the promises to us will be fulfilled. Rouse one another to take part in the offering of Jesus which takes place in the Christian liturgy. Some were apparently absenting themselves from the community celebration of the Eucharist. They should join that assembly again in order to be encouraged by the love for one another which exists there. The motivation: the parousia draws near.

## Or Else

26If we sin deliberately after receiving knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains sacrifice for sins  
27but a fearful prospect of judgment and a flaming fire that is going to consume the adversaries. 28Anyone who rejects the law of Moses is put to death without pity on the testimony of two or three witnesses. 29Do you not think that a much worse punishment is due the one who has contempt for the Son of God, considers unclean the covenant-blood by which he was consecrated, and insults the spirit of grace? 30We know the one who said:

“Vengeance is mine; I will repay,”

and again:

“The Lord will judge his people.”

31It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

Once a person deliberately sins by apostasy from Christ, after one has already accepted Christ, there is no sacrifice left which can remove sin; there remains only judgement. Under the law of Moses anyone who rejected that law was stoned to death. Don’t you think it will be worse for one who rejects the salvation granted us through Christ? The author threatens with two passages from the Old Testament: Deuteronomy 32:3 and 36. He concludes his threat with verse 31.

## Remember the good ol’ days

32Remember the days past when, after you had been enlightened, you endured a great contest of suffering.  
33At times you were publicly exposed to abuse and affliction; at other times you associated yourselves with those so treated. 34You even joined in the sufferings of those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, knowing that you had a better and lasting possession. 35Therefore, do not throw away your confidence; it will have great recompense. 36You need endurance to do the will of God and receive what he has promised.

37“For, after just a brief moment,

he who is to come shall come;

he shall not delay.

38But my just one shall live by faith,

and if he draws back I take no pleasure in him.”

39We are not among those who draw back and perish, but among those who have faith and will possess life.

In the past you endured suffering for your faith, and you stood by others who were suffering. You joined them in prison and accepted the loss of property, knowing that something better awaited you. Don’t throw away that attitude. Keep on enduring what you have to in order to fulfill the will of God and receive God’s promises. The author quotes (sort of) Isaiah 26:20 and Romans 1:17 in support of his threat. He ends on an upbeat note that assures that he and his audience are not the ones who draw back and perish, but the ones who have faith and will possess

life.

Our author will now offer these Hebrews who are enamored of their Jewish tradition, even though they were baptized, ample evidence that their ancestors were looking for something better than was available to them at their times.

#### 11:1-40 - The faith of our ancestors

While verse 1 could sound like a theoretical definition of faith, it is not meant to be that. In this chapter the author will describe faith, not in its essence, but in the evidence of what faith does. He is doing this for those Jewish Christians who were hankering back to the days of their Jewish faith and devotion, in order to show both appreciation for that heritage, and in verses 39 and 40 to show how that heritage is surpassed.

1 Faith is the realization of what is hoped for and evidence of things not seen. 2 Because of it the ancients were well attested. 3 By faith we understand that the universe was ordered by the word of God, so that what is visible came into being through the invisible.

Our author interjects something about himself and his audience in verse 3. It's "we" who understand that the world came from God and that the visible came to be through the invisible. Then he begins a narration of faithful servants of God. In verses 4 to 7 he recounts examples of faith taken from Genesis 1 to 9.

4 By faith Abel offered to God a sacrifice greater than Cain's. Through this he was attested to be righteous, God bearing witness to his gifts, and through this, though dead, he still speaks. 5 By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death, and "he was found no more because God had taken him." Before he was taken up, he was attested to have pleased God. 6 But without faith it is impossible to please him, for anyone who approaches God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. 7 By faith Noah, warned about what was not yet seen, with reverence built an ark for the of his household. Through this he condemned the world and inherited the righteousness that comes through faith.

This following section (verses 8 to 22) covers the time of time of the patriarchs, with the interlude of verses 13 to 16 for a commentary on the point he is making, namely that faith, while commended by God, did not reach its fulfillment or reward.

8 By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; he went out, not knowing where he was to go. 9 By faith he sojourned in the promised land as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs of the same promise; 10 for he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and maker is God. 11 By faith he received power to generate, even though he was past the normal age—and Sarah herself was sterile—for he thought that the one who had made the promise was trustworthy. 12 So it was that there came forth from one man, himself as good as dead, descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sands on the seashore.

13 All these died in faith. They did not receive what had been promised but saw it and greeted it from afar and acknowledged themselves to be strangers and aliens on earth, 14 for those who speak thus show that they are seeking a homeland. 15 If they had been thinking of the land from which they had come, they would have had opportunity to return. 16 But now they desire a better homeland, a heavenly one. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

17 By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was ready to offer his only son, 18 of whom it was said, "Through Isaac descendants shall bear your name." 19 He reasoned that God was able to raise even from the dead, and he received Isaac back as a symbol. 20 By faith regarding things still

to come Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau. 21By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph and “bowed in worship, leaning on the top of his staff.” 22By faith Joseph, near the end of his life, spoke of the Exodus of the Israelites and gave instructions about his bones.

### Verses 23 to 31 cover the time of Moses and the exodus.

23By faith Moses was hidden by his parents for three months after his birth, because they saw that he was a beautiful child, and they were not afraid of the king’s edict. 24By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh’s daughter; 25he chose to be ill-treated along with the people of God rather than enjoy the fleeting pleasure of sin. 26He considered the reproach of the Anointed greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the recompense. 27By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the king’s fury, for he persevered as if seeing the one who is invisible. 28By faith he kept the Passover and sprinkled the blood, that the Destroyer of the firstborn might not touch them. 29By faith they crossed the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted it they were drowned. 30By faith the walls of Jericho fell after being encircled for seven days. 31By faith Rahab the harlot did not perish with the disobedient, for she had received the spies in peace.

### Verses 32 to 38 cover the time of the judges, prophets and the Maccabean martyrs.

32What more shall I say? I have not time to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets, 33who by faith conquered kingdoms, did what was righteous, obtained the promises; they closed the mouths of lions, 34put out raging fires, escaped the devouring sword; out of weakness they were made powerful, became strong in battle, and turned back foreign invaders. 35Women received back their dead through resurrection. Some were tortured and would not accept deliverance, in order to obtain a better resurrection. 36Others endured mockery, scourging, even chains and imprisonment. 37They were stoned, sawed in two, put to death at sword’s point; they went about in skins of sheep or goats, needy, afflicted, tormented. 38The world was not worthy of them. They wandered about in deserts and on mountains, in caves and in crevices in the earth.

39Yet all these, though approved because of their faith, did not receive what had been promised. 40God had foreseen something better for us, so that without us they should not be made perfect.

So what’s the point our author wants to make? All the foregoing mentioned people did live by faith, but they did not receive what had been promised. God had planned that all these ancestors would not receive what was promised until that included us.

## 12:1-13 - Our relationship with God, our Father

1Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us rid ourselves of every burden and sin that clings to us and persevere in running the race that lies before us 2while keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the leader and perfecter of faith. For the sake of the joy that lay before him he endured the cross, despising its shame, and has taken his seat at the right of the throne of God. 3Consider how he endured such opposition from sinners, in order that you may not grow weary and lose heart. 4In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood. 5You have also forgotten the exhortation addressed to you as sons:

“My son, do not disdain the discipline of the Lord  
or lose heart when reproved by him;  
6for whom the Lord loves, he disciplines;  
he scourges every son he acknowledges.”

7Endure your trials as “discipline”; God treats you as sons. For what “son” is there whom his father does not discipline? 8If you are without discipline, in which all have shared, you are not sons but bastards. 9Besides this, we have had our earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them. Should we not [then] submit all the more to the

Father of spirits and live? 10They disciplined us for a short time as seemed right to them, but he does so for our benefit, in order that we may share his holiness. 11At the time, all discipline seems a cause not for joy but for pain, yet later it brings the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who are trained by it. 12So strengthen your drooping hands and your weak knees. 13Make straight paths for your feet, that what is lame may not be dislocated but healed.

That's all pretty straight forward. The only thing which could be debated is whether God, the loving Father, *deliberately sends* suffering in order to discipline God's children, or God only *allows* God's children to suffer as a form of discipline. That discussion is also carried on in reference to Jesus' sufferings. Some would say that God required Jesus to suffer in order to be the sacrificial offering for sin. Others would say that Jesus' suffering was the result of his obedience to the will of his Father, which angered others who killed him; it was obedience which he offered as his sacrifice. The Catholic Church allows both interpretations.

#### 12:14-17 - Exhortation

14Strive for peace with everyone, and for that holiness without which no one will see the Lord. 15See to it that no one be deprived of the grace of God, that no bitter root spring up and cause trouble, through which many may become defiled, 16that no one be an immoral or profane person like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. 17For you know that later, when he wanted to inherit his father's blessing, he was rejected because he found no opportunity to change his mind, even though he sought the blessing with tears.

This is the second time that the author has suggested that once one had become a believer in Christ and later fell away, there was no chance to change one's mind. Chapter 10, verse 31 gives that same impression.

#### 12:18-29 - Two warnings: one old, one new

18You have not approached that which could be touched and a blazing fire and gloomy darkness and storm 19and a trumpet blast and a voice speaking words such that those who heard begged that no message be further addressed to them, 20for they could not bear to hear the command: "If even an animal touches the mountain, it shall be stoned." 21Indeed, so fearful was the spectacle that Moses said, "I am terrified and trembling." 22No, you have approached Mount Zion and the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and countless angels in festal gathering, 23and the assembly of the firstborn enrolled in heaven, and God the judge of all, and the spirits of the just made perfect, 24and Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and the sprinkled blood that speaks more eloquently than that of Abel. 25See that you do not reject the one who speaks. For if they did not escape when they refused the one who warned them on earth, how much more in our case if we turn away from the one who warns from heaven. 26His voice shook the earth at that time, but now he has promised, "I will once more shake not only earth but heaven." 27That phrase, "once more," points to [the] removal of shaken, created things, so that what is unshaken may remain. 28Therefore, we who are receiving the unshakable kingdom should have gratitude, with which we should offer worship pleasing to God in reverence and awe. 29For our God is a consuming fire.

The contrast our author draws is between the assembly receiving the Law from God through Moses on Mount Sinai, and the assembled people of God on Mount Zion, meaning those faithful persons living and dead who make up the new covenant in Jesus. The old covenant was inaugurated in fear so that the people wanted to run away; the new covenant whose mediator is Jesus allows people to draw near to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.

In the giving of the old law, the people didn't want to hear God's voice because it was so frightening. The admonition to the citizens of the new covenant is "See that you do not reject the

one who speaks” inaugurating this new covenant. Their warning came from the earth; ours comes from heaven, so we must not turn away as they did. The old earth has been shaken away, so only the new remains. Therefore we should be grateful.

### 13:1-19 - Final exhortation

1Let mutual love continue. 2Do not neglect hospitality, for through it some have unknowingly entertained angels. 3Be mindful of prisoners as if sharing their imprisonment, and of the ill-treated as of yourselves, for you also are in the body. 4Let marriage be honored among all and the marriage bed be kept undefiled, for God will judge the immoral and adulterers. 5Let your life be free from love of money but be content with what you have, for he has said, “I will never forsake you or abandon you.”

6Thus we may say with confidence:

“The Lord is my helper,  
[and] I will not be afraid.  
What can anyone do to me?”

7Remember your leaders who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. 8Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

9Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teaching. It is good to have our hearts strengthened by grace and not by foods, which do not benefit those who live by them. 10We have an altar from which those who serve the tabernacle have no right to eat. 11The bodies of the animals whose blood the high priest brings into the sanctuary as a sin offering are burned outside the camp. 12Therefore, Jesus also suffered outside the gate, to consecrate the people by his own blood. 13Let us then go to him outside the camp, bearing the reproach that he bore. 14For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the one that is to come. 15Through him [then] let us continually offer God a sacrifice of praise, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. 16Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have; God is pleased by sacrifices of that kind.

17Obey your leaders and defer to them, for they keep watch over you and will have to give an account, that they may fulfill their task with joy and not with sorrow, for that would be of no advantage to you. 18Pray for us, for we are confident that we have a clear conscience, wishing to act rightly in every respect. 19I especially ask for your prayers that I may be restored to you very soon.

The admonition to “remember your leaders who spoke the word of God to you,” combined with the mention of Italy in verse 24, has raised the possibility that the leaders are Peter and Paul, and that the letter was written for Roman Jewish Christians. This is only a hint, and not very conclusive. But that’s all we’ve got.

I am surprised at how little commentary exists on these verses. Perhaps it is thought that they are self-explanatory. Verses 10 to 14 make up a rather stretched metaphor, but we can get the point. Prayers are asked for the leaders and for the author.

### 13:20-21 - Blessing

20May the God of peace, who brought up from the dead the great shepherd of the sheep by the blood of the eternal covenant, Jesus our Lord, 21furnish you with all that is good, that you may do his will. May he carry out in you what is pleasing to him through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever [and ever]. Amen.

A beautiful blessing. Throughout the letter the resurrection of Jesus has been presumed, but in verse 20 it is expressed explicitly for the only time in the letter.

### 13:22-25 - Conclusion

22Brothers, I ask you to bear with this message of encouragement, for I have written to you rather briefly.  
23I must let you know that our brother Timothy has been set free. If he comes soon, I shall see you together with him.  
24Greetings to all your leaders and to all the holy ones. Those from Italy send you greetings. 25Grace be with all of you.

This short section gives the only clues as to who might be the audience to whom the letter is addressed. The mention of Italy suggests that this might have been written for Jewish Christians in Rome.

My companion in these studies of the scriptures, may I conclude, with my sentiments expressed in the words penned by pPaul in the Letter to the Ephesians. “Now to him who is able to accomplish far more than all we ask or imagine, by the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”



## The Catholic Letters

The word “catholic” means universal. The letters which fit into this category are those not addressed to a specific individual or church, but universally to all, and not attributed to Paul. That general classification is about all on which scripture scholars agree. From among the diverse opinions about date of composition of each letter, I will follow the chronological order suggested by Raymond E. Brown.



## First Letter of Peter

As to the date, scholars range in their opinions from the early 60's to some time between 70 A.D. to 90 A.D. Authorship is also debated; if written in the early 60's, the author could indeed be Peter; if in the later years, by a disciple of Peter's. I've read some of the arguments for both opinions, and I cannot come to any personal conclusions. Most, but not all, scholars would opt for the later date and written by a disciple. Most are quite confident that it was written from Rome.

Although definitely written in a letter format, the contents suggest that the main message may have been a homily on the occasion of baptism. Don't think of infant baptism, but of the baptism of an adult, or even a group of adults. I'm going to accept that suggestion as I reflect and comment on the letter.

### 1:1-2 - Greeting

<sup>1</sup>Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to the chosen sojourners of the dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, <sup>2</sup>in the foreknowledge of God the Father, through sanctification by the Spirit, for obedience and sprinkling with the blood of Jesus Christ: may grace and peace be yours in abundance.

The addressees are undoubtedly Gentile Christians, "chosen sojourners," resident aliens in the lands of pagans, but indisputably chosen. Noteworthy is the reference to the Trinity, which would necessarily be part of the baptismal ceremony. The rest of the greeting is similar to those in Paul's letters, with the addition of "in abundance."

### 1:3-12 - Blessing

<sup>3</sup>Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who in his great mercy gave us a new birth to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, <sup>4</sup>to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you <sup>5</sup>who by the power of God are safeguarded through faith, to a salvation that is ready to be revealed in the final time. <sup>6</sup>In this you rejoice, although now for a little while you may have to suffer through various trials, <sup>7</sup>so that the genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold that is perishable even though tested by fire, may prove to be for praise, glory, and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. <sup>8</sup>Although you have not seen him you love him; even though you do not see him now yet believe in him, you rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, <sup>9</sup>as you attain the goal of [your] faith, the salvation of your souls.

<sup>10</sup>Concerning this salvation, prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and investigated it, <sup>11</sup>investigating the time and circumstances that the Spirit of Christ within them indicated when it testified in advance to the sufferings destined for Christ and the glories to follow them. <sup>12</sup>It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you with regard to the things that have now been announced to you by those who

preached the good news to you [through] the holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels longed to look.

The blessing is much longer than is typical of the letters attributed to Paul, and it sets the current situation of the addressees into the flow of all of salvation history. Even though it is presented as a blessing, it is actually a theological celebration of the grace bestowed on the addressees through their baptism (“a new birth”), namely the grace of *hope* because of the resurrection of Christ. This grace of hope is meant to sustain you during this in-between time, until the final days.

Any suffering you experience is meant to manifest the genuineness and strength of your *faith* (described beautifully in verses 8 and 9), which will lead to the salvation of your souls. The baptismal day would be a day of rejoicing, but the reminder is there that one might have to suffer for one’s faith.

Beginning with verse 10 the author sets his addressees’ situation within salvation history, declaring that the prophets of old identified that the messiah would suffer and then be glorified. Those prophets didn’t so prophesy for themselves, but for your benefit.

### 1:13-16 - Be holy

<sup>13</sup>Therefore, gird up the loins of your mind, live soberly, and set your hopes completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. <sup>14</sup>Like obedient children, do not act in compliance with the desires of your former ignorance <sup>15</sup>but, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in every aspect of your conduct, <sup>16</sup>for it is written, “Be holy because I [am] holy.”

In the Book of Exodus the Israelites were told to “gird their loins” for the journey. Here it’s gird up the loins of your mind, in preparation for the journey you are undertaking as a result of your baptism. Your new life in Christ is contrasted to “your former ignorance.” Your baptism is an entrance into holiness of life.

### 1:17-21 - Faith and hope

<sup>17</sup>Now if you invoke as Father him who judges impartially according to each one’s works, conduct yourselves with reverence during the time of your sojourning, <sup>18</sup>realizing that you were ransomed from your futile conduct, handed on by your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold <sup>19</sup>but with the precious blood of Christ as of a spotless unblemished lamb. <sup>20</sup>He was known before the foundation of the world but revealed in the final time for you, <sup>21</sup>who through him believe in God who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.

A note on the Greek grammar here: the “you” and “your” used throughout this passage is the plural, meaning a lot of you. This may refer to the group of people which is receiving baptism; it may also refer to the entire congregation of believers . . . and therefore also to us.

“Realizing that you were ransomed” calls to mind the practice within the Hebrew community of ransoming or redeeming someone from slavery. If one became indentured to another, the family was bound to ransom the individual. The Hebrew practice of consecrating the firstborn male to God was accompanied by the “ransoming” of him by offering an animal or bird for sacrifice, or even by a gift of money, in his stead. Samuel was not ransomed; he remained in the temple. Jesus was ransomed by the offering of two turtle doves or pigeons.

So those being baptized, and the entire congregation were to recall that they were ransomed “from your futile conduct, handed on by your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold but with the precious blood of Christ as of a spotless unblemished lamb.”

In the blessing in 1:3-12 our author had mentioned a hope that “gave us a new birth to a living hope,” and a genuine faith “so that the genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold may prove to be for praise, glory, and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.” He now elaborates on that theme by showing that since you have been baptized, your faith and hope are in God.

## 1:22-25 - Love

22Since you have purified yourselves by obedience to the truth for sincere mutual love, love one another intensely from a [pure] heart. 23You have been born anew, not from perishable but from imperishable seed, through the living and abiding word of God, 24for:

“All flesh is like grass,  
and all its glory like the flower of the field;  
the grass withers,  
and the flower wilts;  
25but the word of the Lord remains forever.”

This ransom spoken of in verse 18, by which you were bought and brought back into the community, requires of us mutual love, in Greek *philadelphia*. And this love and affection must not be for any reason of self-gain. It is done “from a pure heart.” It is through the word of God that you have been born anew (baptism), and that word remains forever.

## 2:1-10 - God’s building; God’s people

1Rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, insincerity, envy, and all slander; 2like newborn infants, long for pure spiritual milk so that through it you may grow into salvation, 3for you have tasted that the Lord is good. 4Come to him, a living stone, rejected by human beings but chosen and precious in the sight of God, 5and, like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. 6For it says in scripture:

“Behold, I am laying a stone in Zion,  
a cornerstone, chosen and precious,  
and whoever believes in it shall not be put to shame.”

7Therefore, its value is for you who have faith, but for those without faith:

“The stone which the builders rejected  
has become the cornerstone,”

8and

“A stone that will make people stumble,  
and a rock that will make them fall.”  
They stumble by disobeying the word, as is their destiny.

9But you are “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own, so that you may announce the praises” of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

10Once you were “no people”  
but now you are God’s people;  
you “had not received mercy”

but now you have received mercy.

It's so easy to imagine that this is an exhortation or reflection by a presbyter after a baptismal ceremony. The images just fit. The newly baptized are, first, to strip away all that is unworthy, and second, to long for pure spiritual milk in order to grow toward salvation. The image is of infancy, reminding the newly baptized that they have not arrived at their destination, but have begun their journey. They've only tasted that the Lord is good. Now they have to allow themselves to be built into a spiritual house, a holy priesthood. This is true for those who have faith, but not for those who do not have faith.

For all modern baptized readers of this letter, the message is the same. We haven't arrived; we're on the way.

The quotation in verses 6, 7 and 8 are respectively from Isaiah 28:16, Psalm 118:22, and Isaiah 8:14. Verse 9 is an interpretation of Exodus 19:6 where similar words are addressed to the Chosen People. The implication is that by baptism Christians become the new People of God.

From 2:11 to 3:12 there is instruction in what it means to be a Christian. Since several groups of people will be mentioned in these verses, it seems good to imagine that there was a rather large and diverse group which was just baptized. The author does not suggest attempting to change the social structure of the world at that time, he suggests only how to adapt to that world order.

#### 2:11-12 - Good example

11 Beloved, I urge you as aliens and sojourners to keep away from worldly desires that wage war against the soul. 12 Maintain good conduct among the Gentiles, so that if they speak of you as evildoers, they may observe your good works and glorify God on the day of visitation.

What makes the newly baptized Christians "aliens and sojourners" is not their absence from home, but their difference from the worldly desires of the society around them. Overcome whatever prejudice you might face by the example of your lives.

#### 2:13-17 - Christian citizens

13 Be subject to every human institution for the Lord's sake, whether it be to the king as supreme 14 or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the approval of those who do good. 15 For it is the will of God that by doing good you may silence the ignorance of foolish people. 16 Be free, yet without using freedom as a pretext for evil, but as slaves of God. 17 Give honor to all, love the community, fear God, honor the king.

The newly baptized Christians are to behave toward civil society in such a way as not to be deserving of the punishment which civil authorities can mete out to evil doers. Again, good behavior will silence those who think you different from the rest of society. It is your commitment to God which will lead you to treat all others appropriately. You are free, but unsocial behavior under the pretext of freedom is an aberration.

#### 2:18-25 - Christian slaves

18Slaves, be subject to your masters with all reverence, not only to those who are good and equitable but also to those who are perverse. 19For whenever anyone bears the pain of unjust suffering because of consciousness of God, that is a grace. 20But what credit is there if you are patient when beaten for doing wrong? But if you are patient when you suffer for doing what is good, this is a grace before God. 21For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his footsteps.

22“He committed no sin,  
and no deceit was found in his mouth.”

23When he was insulted, he returned no insult; when he suffered, he did not threaten; instead, he handed himself over to the one who judges justly. 24He himself bore our sins in his body upon the cross, so that, free from sin, we might live for righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. 25For you had gone astray like sheep, but you have now returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.

Again, without making any attempt to challenge the cultural and social realities in which the new Christians live, the instructions are meant to help the new Christians get along in that world.

In this exhortation to slaves, the supposition is that their masters are *not* Christians. Unlike the other “codes” of behavior in the letters of Paul, here there are no reciprocal duties spelled out for the masters. Instead the example of Christ’s unjust suffering is held up as a model to be imitated.

Perhaps the length to which the author goes in exhorting the newly baptized slaves to accept their lot indicates some difficulty on the part of the author in accepting slavery as legitimate. But perhaps not. Slavery was not of the kind known in America up to the middle of the 19th Century. It meant one person, the slave, had become indentured to another, the master. That could come about for many reasons.

Verses 24 and 25 may have come to the author’s mind because of the occasion of the slave having been baptized into Christ.

### 3:1-7 - Christian spouses

1Likewise, you wives should be subordinate to your husbands so that, even if some disobey the word, they may be won over without a word by their wives’ conduct 2when they observe your reverent and chaste behavior. 3Your adornment should not be an external one: braiding the hair, wearing gold jewelry, or dressing in fine clothes, 4but rather the hidden character of the heart, expressed in the imperishable beauty of a gentle and calm disposition, which is precious in the sight of God. 5For this is also how the holy women who hoped in God once used to adorn themselves and were subordinate to their husbands; 6thus Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him “lord.” You are her children when you do what is good and fear no intimidation.

7Likewise, you husbands should live with your wives in understanding, showing honor to the weaker female sex, since we are joint heirs of the gift of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered.

As with the issue of the institution of slavery, so the relationship within the institution of marriage in the First Century is simply taken for granted. The exhortation concerns the manner of living within that structure in such a way as to edify others. Obedience, reverence and chastity were virtues expected of every First Century wife. Non-Christian husbands (those who disobey the word) may be won over without a word from their wives, but by their wives’ behavior. External adornment of hair, jewelry and clothing may make a wife attractive to her husband, but the interior and imperishable beauty of a gentle and clam disposition will be even more influential on the attitude of the husband toward his wife.

As with the other “household codes” found in the letters of Paul, the instructions to the husband take up much less space than do those addressed to wives. The phrase “that your prayers may not be hindered” means that husbands can’t relate well with God if they don’t relate well with their wives.

### 3:8-12 - All Christians

8Finally, all of you, be of one mind, sympathetic, loving toward one another, compassionate, humble. 9Do not return evil for evil, or insult for insult; but, on the contrary, a blessing, because to this you were called, that you might inherit a blessing. 10For:

“Whoever would love life  
and see good days  
must keep the tongue from evil  
and the lips from speaking deceit,  
11 must turn from evil and do good,  
seek peace and follow after it.  
12 For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous  
and his ears turned to their prayer,  
but the face of the Lord is against evildoers.”

After having given instruction to the various segments of the Christian community in relation to civil society, the author now addresses behavior within the believing community with five brief imperatives: be of one mind, sympathetic, loving toward one another, compassionate, humble. Do not return evil for evil or insult for insult, rather offer a blessing, because that way the newly baptized will inherit the blessing promised in Psalm 34:13-17. The blessing promised in the psalm is long life and prosperity. Taken over by our author, it also promises eternal life.

### 3:13-22 - Christian suffering

13 Now who is going to harm you if you are enthusiastic for what is good? 14 But even if you should suffer because of righteousness, blessed are you. Do not be afraid or terrified with fear of them, 15 but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts. Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope, 16 but do it with gentleness and reverence, keeping your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who defame your good conduct in Christ may themselves be put to shame. 17 For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that be the will of God, than for doing evil.

18 For Christ also suffered for sins once, the righteous for the sake of the unrighteous, that he might lead you to God. Put to death in the flesh, he was brought to life in the spirit. 19 In it he also went to preach to the spirits in prison, 20 who had once been disobedient while God patiently waited in the days of Noah during the building of the ark, in which a few persons, eight in all, were saved through water. 21 This prefigured baptism, which saves you now. It is not a removal of dirt from the body but an appeal to God for a clear conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, 22 who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers subject to him.

The question posed in verse 13 about who is going to harm you if you are enthusiastic for what is good, could possibly be answered, “A lot of people.” And our author sort of responds that way. But whatever suffering you undergo because of your righteousness will make you blessed. So don’t be afraid. “Sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts” means reverence Him. The suffering which apparently came the Christians’ way was not persecution so much as alienation. They were different. They are urged to give a gentle and reverent explanation for their difference to anyone

who asks about their way of living. Don't get nasty in your response to those who don't understand you. You may have to suffer for doing good, but that is better than suffering for doing bad.

Verses 18 references baptism. Christ was put to death physically, but he was brought to life in his resurrection. The form of baptism in the First Century was by emersion. One was dunked into the water as a sign of dying with Christ, and then raised up out of the water in imitation of Christ's being risen. Verses 20 to 22 present Noah's being rescued by means of the water of the flood as another image of baptism. It's verse 19 that has sparked the discussion and debate.

It takes some explaining in order to make sense of verse 19, and at that, all the explaining is only speculative. But here goes.

The "spirits in prison" are identified with the Genesis story of Noah and the flood (Genesis 6:1-8), where we are told about the "sons of God" having intercourse with the daughters of men. "Sons of God" means the angels. The offspring were the Nephilim who were giants. The angels who had intercourse with the human women were consigned to the nether world. Our author sees Jesus going to the nether world to preach to these spirits.

#### 4:1-6 - Christian living

1Therefore, since Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same attitude (for whoever suffers in the flesh has broken with sin), 2so as not to spend what remains of one's life in the flesh on human desires, but on the will of God. 3For the time that has passed is sufficient for doing what the Gentiles like to do: living in debauchery, evil desires, drunkenness, orgies, carousing, and wanton idolatry. 4They are surprised that you do not plunge into the same swamp of profligacy, and they vilify you; 5but they will give an account to him who stands ready to judge the living and the dead. 6For this is why the gospel was preached even to the dead that, though condemned in the flesh in human estimation, they might live in the spirit in the estimation of God.

Christ suffered while he lived his earthly life. If you suffer (ridicule, most likely), that will show that you will have broken from sin. So spend the rest of your "life in the flesh," not on human desires, but on doing the will of God. You've had enough of living like the Gentiles, and since your conversion to Christ they vilify you. However stand firm in your convictions. All will be judged.

The reference to the gospel being preached even to the dead probably means that the gospel was preached to people who subsequently died and therefore seemed condemned by human standards, because they died. But they live in the spirit as far as God is concerned.

#### 4:7-11 - Christian love

7The end of all things is at hand. Therefore, be serious and sober for prayers. 8Above all, let your love for one another be intense, because love covers a multitude of sins. 9Be hospitable to one another without complaining. 10As each one has received a gift, use it to serve one another as good stewards of God's varied grace. 11Whoever preaches, let it be with the words of God; whoever serves, let it be with the strength that God supplies, so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

Love is the motive for being hospitable without complaining. Quoting Proverbs 10:12, the author urges mutual love within the community.

The point of this section revolves around the notion of the steward. The steward was the household manager whose job it was to attend to the material welfare of the family. Everyone is called to be good a good steward, managing whatever gifts one has received from God for the good of the entire community.

The doxology does not indicate the end of a letter. Only rarely in the New Testament does one of the letters end with a doxology.

#### 4:12-19 - Persecution

12Beloved, do not be surprised that a trial by fire is occurring among you, as if something strange were happening to you. 13But rejoice to the extent that you share in the sufferings of Christ, so that when his glory is revealed you may also rejoice exultantly. 14If you are insulted for the name of Christ, blessed are you, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. 15But let no one among you be made to suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evildoer, or as an intriguer. 16But whoever is made to suffer as a Christian should not be ashamed but glorify God because of the name. 17For it is time for the judgment to begin with the household of God; if it begins with us, how will it end for those who fail to obey the gospel of God?

18“*And if the righteous one is barely saved,  
where will the godless and the sinner appear?*”

19As a result, those who suffer in accord with God’s will hand their souls over to a faithful creator as they do good.

It seems as though the suffering which the author expects the baptized to undergo is the ridicule of their neighbors. Perhaps “a trial by fire” is a bit of an exaggeration, but the cruelty of neighbors can be very distressing. But rejoice, because you are sharing in the sufferings of Christ, and therefore you are blessed. However, don’t get yourself in a situation of suffering because you are a murderer or a thief or evildoer or an intriguer. If you suffer for doing good, there is no need to be ashamed. Judgement time will come and as Proverbs 11:31 indicates, it will be bad for the godless and sinners. Keep on doing good, and you will know you are in the hand of God.

#### 5:1-4 - Christian leadership

1So I exhort the presbyters among you, as a fellow presbyter and witness to the sufferings of Christ and one who has a share in the glory to be revealed. 2Tend the flock of God in your midst, [overseeing] not by constraint but willingly, as God would have it, not for shameful profit but eagerly. 3Do not lord it over those assigned to you, but be examples to the flock. 4And when the chief Shepherd is revealed, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.

By the later First Century, presbyters were paid for their services. But they are not to carry on that ministry grudgingly, nor for profit, but eagerly. Your position does not allow you to lord it over the others. But the example of your life will lead the others. And you will be rewarded when the chief shepherd appears. Christian leadership is to be assumed willingly, not for profit, nor lording it over others, but leading by example.

#### 5:5-11 - Christian community

5Likewise, you younger members, be subject to the presbyters. And all of you, clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another, for:

“*God opposes the proud  
but bestows favor on the humble.*”

6So humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time. 7Cast all your worries upon him because he cares for you. 8Be sober and vigilant. Your opponent the devil is prowling around like a roaring lion looking for [someone] to devour. 9Resist him, steadfast in faith, knowing that your fellow believers throughout the world undergo the same sufferings. 10The God of all grace who called you to his eternal glory through Christ [Jesus] will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you after you have suffered a little. 11To him be dominion forever. Amen.

The “younger members” may have been people with authority within the community, but not as important as the presbyter. Everyone should show humility in dealing with each other. The quotation is again from Proverbs, this time 5:34. God cares for you. Cast your cares on God. The violence of the devil will come against you through those the devil inspires to harass you. Just be steadfast in your faith. Christians in other places undergo the same sort of trials. Hang in there. God will triumph for you and in you.

#### 5:12-14 - Conclusion

12I write you this briefly through Silvanus, whom I consider a faithful brother, exhorting you and testifying that this is the true grace of God. Remain firm in it. 13The chosen one at Babylon sends you greeting, as does Mark, my son. 14Greet one another with a loving kiss. Peace to all of you who are in Christ.

The sign-off presents the problem of authorship and date again. Was this really Peter writing in the early 60's or a disciple writing in the 80's to 90's? In either case, the author cloaks himself in the company of those who were in fact companions of Peter's, Silvanus and Mark. “The chosen one at Babylon” means the church in Rome. “Babylon” was a code word used in First Century Christianity for Rome.



## The Letter of James

Who is this James who claims in verse 1 to be “a slave of God and of our Lord Jesus Christ?” He is definitely not either of the James’s counted among the apostles. He seems to want to be identified as the James, the “brother of the Lord” who was the presiding figure in the Jerusalem Jewish-Christian community. That is most probably the person whose name appears in the first verse of this letter. However, that James was stoned to death in 62 A.D., and this letter was written after that, most likely in the 80's or 90's. Whoever wrote this letter did so under the pseudonym James, the brother of the Lord, the presiding figure in Jerusalem.

But behind that name who is the author who actually wrote the letter? Undoubtedly that person was an admirer of the James whose identity he assumes. Beyond that, every attempt to identify the author is only speculation.

The author is certainly familiar with the tradition of the gospels and the teaching of Saint Paul, but apparently both of these came to the author in the oral tradition or through the Q-source, an already collected group of the sayings of Jesus which Matthew also had at his disposal, rather than the written gospel. As we will see, the author must have been familiar with the sermon on the mount, although again not in the written form from Matthew’s Gospel. There is an anti-Paul tone to parts of the letter, particularly on the matter of faith and works in the scheme of salvation. Our author must have at least heard about Paul’s teaching, even if he had not read any of Paul’s letters.

We’ll accept that the letter was written toward the end of the First Century, in the 80's or 90's A.D., but certainly not much later. By the end of the century the author would have had access to the written gospels and the letters of Paul. The content of the letter suggests that it emanated from Jerusalem to various churches which had been evangelized by missionaries from there, and therefore whose belief in Jesus and his message was tinged with appreciation for the Jewish faith tradition. Even that is sort of guessing; anything further than that is certainly guessing.

It took awhile for this letter to be accepted into the canon of scripture. It has come into some prominence today because of its social justice emphasis. Most of the letter will make sense to any reader upon first reading. This reflection will look at the reasons for writing those things.

### 1:1 - Address

1James, a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes in the dispersion, greetings.

We've pretty well covered this in the introduction. The "dispersion" is probably the churches founded by missionaries coming out of Jerusalem.

### 1:2-11 - Rich and poor, a perspective

2Consider it all joy, my brothers, when you encounter various trials, 3for you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. 4And let perseverance be perfect, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. 5But if any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and he will be given it. 6But he should ask in faith, not doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed about by the wind. 7For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord, 8since he is a man of two minds, unstable in all his ways.

9The brother in lowly circumstances should take pride in his high standing, 10and the rich one in his lowliness, for he will pass away "like the flower of the field." 11For the sun comes up with its scorching heat and dries up the grass, its flower droops, and the beauty of its appearance vanishes. So will the rich person fade away in the midst of his pursuits.

The teaching and example of Jesus on the role of trials in one's life sets the scene for the author's commentary on riches and poverty. Testing leads to perseverance and even to perfection. But only the wise in Christian faith will see things that way. So pray for that wisdom and God will give it to you. That wisdom will allow one to endure testing with calm and hope.

The second specifically Christian teaching, and an application of the message about testing is the author's admonition about riches and poverty. The one in lowly circumstances can take pride in his or her high standing, because of God's special care for the poor. The rich people can be proud of their lowliness, because in the sight of God their wealth does not matter at all. In this very Jewish oriented letter, this is the reversal of the typical Jewish understanding that riches are a sign of God's favor.

Concern for the plight of the poor will become a major theme in this letter.

### 1:12-18 - Temptation

12Blessed is the man who perseveres in temptation, for when he has been proved he will receive the crown of life that he promised to those who love him. 13No one experiencing temptation should say, "I am being tempted by God"; for God is not subject to temptation to evil, and he himself tempts no one. 14Rather, each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. 15Then desire conceives and brings forth sin, and when sin reaches maturity it gives birth to death.

16Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers: 17all good giving and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no alteration or shadow caused by change. 18He willed to give us birth by the word of truth that we may be a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

That one is blessed who perseveres in temptation, not just the one who is tempted. If one remains faithful even while tempted, that one will receive the crown of life. The allusion here is to the crown of leaves which is awarded to the athlete who has won the competition. The crown of life refers to eternal life. God is not the author of our temptations; it is our passions which tempt us. Those desires can lead to the invitation to sin, and if sin is assented to, that will lead to death. There is a negative parallel here. Verse 12 shows the progression from temptation to proven faith to the crown of life. Verse 15 shows the progression from desire to sin to death.

Referring to God as the “Father of lights, with whom there is no alteration or shadow caused by change” our author is comparing the Creator to the lights in the heavens. Those lights change with the seasons of the year. But in God there is no change; God’s love and care are changeless.

### 1:19-27 - Doers of the word

19Know this, my dear brothers: everyone should be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath, 20for the wrath of a man does not accomplish the righteousness of God. 21Therefore, put away all filth and evil excess and humbly welcome the word that has been planted in you and is able to save your souls.

22Be doers of the word and not hearers only, deluding yourselves. 23For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his own face in a mirror. 24He sees himself, then goes off and promptly forgets what he looked like. 25But the one who peers into the perfect law of freedom and perseveres, and is not a hearer who but a doer who acts, such a one shall be blessed in what he does.

26If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, his religion is vain. 27Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

Our author’s advice in verse 19 has application even beyond the hearing of the Word of God. Whenever anyone speaks, we should be quick to hear. That indicates an anticipation that the word which is received will enlighten. Slow to speak indicates a pause to seriously consider what has been heard. In some Native American traditions, during a meeting the custom is that everyone remains silent for two minutes before responding to what has been heard. It can be compared to writing an angry letter in response to what one has found to be annoying. It’s better to set that letter aside for awhile before sending it, giving oneself a chance to seriously consider what was the first reaction to the annoyance. Be slow to wrath.

Regarding hearing the Word of God, the same advice holds. Take in the Word, ponder it, and only then speak or act. Simply welcome the Word which has power to save.

Our author is suspicious of those who hear the Word only, but do not respond to what is heard. The Word of God is a mirror into which we can look to see ourselves aright. Forgetting who the Word of God tells us we are, no change takes place in our behavior. But if we are hearers and doers, we will be truly blessed in what we do as a result of our hearing.

If our author is suspicious of those who hear the word and do nothing about what one has heard, he’s even more suspicious of those who do not bridle their tongues. (He will take up this discussion about the use of the tongue in Chapter 3.) Perhaps he also means that only talking a good game is useless. Genuine religion finds its authentication in one’s behavior, like taking care of widows and orphans, not in words only.

### 2:1-13 - Partiality

1My brothers, show no partiality as you adhere to the faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ. 2For if a man with gold rings on his fingers and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and a poor person in shabby clothes also comes in, 3and you pay attention to the one wearing the fine clothes and say, “Sit here, please,” while you say to the poor one, “Stand there,” or “Sit at my feet,” 4have you not made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil designs?

5Listen, my beloved brothers. Did not God choose those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and

heirs of the kingdom that he promised to those who love him? 6But you dishonored the poor person. Are not the rich oppressing you? And do they themselves not haul you off to court? 7Is it not they who blaspheme the noble name that was invoked over you? 8However, if you fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing well. 9But if you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors. 10For whoever keeps the whole law, but falls short in one particular, has become guilty in respect to all of it. 11For he who said, "You shall not commit adultery," also said, "You shall not kill." Even if you do not commit adultery but kill, you have become a transgressor of the law. 12So speak and so act as people who will be judged by the law of freedom. 13For the judgment is merciless to one who has not shown mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.

This section can be understood as having three parts: general admonition (verse 1), an example (verses 2-4), and reasons against partiality (5-13).

After the general admonition against showing partiality in verse 1, the author gives the example of the two types of persons who come to the assembly: a rich person and a poor person. It seems important to remember that the sin is in showing partiality, not in being rich. It could be supposed on the basis of this passage alone that showing partiality to the poor is equally sinful. But other passages in the New Testament would seem to recommend preference for the poor. Neither the rich nor the poor are to be despised just because they are rich or poor. Our author now takes up the *behavior* of the rich in his community, and he will deal with that issue again in 5:1-6.

We don't know if the author is referring to actual situations within the community, or if this is a theoretical case, as he writes about the rich oppressing and hauling people off to court. If the rich do that they blaspheme the name of Jesus, which was pronounced over both rich and poor at their baptism.

The royal law that says all should love their neighbors as themselves, if observed, indicates that one is doing well. But if someone observes the whole law except for this one decree, that person is violating the whole law. The author is not speaking of the Law of Moses, but the law of freedom, decreed by Christ. But people shouldn't get hung up by judging one another on individual precepts of any law. Mercy, not judgement, is the desired attitude and behavior.

## 2:14-26 - Faith and works

14What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? 15If a brother or sister has nothing to wear and has no food for the day, 16and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, keep warm, and eat well," but you do not give them the necessities of the body, what good is it? 17So also faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

18Indeed someone may say, "You have faith and I have works." Demonstrate your faith to me without works, and I will demonstrate my faith to you from my works. 19You believe that God is one. You do well. Even the demons believe that and tremble. 20Do you want proof, you ignoramus, that faith without works is useless? 21Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered his son Isaac upon the altar? 22You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by the works. 23Thus the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called "the friend of God." 24See how a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. 25And in the same way, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she welcomed the messengers and sent them out by a different route? 26For just as a body without a spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.

The message here is pretty clear. The question is whether or not one wants to hear it. The Protestant Reformation didn't want to hear it, so they excluded this letter from the canon of inspired scripture. Whether or not someone wants to hear it, here's what it says.

Claims of faith which does not motivate behavior has no merit. The author argues from the case of Abraham, who Genesis (15:6) says believed and that belief was credited to him as righteousness, which would suggest that faith alone brings justification. Our author argues that it is “faith along with works,” and faith “completed by works” that brings righteousness. Abraham’s work was his willingness to sacrifice Isaac. Some think that our author is arguing with Paul’s letter to the Romans (4:5-6) which says “when one does not work, but believes in the one who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness.”

It wasn’t until 1999 that the Lutherans and the Catholics settled on this common understanding of the issue. God’s grace alone justifies; no human effort can accomplish gaining friendship with God. The common understanding also said that anyone who is justified by God will engage in good works. In the middle of the First Century, it seems that our author already said that, summing up the issue in verse 26.

### 3:1-12 - The power of the tongue

1Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you realize that we will be judged more strictly, 2for we all fall short in many respects. If anyone does not fall short in speech, he is a perfect man, able to bridle his whole body also. 3If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we also guide their whole bodies. 4It is the same with ships: even though they are so large and driven by fierce winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot’s inclination wishes. 5In the same way the tongue is a small member and yet has great pretensions.

Consider how small a fire can set a huge forest ablaze. 6The tongue is also a fire. It exists among our members as a world of malice, defiling the whole body and setting the entire course of our lives on fire, itself set on fire by Gehenna. 7For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, 8but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. 9With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings who are made in the likeness of God. 10From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. This need not be so, my brothers. 11Does a spring gush forth from the same opening both pure and brackish water? 12Can a fig tree, my brothers, produce olives, or a grapevine figs? Neither can salt water yield fresh.

The admonition that not many should teachers sets the scene for what teachers do: they teach. How? By speaking. The admonition, therefore, goes beyond the role of a teacher to everyone who speaks. Anyone who does not fall short in speech is perfect. Bridles, rudders, fire, poison, bitter water – all are compared to the use of the tongue. The tongue is untamable!

### 3:13-18 - True wisdom

13Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show his works by a good life in the humility that comes from wisdom. 14But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. 15Wisdom of this kind does not come down from above but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. 16For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every foul practice. 17But the wisdom from above is first of all pure, then peaceable, gentle, compliant, full of mercy and good fruits, without inconstancy or insincerity. 18And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace for those who cultivate peace.

True wisdom produces humility. In verse 17 our author describes that wisdom from above. In verses 14 to 16 our author shows what lack of true wisdom brings: jealousy, selfish ambition, falsehood, earthly, unspiritual and demonic. These will bring about disorder and foul practice in

the community. Somehow verse 18 advocates the cultivation of peace within the community.  
4:1-12 - Causes of division

1Where do the wars and where do the conflicts among you come from? Is it not from your passions that make war within your members? 2You covet but do not possess. You kill and envy but you cannot obtain; you fight and wage war. You do not possess because you do not ask. 3You ask but do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. 4Adulterers! Do you not know that to be a lover of the world means enmity with God? Therefore, whoever wants to be a lover of the world makes himself an enemy of God. 5Or do you suppose that the scripture speaks without meaning when it says, “The spirit that he has made to dwell in us tends toward jealousy”? 6But he bestows a greater grace; therefore, it says:

“God resists the proud,  
but gives grace to the humble.”

7So submit yourselves to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.

8Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you of two minds. 9Begin to lament, to mourn, to weep. Let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy into dejection. 10Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will exalt you. 11Do not speak evil of one another, brothers. Whoever speaks evil of a brother or judges his brother speaks evil of the law and judges the law. If you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. 12There is one lawgiver and judge who is able to save or to destroy. Who then are you to judge your neighbor?

Perhaps this passage will make sense if we distinguish pleasure (self-centered passion) from happiness. Verses 1 to 3 lists some of those self-centered passions, including asking God to satisfy your selfish desires (You ask wrongly). The Hebrew people entered into a covenant with God. They were espoused by God. Now if they turn their loving to the world, they are involved in adultery.

Verse 5 remains a puzzle, even as to its translation from the Greek. No passage in the bible can be found which matches the citation given here, undoubtedly from a faulty memory. The remedy for the abuses described in verses 1 to 5 begins with the thought in verse 6 from Proverbs 3:34 (although again the words are not quoted exactly). The admonition is clear: “submit yourselves to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.” “You of two minds” means lacking in integrity. Repent, humble yourselves before the Lord, don’t speak evil of one another. Whoever speaks evil of a brother or sister or judges them judges the law. What law? The second great commandment: love your neighbor as yourself.

4:13-17 - Don’t be too sure

13Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we shall go into such and such a town, spend a year there doing business, and make a profit”— 14you have no idea what your life will be like tomorrow. You are a puff of smoke that appears briefly and then disappears. 15Instead you should say, “If the Lord wills it, we shall live to do this or that.” 16But now you are boasting in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. 17So for one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, it is a sin.

Our author warns against the arrogance of thinking you are in charge of your life. Depend on the Lord instead. If one knows enough not to boast that way, but does it anyway, that is sinful.

5:1-6 - Warning to the rich

1Come now, you rich, weep and wail over your impending miseries. 2Your wealth has rotted away, your clothes have become moth-eaten, 3your gold and silver have corroded, and that corrosion will be a testimony against you; it will devour your flesh like a fire. You have stored up treasure for the last days. 4Behold, the wages you withheld from the workers who harvested your fields are crying aloud, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the of hosts. 5You have lived on earth in luxury and pleasure; you have fattened your hearts for the day of slaughter. 6You have condemned; you have murdered the righteous one; he offers you no resistance.

The rich are again assaulted. But it is not because they are rich; it is because they have become rich by fraudulent means, such as withholding wages from your workers. All that good stuff on which you put so much emphasis, it's going to pass away. The treasure you have stored up for the last days is punishment! And you yourselves are just like live stock being fattened up for the slaughter. The power of the wealthy to "condemn" and to "murder the righteous one" who offers no resistance does not seem to apply to any specific individual.

### 5:7-11 - Patience

7Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. 8You too must be patient. Make your hearts firm, because the coming of the Lord is at hand. 9Do not complain, brothers, about one another, that you may not be judged. Behold, the Judge is standing before the gates. 10Take as an example of hardship and patience, brothers, the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. 11Indeed we call blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of the perseverance of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, because "the Lord is compassionate and merciful."

Some suggest that the admonition to be patient refers to the suffering caused by the unjust wealthy people of the preceding verses. In any case the point is patience until the just judge arrives; he is standing before the gates. This early in the Christian era, there was the expectation of the Lord's immanent return.

In the mean time, don't complain about each other. While you are judging others, they are judging you. How silly. Follow the example of patience shown by the prophets, or Job. In Job's case, his perseverance in suffering fulfilled the purpose of the Lord. Even in the face of suffering, the Lord is compassionate and merciful.

### 5:12 - Swearing oaths

12But above all, my brothers, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath, but let your "Yes" mean "Yes" and your "No" mean "No," that you may not incur condemnation.

Oaths were customarily taken on the name of God. To circumvent the use of the name of God in taking an oath, the substitute was "by heaven or by earth." That also circumvented the binding force of an oath. Oaths are not forbidden. But an untruthful oath is. So mean what you say.

### 5:13-15 - Anointing of the sick

13Is anyone among you suffering? He should pray. Is anyone in good spirits? He should sing praise. 14Is

anyone among you sick? He should summon the presbyters of the church, and they should pray over him and anoint [him] with oil in the name of the Lord, 15and the prayer of faith will save the sick person, and the Lord will raise him up. If he has committed any sins, he will be forgiven.

In suffering and in good spirits, one should present oneself to the Lord however one happens to be.

If someone is sick, call the presbyter to pray over that person and to anoint the sick one with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick person, and the Lord will raise that person up. And that person's sins will be forgiven. This statement is the basis for the Catholic sacrament of Anointing of the Sick. It is to be noted that this sacrament is not any longer called "the last rites" or "extreme unction" to be administered at the point of death. It's for the healing of the sick person.

#### 5:16-18 - Confession and intercession

16Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The fervent prayer of a righteous person is very powerful. 17Elijah was a human being like us; yet he prayed earnestly that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain upon the land. 18Then he prayed again, and the sky gave rain and the earth produced its fruit.

Verse 16 may seem to be connected with verses 14 and 15, but most scholars think this is a new admonition about praying, rather than a further discussion of the healing, which in this case means the spiritual healing of the forgiveness of sin. The confessing of sins and prayer for one another may represent a practice in the assembly similar to the penitential rite at the beginning of the Catholic Liturgy. The author's point is the power of praying, which he demonstrates by using the example of Elijah.

#### 5:19-20 - Converting the fallen

19My brothers, if anyone among you should stray from the truth and someone bring him back, 20he should know that whoever brings back a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

This rather abrupt ending shows that our author, who has been rather severe in places, is still a gentle pastor. Straying from the truth is sin; bringing back the one straying is leading the straying one to conversion. Whose soul is saved, the strayer or the bringer-back? We can't be sure, so let's settle for both.

## The Letter of Jude

As is true of several of the catholic letters, we need to attempt an answer to two questions: who is the “Jude” whose name appears on the letter; and who is the person behind that name? All we have by way of answers to those questions is “best guesses.” Those are: Jude is the brother of James, who is described as the brother of the Lord, and who is the presider of the assembly in Jerusalem; the person who wrote in the name of Jude is completely unknown, but he is familiar with the Hebrew scriptures and with several apocryphal works, both of which he quotes in support of his message.

His message is a call to keep to, or return to, true teaching, resisting the teaching of the intruders who are teaching things of which our author disapproves . . . strongly. We can’t tell what it is he objects to, but he is very disturbed and even angry about the false teaching.

The style of writing in this letter is almost apocalyptic, that is, presenting times as so bad that God must soon intervene.

### 1-2 - Opening

1Jude, a slave of Jesus Christ and brother of James, to those who are called, beloved in God the Father and kept safe for Jesus Christ: 2may mercy, peace, and love be yours in abundance.

The addressees are “called” and they are the darlings of God, a phrase used in the Old Testament to describe Israel. The identification with Israel can also be seen in the wish for “mercy,” the love of God bestowed in the covenant, “peace,” meaning community agreement, and “love,” which is a wish for group solidarity.

### 3-4 - Reason for writing

3Beloved, although I was making every effort to write to you about our common salvation, I now feel a need to write to encourage you to contend for the faith that was once for all handed down to the holy ones. 4For there have been some intruders, who long ago were designated for this condemnation, godless persons, who pervert the grace of our God into licentiousness and who deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.

It seems that the author was planning on writing a longer theological, and perhaps moral, discourse, but now he feels the need to dash off a quick message to encourage the recipients to

“contend for the faith” that has been handed down to them. Against whom will they have to contend? Some intruders who apparently are denying the authority of God, perhaps even God’s divinity, and that of Jesus Christ.

One scripture scholar offers a benign view of these intruders. Perhaps they were sincere in their attempt to proclaim the gospel, but were misguided in some respects. No matter their motivation, our author is upset with them and brands them as “godless people.” One wonders if the situation back then was in any way similar to the kinds of arguments and mutual condemnations which occupy many Christians today, about the nature of religious worship and the fear of unorthodox teaching and practice.

### 5-7 - Past judgments of God

5I wish to remind you, although you know all things, that [the] Lord who once saved a people from the land of Egypt later destroyed those who did not believe. 6The angels too, who did not keep to their own domain but deserted their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains, in gloom, for the judgment of the great day. 7Likewise, Sodom, Gomorrah, and the surrounding towns, which, in the same manner as they, indulged in sexual promiscuity and practiced unnatural vice, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire.

Wishing to remind his addressees that “intruders, who long ago were designated for this condemnation, godless persons, who pervert the grace of our God into licentiousness and who deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ” would be punished, the author recalls others who were punished by God in the past. That is the Israelites who did not believe were destroyed in the dessert; the angels described in Genesis 6:1-4 who came to earth and had sexual intercourse with women; and the residents of Sodom and Gomorrah. So whoever these intruders are, they too will be punished.

### 8-10 - Application to the intruders

8Similarly, these dreamers nevertheless also defile the flesh, scorn lordship, and revile glorious beings. 9Yet the archangel Michael, when he argued with the devil in a dispute over the body of Moses, did not venture to pronounce a reviling judgment upon him but said, “May the Lord rebuke you!” 10But these people revile what they do not understand and are destroyed by what they know by nature like irrational animals.

“These dreamers” (a term used in Deuteronomy 13:1-5 and in Jeremiah 27:9 to designate false teachers) do three things: they defile the flesh, scorn lordship and revile glorious beings. Why these specific things are mentioned is hard to understand, but perhaps they are a reversed list of the things mentioned in 5 to 7: defile the flesh = Sodom and Gomorrah; scorn lordship = the people who perished in the dessert; and revile glorious beings = angels having sexual intercourse with human women.

Even the Archangel Michael did not revile the devil, but only asked that the Lord rebuke him. The battle over the body of Moses does not appear in the bible, but in a work referred to as *The Assumption of Moses*, a document which has not been found, but which is mentioned by some fathers of the church. So these intruders are not nearly as polite as Michael; they revile what they don’t understand, and they get destroyed by their carnal lusts, behaving like irrational animals.

## 11-13 - More examples of punishment

11Woe to them! They followed the way of Cain, abandoned themselves to Balaam's error for the sake of gain, and perished in the rebellion of Korah. 12These are blemishes on your love feasts, as they carouse fearlessly and look after themselves. They are waterless clouds blown about by winds, fruitless trees in late autumn, twice dead and uprooted. 13They are like wild waves of the sea, foaming up their shameless deeds, wandering stars for whom the gloom of darkness has been reserved forever.

Our author really doesn't like these intruders. He compares them to "the way of Cain," who denied God's just judgement (Genesis 4:13), to Balaam's error, his willingness to curse Israel for the sake of money (Numbers 22-24), and the rebellion of Korah, who opposed Moses (Numbers 16). As God punished these three, so God will punish the intruders.

Our author gets a bit poetic in his description of these false teachers, comparing them to waterless clouds (useless and non-productive of nourishing rain), fruitless trees in autumn (when fruit should be on the trees), wild waves on the sea (producing foam only), and wandering stars (who will live in the darkness forever).

The reference to "blemishes on your love feasts" suggests that these intruders and false teachers are even participating in the meal which included the celebration of Eucharist.

## 14-19 - All this had been expected

14Enoch, of the seventh generation from Adam, prophesied also about them when he said, "Behold, the Lord has come with his countless holy ones 15to execute judgment on all and to convict everyone for all the godless deeds that they committed and for all the harsh words godless sinners have uttered against him." 16These people are complainers, disgruntled ones who live by their desires; their mouths utter bombast as they fawn over people to gain advantage. 17But you, beloved, remember the words spoken beforehand by the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ, 18for they told you, "In [the] last time there will be scoffers who will live according to their own godless desires." 19These are the ones who cause divisions; they live on the natural plane, devoid of the Spirit.

In verses 14 and 15 our author is quoting from the apocryphal Book of Enoch which prophesies the return of the Lord in judgement on all godless sinners, which our author thinks the intruders are. Verse 16 simply denounces the intruders before the author turns to his addressees. The words which are in quotation marks cannot be found verbatim anywhere in the New Testament. But the sentiment is expressed often in such places as Mark 13:22, Acts 20:30, 1Timothy 4:1-3, and 2 Peter 3:3. These intruders are causing divisions within the community; they lack the Spirit.

## 20-23 - Exhortation

20But you, beloved, build yourselves up in your most holy faith; pray in the holy Spirit. 21Keep yourselves in the love of God and wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life. 22On those who waver, have mercy; 23save others by snatching them out of the fire; on others have mercy with fear, abhorring even the outer garment stained by the flesh.

After his polemic, our author turns almost tender, and even forgiving, in his final words. He advises building each other up in faith, praying in the holy Spirit, keeping yourselves in the love of God, and waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ. He encourages mercy, not condemnation, on those who waver. Some can be saved by snatching them from the fire; others should also receive mercy, but fear of being contaminated by contact with them.

#### 24-25 - Doxology

24To the one who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you unblemished and exultant, in the presence of his glory, 25to the only God, our savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord be glory, majesty, power, and authority from ages past, now, and for ages to come. Amen.

This is a typical ending of a letter. Having been worried about the effect the intruders' teaching might have had on his addressees, the author praises the one who can keep his audience from stumbling.

## The First Letter of John

The occasion for writing this beautiful letter is anything but beautiful. The Johannine community had splintered; some had “gone out from us.” The letter does not seem to have been written in an effort to bring them so much as it seems an effort to shore up the faith and practice of those who remained. While the letter was written as a rebuttal of the claims of the dissidents, it has provided some of the most profound theology found in the New Testament.

To whom is this message addressed? It would seem that the Johannine community was comprised of several, even many, house-churches, with possibly a presbyter overseeing their union. The letter would have gone out to all the house-churches which had remained united with the writer, but not to the ones which had broken off.

Who is the author of this letter, and of the other two letters of John? It is often stated the author of the gospel according to John and of the three letters of John was the Johannine school. That does not imply that each work is the work of a committee. Four members of that “school” seem to be responsible for the Johannine writings which come down to us. The beloved disciple, a person other than John the son of Zebedee and brother of James, was the source of the material and the inspiration for the Johannine school. Within that school was the evangelist who composed the bulk of the Gospel according to John. There was also a redactor who put the gospel into its final form. And there was the presbyter who wrote the three letters, or at least the first two.

The presbyter who wrote the First Letter of John writes persuasively rather than authoritatively, indicating perhaps that he was a leader in the community, but that the community itself was more charismatic than highly structured.

Dating the Gospel according to John in relation to the three letters of John is a bit tricky. A good hypothesis is that the evangelist of the gospel finished his work about 90 A.D. The final redactor completed his work about 100 A.D. The First Letter of John was possibly written somewhere between 90 and 100 A.D. The Presbyter-author of the letter would have known of the work of the evangelist before the redactor had completed his work. His letter can quite easily be considered to be based on the two parts of the Gospel of John, the Book of Signs and the Book of Glory; the first part of the letter (God is light) related to the Book of Signs, and the second part (God is love) related to the Book of Glory.

The letter addresses theological problems caused by the claims of those who had “gone out from us.” The secessionists understood the Gospel of John in a way our author finds objectionable, an almost exclusively spiritual reality. What were those claims? They fall into three categories: faith, morals, and the Spirit.

For the secessionists faith that the Son of God entered into our world was all that was needed. This entrance into the world, for them, might have been his baptism, when the Spirit descended on him. Since the Son of God became human, they argued, all humanity was redeemed. The human activity of Jesus really didn't mean anything, nor did it teach anything. Simply believing in the incarnation was sufficient for salvation.

If the incarnation of the Son of God brought about salvation, and what he did on earth was unimportant, then whatever they did after they came to believe, and therefore were saved, didn't matter either. There were no moral injunctions which needed to be observed.

The secessionists claimed to be led by the Spirit in their preaching and teaching; they were prophets. The author of this letter distinguishes between the Spirit of Truth and the Spirit of Deceit, and warns, "Do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God" (4:1).

Is this really a letter? Well, it's a missive, most likely written in Ephesus, but it does not follow the style of a letter. It is a discourse composed to refute those who are misunderstanding the Gospel of John. Between the prologue and the ending, the main part of the letter can be divided into two sections: 1:5-3:10 with the theme that God is light, and we should walk in the light; 3:11-5:12 with the theme of love, and that we should love one another.

#### 1:1-4 - The prologue

1 What was from the beginning,  
    what we have heard,  
    what we have seen with our eyes,  
    what we looked upon  
    and touched with our hands  
    concerns the Word of life—  
2 for the life was made visible;  
    we have seen it and testify to it  
    and proclaim to you the eternal life  
    that was with the Father and was made visible to us—  
3 what we have seen and heard  
    we proclaim now to you,  
    so that you too may have fellowship with us;  
    for our fellowship is with the Father  
    and with his Son, Jesus Christ.  
4 We are writing this so that our joy may be complete.

In style and tone the prologue of the letter mimics the prologue of the Gospel of John, but the emphasis is very different. The Gospel's prologue emphasized the *pre-existence* of the Word; the prologue here emphasizes the witness to the *incarnate* Word which was heard, seen, looked upon and touched – "the life was made visible," and "was made visible to us" (1:2). This countered the secessionist claims that belief in the mere fact of the incarnation was sufficient for salvation, giving an almost exclusively spiritual meaning to the incarnation.

In the Gospel prologue the beginning is the pre-existence of the Word; here in the First Letter of John the beginning is the incarnate word, not nearly so personified as the Word is in the Gospel prologue.

In writing to the believers, the presbyter finds joy – not “so *your* joy may be complete,” but “so *our* joy may be complete.” The cause of that joy is the perhaps charismatic fellowship the community enjoys with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.

## Part 1: God is light and we must walk in the light (1:5-3:10)

### 1:5-7 - God is light

5Now this is the message that we have heard from him and proclaim to you: God is light, and in him there is no darkness at all. 6If we say, “We have fellowship with him,” while we continue to walk in darkness, we lie and do not act in truth. 7But if we walk in the light as he is in the light, then we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of his Son Jesus cleanses us from all sin.

Almost parallel with John 3:19-21, the assertion here is that fellowship with God and therefore with one another is to be found in walking in the light, which is equated with acting in truth. That truth is that we have been cleansed by the blood of God’s Son. The emphasis here would be on the blood of the Son, not merely the incarnation of the Son.

### 1:8-10 - Denial of sin

8If we say, “We are without sin,” we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. 9If we acknowledge our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from every wrongdoing. 10If we say, “We have not sinned,” we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

If we remember that the secessionists felt no moral constraints on their behavior, this passage can be seen as a refutation of that position. There is sin; and we have sinned. If we say otherwise, we lie. But being sinners does not condemn us because God will forgive. However, if we say we have not sinned, we make a God a liar, because God knows we have sinned and is prepared to forgive us.

### 2:1-6 - Keeping the commandments

1My children, I am writing this to you so that you may not commit sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous one. 2He is expiation for our sins, and not for our sins only but for those of the whole world. 3The way we may be sure that we know him is to keep his commandments. 4Whoever says, “I know him,” but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him. 5But whoever keeps his word, the love of God is truly perfected in him. This is the way we may know that we are in union with him: 6whoever claims to abide in him ought to live [just] as he lived.

The mention of sin in the previous segment draws the writer’s mind this further comment on sin. The acknowledgment of sin is not cause for despair. We have an Advocate with the Father who intercedes on behalf of sinners. He is expiation for our sins. This is one of the few times in Johanne writing which sees Christ’s death as a form of expiation. In John’s Gospel, the death of Jesus is his glorification, because in dying he shed his human limitations.

Knowing (believing in) Jesus can be shown only by doing what Jesus commanded. Anything less than that is to live a lie. Verse 5 says, “Whoever keeps his word, the love of God is

truly perfected in him.” That can mean either God’s love for us or our love for God, or both. Claims of some kind of spiritual bond with Jesus can be known by the claimant’s deeds, not simply protestation that one knows him.

## 2:7-11 - The new commandment: love

7Beloved, I am writing no new commandment to you but an old commandment that you had from the beginning. The old commandment is the word that you have heard. 8And yet I do write a new commandment to you, which holds true in him and among you, for the darkness is passing away, and the true light is already shining. 9Whoever says he is in the light, yet hates his brother, is still in the darkness. 10Whoever loves his brother remains in the light, and there is nothing in him to cause a fall. 11Whoever hates his brother is in darkness; he walks in darkness and does not know where he is going because the darkness has blinded his eyes.

Christians already know the old commandment to love one another. But the commandment still needs to be fulfilled completely, so it is also a new commandment, still urging people on to fulfillment. The darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining, but there is still more to be accomplished, because love is not yet complete. Some hate their brothers and sisters, and so there is still darkness. “The true light is already shining” echoes John 1:9 “The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.”

## 2:12-14 - Individuals and the whole community

12I am writing to you, children, because your sins have been forgiven for his name’s sake.  
13I am writing to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning.  
I am writing to you, young men, because you have conquered the evil one.  
14I write to you, children, because you know the Father.  
I write to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning.  
I write to you, young men, because you are strong and the word of God remains in you, and you have conquered the evil one.

Each of three groups is addressed twice: children, fathers, young men. It is suggested by some that “children” refers to the entire community, “fathers” refers to those who have been believers longer, and “young men” to those more recent converts. But no one knows for sure.

## 2:15-17 - The world

15Do not love the world or the things of the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. 16For all that is in the world, sensual lust, enticement for the eyes, and a pretentious life, is not from the Father but is from the world. 17Yet the world and its enticement are passing away. But whoever does the will of God remains forever.

The world is filled with sensual lust, enticement for the eyes, and a pretentious life. These have become known as concupiscence, envy and pride. But these will eventually fade away, but those who obey God’s will will remain forever.

## 2:18-23 - The anti-christs

18Children, it is the last hour; and just as you heard that the antichrist was coming, so now many antichrists have appeared. Thus we know this is the last hour. 19They went out from us, but they were not really of our number; if they had been, they would have remained with us. Their desertion shows that none of them was of our number. 20But you have the anointing that comes from the holy one, and you all have knowledge. 21I write to you not because you do not know the truth but because you do, and because every lie is alien to the truth. 22Who is the liar? Whoever denies that Jesus is the Christ. Whoever denies the Father and the Son, this is the antichrist. 23No one who denies the Son has the Father, but whoever confesses the Son has the Father as well.

The Presbyter reflects on the situation of some having abandoned the community, and he names them the expected antichrists. The appearance of the antichrists signals that this is the last hour. Actually the secessionists were never really part of who we are. If they had been, they never would have left us. In contrast to them, you have the anointing that comes from the holy one, and you all have knowledge. That anointing is the Holy Spirit who will reveal to you the truth. Our author is writing this, not because they don't already know it, but because they do know it. He is only recalling to their mind what they already know.

Those who left the community have nothing left. They have denied Christ, the Son, so they have also denied the Father. But you who confess the Son have the Father as well.

## 2:24-27 - Your anointing

24Let what you heard from the beginning remain in you. If what you heard from the beginning remains in you, then you will remain in the Son and in the Father. 25And this is the promise that he made us: eternal life. 26I write you these things about those who would deceive you. 27As for you, the anointing that you received from him remains in you, so that you do not need anyone to teach you. But his anointing teaches you about everything and is true and not false; just as it taught you, remain in him.

This is a word of encouragement for and to those who remain within the community. At their reception into the community, probably at their baptism, they received the anointing, that is the Holy Spirit. That anointing is the promise of eternal life. Our author is writing lest the members of the community be deceived by teachers from the splinter group. They don't need any new teachers; they are taught by the Spirit with which they were anointed. Hold to that teaching.

## 2:28-3:3 - Confident children of God

28And now, children, remain in him, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not be put to shame by him at his coming. 29If you consider that he is righteous, you also know that everyone who acts in righteousness is begotten by him.

1See what love the Father has bestowed on us that we may be called the children of God. Yet so we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. 2Beloved, we are God's children now; what we shall be has not yet been revealed. We do know that when it is revealed we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. 3Everyone who has this hope based on him makes himself pure, as he is pure.

This is an exhortation to hang in there. Righteousness is a sign that one has been begotten by God (or Jesus). We are not only called children of God; we actually are God's children. But even better things await us when Jesus returns. The realized eschatology of John's Gospel – Jesus is already present and the end time has begun – is also present in this First Letter of John. But the

letter also looks forward to the final eschatology – the coming of Jesus at the end of time and the fullness of union with him.

Perhaps the last sentence makes a contrast between the members of the community who keep themselves pure because Jesus is pure, and those who have left, believing that there is no moral obligation to act virtuously.

### 3:4-10 - Sin

4Everyone who commits sin commits lawlessness, for sin is lawlessness. 5You know that he was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. 6No one who remains in him sins; no one who sins has seen him or known him. 7Children, let no one deceive you. The person who acts in righteousness is righteous, just as he is righteous. 8Whoever sins belongs to the devil, because the devil has sinned from the beginning. Indeed, the Son of God was revealed to destroy the works of the devil. 9No one who is begotten by God commits sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot sin because he is begotten by God. 10In this way, the children of God and the children of the devil are made plain; no one who fails to act in righteousness belongs to God, nor anyone who does not love his brother.

Whoever sins commits lawlessness. Lawlessness is the activity of the antichrist. It is a hostility toward God and a rejection of Christ. Christ is sinless and takes away sin. Those who know Jesus do not sin; no one who sins knows Christ. You can tell who belongs to Christ because that person acts righteously. And you can tell who belongs to the devil, because he sins. Remember that those who splintered off from the community thought it didn't matter what they did, because simply by becoming a human being Jesus redeemed all of humankind. Our author says otherwise: you can tell the redeemed from the damned by their behavior.

It's a powerful sexual image which our author uses in verse 9. God's seed remains in those who are begotten by God, so they don't sin. That's how one can distinguish the children of God from the children of the devil. Those belong to the devil who do not act righteously and who do not love their brothers and sisters. The author is thinking of those who have abandoned the community.

### Part 2: God is love; walk as children of the loving God (3:11-5:12)

### 3:11-18 - Real love

11For this is the message you have heard from the beginning: we should love one another, 12unlike Cain who belonged to the evil one and slaughtered his brother. Why did he slaughter him? Because his own works were evil, and those of his brother righteous. 13Do not be amazed, [then,] brothers, if the world hates you. 14We know that we have passed from death to life because we love our brothers. Whoever does not love remains in death. 15Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life remaining in him. 16The way we came to know love was that he laid down his life for us; so we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. 17If someone who has worldly means sees a brother in need and refuses him compassion, how can the love of God remain in him? 18Children, let us love not in word or speech but in deed and truth.

In 1:5 our author began part one of his letter, "Now this is the message that we have heard from him and proclaim to you: God is *light*." Similarly this second part of his letter begins, "For this is the message you have heard from the beginning: we should *love* one another."

The author uses the example of Cain and Abel from the Book of Genesis to convey his

message. In contrasting the evil works of Cain and the righteous deeds of Abel, he is again contrasting his community with the splinter group, whom he now identifies as belonging to the world. Those who love pass from death to life; those who do not love remain in death. He pushes the point by declaring that hating is equivalent to murder.

Christ Jesus is the perfect example of what it means to love; he laid down his life for us. We are to love in the same way. The author makes a practical application of this principle when he urges those who have means and refuse assistance to those brothers and sisters in need; how can the love of God remain in them? Love is a matter of more than words; it can be seen.

### 3:19-24 - Confidence before God

19[Now] this is how we shall know that we belong to the truth and reassure our hearts before him 20in whatever our hearts condemn, for God is greater than our hearts and knows everything. 21Beloved, if [our] hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence in God 22and receive from him whatever we ask, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him. 23And his commandment is this: we should believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and love one another just as he commanded us. 24Those who keep his commandments remain in him, and he in them, and the way we know that he remains in us is from the Spirit that he gave us.

When a professional and respected scripture scholar begins his commentary on a passage with the words, “This is a difficult passage to understand,” we can be sure that we’re in for a variety of opinions as to its meaning and references to various other ways the Greek original might be translated. This passage is a case in point. But here’s a possibility relying on the English translation of the Greek. Perhaps the Greek cannot be understood this way, however.

Because there was a split in the community, with both elements claiming to know the truth, our author wants to reassure the members of his community that if in their hearts they condemn the dissidents, God is greater than their hearts, and God knows everything. Maybe those others are not as bad as we think. As for us, if our hearts do not condemn *us* we can have confidence in God and receive from God whatever we ask. But we need to keep the commandments, namely to believe in the name of God’s Son, and to love one another. In so doing we will remain in Jesus, and he will remain in us, which we will know from the Spirit that he gave us.

### 4:1-6 - Testing the spirits

1Beloved, do not trust every spirit but test the spirits to see whether they belong to God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. 2This is how you can know the Spirit of God: every spirit that acknowledges Jesus Christ come in the flesh belongs to God, 3and every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus does not belong to God. This is the spirit of the antichrist that, as you heard, is to come, but in fact is already in the world. 4You belong to God, children, and you have conquered them, for the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. 5They belong to the world; accordingly, their teaching belongs to the world, and the world listens to them. 6We belong to God, and anyone who knows God listens to us, while anyone who does not belong to God refuses to hear us. This is how we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of deceit.

In testing what spirit is leading someone, what that spirit produces needs to be examined in order to know if one is being led by the Spirit of God or the spirit of the antichrist. Remember, the splinter group taught that the physical life of Jesus and his suffering and death, along with his

tachings, really had no value for salvation. Salvation was assured by the simple fact that the Son of God became a human being. So if the spirit acknowledges that Jesus came in the flesh – life, death, resurrection and teaching – that spirit is of God. Any spirit which does not acknowledge that is from the antichrist. The Spirit of God guides the author’s community; the spirit of deceit rules the world. And for our author the world means, among other things, those who have broken off from the community.

The author’s argument here is shaped greatly by the Gospel of John. John 15:19: “If you belonged to the world, the world would love its own, but because you do not belong to the world, and I have chosen you out of the world, the world hates you.” John 16:11: “The ruler of this world has been condemned.” John 16:33: Take courage, I have conquered the world.”

The difficulty with this argument is that the opponents could claim the same things. However, the ultimate test of the Spirit is its testimony to, not only the incarnation, but to the life and teachings of Jesus.

#### 4:7-21 - God’s love and Christian life

7Beloved, let us love one another, because love is of God; everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God. 8Whoever is without love does not know God, for God is love. 9In this way the love of God was revealed to us: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might have life through him. 10In this is love: not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as expiation for our sins. 11Beloved, if God so loved us, we also must love one another. 12No one has ever seen God. Yet, if we love one another, God remains in us, and his love is brought to perfection in us.

13This is how we know that we remain in him and he in us, that he has given us of his Spirit. 14Moreover, we have seen and testify that the Father sent his Son as savior of the world. 15Whoever acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God remains in him and he in God. 16We have come to know and to believe in the love God has for us.

God is love, and whoever remains in love remains in God and God in him. 17In this is love brought to perfection among us, that we have confidence on the day of judgment because as he is, so are we in this world. 18There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear because fear has to do with punishment, and so one who fears is not yet perfect in love. 19We love because he first loved us. 20If anyone says, “I love God,” but hates his brother, he is a liar; for whoever does not love a brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. 21This is the commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.

In order to grasp the import of this section, one must really believe that God is love. Love is the very nature of God. That love poured itself out in creation; so God is also Creator. God’s love poured itself out in creating human beings in God’s own likeness; so human beings who love manifest who God is. God’s love poured itself out in choosing a people to be God’s own; so God is the Father of a nation. God’s love poured itself out in sending a savior; so God is a Savior. God’s love is poured itself out in showing mercy; so God is merciful. Everything God does stems from the fact that God is love. Without that belief, this section cannot make sense.

Thomas Aquinas instructs us that even within the Trinity it is love which makes God to be God, because the Holy Spirit *is* the mutual love the Father and the Son have for each other. Whatever others have told us, or whatever we have told ourselves, about God, John tells us that God *IS* love. Most of us have probably never contemplated that reality, but it is the basis of what we read here. (You want to take time to contemplate it? Do so before you read on.)

Verse 7 tells us that “love is of God.” So when we love one another, whether we know it or not, we know God, because God is the love we have for one another. So how do we know what

God's love looks like? God sent God's Son so that the world might have life through him. OK, if God loves us so much, we are to imitate God's love and love those whom God loves. (Allow that to blow your mind, because there is no one whom God does not love.)

Verses 8 to 12 don't much commentary to understand them. But they are offered for our belief. One scripture scholar raises the question whether the dissidents might have claimed to have seen God. Seen or not, if we love one another, God remains in us, and his love is brought to perfection in our love for one another. We pass on to others the very love of God!

Verses 13 to 16 may be another refutation of the dissidents, who may have claimed that they had seen God. Our author claims that "we have seen and testify that the Father sent his Son as savior of the world" through what Jesus did and taught in his life. Remember the dissidents claimed that what Jesus did and said didn't really matter. Verse 17 describes the ramification of the love of God being within the believer. As Jesus is – God's love made visible in our world – so are we – by our love we make God visible in our world.

Verses 18 and 19 again take up the objections of the dissidents who claimed that since what one does has no effect on one's salvation. For them, therefore, there was no fear of punishment. Their claim was that the community of our author was fearful of punishment, and that's why they observed the moral injunctions of the Gospel. Our author rebuts that there is no fear of punishment by those who love, because what motivates the observance of the Gospel moral injunctions is love, not fear, because Jesus first loved us.

The rebuttal goes on in verses 20 and 21. No one can love God who is not seen if one does not also love a brother or sister who is seen. There is a moral injunction in loving God; one must also love one's brothers and sisters.

## 5:1-5 - Faith

1Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is begotten by God, and everyone who loves the father loves [also] the one begotten by him. 2In this way we know that we love the children of God when we love God and obey his commandments. 3For the love of God is this, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome, 4for whoever is begotten by God conquers the world. And the victory that conquers the world is our faith. 5Who [indeed] is the victor over the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

How does one identify the children of God? By their belief that Jesus is the Christ. That belief shows that they are begotten by God. Loving God means also loving Jesus. Our love for God shows in our love for the children of God. And the love for God is this: we keep his commandments. This is again a rebuttal of the dissidents, who claim there is no need to keep the commandments. Those commandments are not burdensome, as the dissidents would suggest; not for those who are begotten by God. (The dissidents ridiculed those in the community who felt "burdened" by moral constraints.) There is no such burden for those who have conquered the world by their belief that Jesus is the Son of God.

## 5:6-12 - The Son came in water and blood

6This is the one who came through water and blood, Jesus Christ, not by water alone, but by water and blood. The Spirit is the one that testifies, and the Spirit is truth. 7So there are three that testify, 8the Spirit, the water, and the blood, and the three are of one accord. 9If we accept human testimony, the testimony of God is surely greater.

Now the testimony of God is this, that he has testified on behalf of his Son. 10Whoever believes in the Son of God has this testimony within himself. Whoever does not believe God has made him a liar by not believing the testimony God has given about his Son. 11And this is the testimony: God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. 12Whoever possesses the Son has life; whoever does not possess the Son of God does not have life.

It is important to our author to point out that Christ came not in water alone (at his baptism, as the dissidents say), but in water and blood (the crucifixion as part of Christ's redeeming sacrifice, whose efficacy is denied by the dissidents.) The Spirit who descended on Jesus at his baptism (John 1:32: "John testified further, 'I saw the Spirit come down like a dove from the sky and remain upon him.'). and which Jesus released in his dying (John 19:30: "When Jesus had taken the wine, he said 'It is accomplished.' and bowing his head he handed over the Spirit.") is the third one who testifies. Only two witnesses are required in order to believe any testimony, and here we have three.

Accepting the testimony of the Spirit, the water and the blood leads to belief in God's son, and that faith leads to eternal life.

### 5:13-21 - Wrap-up

13I write these things to you so that you may know that you have eternal life, you who believe in the name of the Son of God. 14And we have this confidence in him, that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. 15And if we know that he hears us in regard to whatever we ask, we know that what we have asked him for is ours. 16If anyone sees his brother sinning, if the sin is not deadly, he should pray to God and he will give him life. This is only for those whose sin is not deadly. There is such a thing as deadly sin, about which I do not say that you should pray. 17All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin that is not deadly.

18We know that no one begotten by God sins; but the one begotten by God he protects, and the evil one cannot touch him. 19We know that we belong to God, and the whole world is under the power of the evil one. 20We also know that the Son of God has come and has given us discernment to know the one who is true. And we are in the one who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life. 21Children, be on your guard against idols.

Verse 13 is reminiscent of the end of John's Gospel: "These are written that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through this belief you may have life in his name." (John 20:31)

Verses 14 and 15 would seem to say that we can be confident that God will answer our prayers if we ask for something which God wants to give us.

Prayer for sinners is recommended in verse 16, but only if the sin is not deadly. (Later church teaching distinguished venial and mortal sin; this is NOT what the author is thinking about.) So what's the deadly sin? Probably apostasy, and the author probably has the dissidents in mind.

In verses 18 to 21 the author probably has the dissidents in mind also. He reverts to his dualistic view of the world: there is his community and then there is the rest of the world under the control of the evil one. And the final warning is again directed against the dissidents, because they are involved in idolatry.

## The Second Letter of John

This letter is presumed to be the work of the Presbyter who wrote the First Letter of John. Its place of composition is probably also Ephesus, and the date about 100 A.D. This and the Third Letter of John are short, probably the length determined by the size of the papyrus page on which it was written. This letter seems to be addressed to only one Johannine community some distance from Ephesus, warning the members of the possible imminent arrival of some of the dissident missionaries – “those who have gone out from us.” The letter attempts to preserve within the community doctrinal purity and active love. If its style is not frenetic, at least it has an urgency about it.

### 1-3 - Opening

<sup>1</sup>The Presbyter to the chosen Lady and to her children whom I love in truth—and not only I but also all who know the truth— <sup>2</sup>because of the truth that dwells in us and will be with us forever. <sup>3</sup>Grace, mercy, and peace will be with us from God the Father and from Jesus Christ the Father’s Son in truth and love.

Although some commentators have tried to identify a specific person who is addressed, it is almost certainly a local church who is the chosen Lady, and her children are the members of that local church.

Truth and love are highlighted in this address. These are the two concerns of the Johannine community, namely the truth that the Son of God came in the flesh, and the love for one another which must be the response to the coming of the Son of God in the flesh. The secessionists denied the efficacy of the flesh (life, death and teaching) of Jesus, making his incarnation a purely spiritual reality, and they denied that there was any moral obligation attached to belief in Jesus – there was no obligation to love one another.

### 4-11 - The body of the letter

<sup>4</sup>I rejoiced greatly to find some of your children walking in the truth just as we were commanded by the Father. <sup>5</sup>But now, Lady, I ask you, not as though I were writing a new commandment but the one we have had from the beginning: let us love one another. <sup>6</sup>For this is love, that we walk according to his commandments; this is the commandment, as you heard from the beginning, in which you should walk.

<sup>7</sup>Many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh; such is the deceitful one and the antichrist. <sup>8</sup>Look to yourselves that you do not lose what we worked for but

may receive a full recompense. 9Anyone who is so “progressive” as not to remain in the teaching of the Christ does not have God; whoever remains in the teaching has the Father and the Son. 10If anyone comes to you and does not this doctrine, do not receive him in your house or even greet him; 11for whoever greets him shares in his evil works.

The presbyter is glad that some of the members of the community are walking in the truth. But the presbyter wants to reiterate what is already well-known, namely that we love one another and walk in Jesus’ commandments.

He then gets to the reason for his writing. Secessionists are coming who deny the fleshly existence of Jesus. The secessionists were probably falling into the heresy of Docetism, which held that Jesus only appeared to be human. They belong to the antichrist. Do not listen to them. Don’t even let them into the house.

What is this “progressive” teaching? The secessionists began by believing in the physical Jesus, who they thought became the Son of God at his baptism. They gradually moved to a more “spiritual” Christ, whose physical being and teachings were left behind.

12-13 - Sign off

12Although I have much to write to you, I do not intend to use paper and ink. Instead, I hope to visit you and to speak face to face so that our joy may be complete. 13The children of your chosen sister send you greetings.

Although written by the presbyter, the greeting is sent in the name of the entire church.

### The Third Letter of John

It is supposed that the Presbyter of First and Second John is also the author of this third letter. Another supposition about the letter is that Gaius is a friend, and perhaps a convert, of the Presbyter, who is a member of a distant house-church other than the one of which Diotrephes is the leader. The Presbyter is intending to send missionaries to the house-church headed by Diotrephes, but he has refused to receive them. So the Presbyter is asking Gaius to receive them until such time as Diotrephes' mind can be changed.

This is all taking place shortly after 100 A.D., and it bears testimony to the beginning of change in the Johannine community from a rather naive and congenial charismatic group to a more structured and authoritarian community.

The bulk of the Gospel according to John had been written before this letter, up to the obvious conclusion in Chapter 20, verses 30 and 31. The experience of the Presbyter described in this letter suggests that it was written just before Chapter 21 of the Gospel was added by the redactor. Chapter 21 of the Gospel describes a central and authoritative role for Peter, something new in the Johannine tradition.

#### 1-2 - Opening formula

<sup>1</sup>The Presbyter to the beloved Gaius whom I love in truth. <sup>2</sup>Beloved, I hope you are prospering in every respect and are in good health, just as your soul is prospering.

This is a typical opening of a letter at the end of the First Century. The wish for good health is also a standard opening. Our author extends that wish for good health from the body only to include Gaius' spiritual health.

#### 3-4 - Expression of joy

<sup>3</sup>I rejoiced greatly when some of the brothers came and testified to how truly you walk in the truth. <sup>4</sup>Nothing gives me greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.

This is also a standard feature of late First Century letters. However, in this letter, it has something of an edge to it, because it contrasts Gaius' walking in the truth with Diotrephes' stubbornness (verse 9). That the Presbyter knows about Gaius from brothers who have informed him

indicates that for all the loose connections among the house-churches which made up the Johannine community, the Presbyter has been keeping an eye on things through his emissaries.

### 5-12 - The message

5Beloved, you are faithful in all you do for the brothers, especially for strangers; 6they have testified to your love before the church. Please help them in a way worthy of God to continue their journey. 7For they have set out for the sake of the Name and are accepting nothing from the pagans. 8Therefore, we ought to support such persons, so that we may be co-workers in the truth.

9I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to dominate, does not acknowledge us. 10Therefore, if I come, I will draw attention to what he is doing, spreading evil nonsense about us. And not content with that, he will not receive the brothers, hindering those who wish to do so and expelling them from the church.

11Beloved, do not imitate evil but imitate good. Whoever does what is good is of God; whoever does what is evil has never seen God. 12Demetrius receives a good report from all, even from the truth itself. We give our testimonial as well, and you know our testimony is true.

13I have much to write to you, but I do not wish to write with pen and ink. 14Instead, I hope to see you soon, when we can talk face to face.

The contrast between Gaius and Diotrephes is emphasized in verse 5. Gaius hospitably receives strangers, while Diotrephes “will not receive the brothers, hindering those who wish to do so and expelling them from the church.” Our author describes him as one who loves to dominate, and who will not acknowledge the Presbyter. He urges Gaius not to imitate evil, namely the behavior of Diotrephes.

For better or for worse Diotrephes seems to be a presbyter who is turning into what will become known as a bishop, one who leads, not only by charism, but by structured authority. Things are beginning to change in the early church.

Demetrius seems to have been a missionary sent to the house-church, whom Diotrephes refused to receive. Our author vouches for him, and apparently recommends him to Gaius.

### 13-15 - Sign off

13I have much to write to you, but I do not wish to write with pen and ink. 14Instead, I hope to see you soon, when we can talk face to face. 15Peace be with you. The friends greet you; greet the friends there each by name.

Here the letter ends, possibly because the papyrus page was filled.

## The Second Letter of Peter

The Second Letter of Peter is the last book of the New Testament to be written, probably around 150 A.D. by an unknown author who thought it beneficial to provide the communities in Asia Minor with some final advice from Peter. Analysis of the style and vocabulary, as well as the late date of the letter, rule out the author of 1 Peter as the author of 2 Peter.

2 Peter is written as though it were a last will and testament of Peter the apostle as he approached his death. If we make the distinction between letter and epistle, this is clearly an epistle, written for general consumption by believers throughout the world, rather than a missive directed to a particular church or individual in order to address a specific problem or issue. It's message is that God is in charge, and although God delays the parousia, God will reward the faithful and destroy the faithless.

There were in the middle of the Second Century debates about the providential care and the judgement of God on human behavior. The Epicureans and some Jewish heretics argued that there is no providence/judgement in God, no after-life, and therefore, no after death rewards or punishments.

The place of origin of this letter is uncertain, but Rome cannot be ruled out. Wherever it originated, there was already a collection of Pauline writings, to which the author refers, and also the Letter of Jude, which is reproduced throughout this letter, and a copy of 1 Peter.

The polemic but pastoral outlook of this letter in the middle of the Second Century would not foretell the disputes which would surround it in the Twentieth Century. 2 Peter is written with a Greek mind set in which faith is understood as a set of beliefs to which one must adhered. This is just too Catholic for many to stomach. For some it is so distasteful that they have tried to get 2 Peter removed from the canon of scripture.

### 1:1-2 - Greeting

1 Symeon Peter, a slave and apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who have received a faith of equal value to ours through the righteousness of our God and savior Jesus Christ: 2 may grace and peace be yours in abundance through knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.

Peter's name, Symeon, is reproduced here as it would have appeared in Hebrew. It appears that way also in Acts 15:14. The letter is addressed to those who have the same faith the author.

The importance throughout the letter of faith, thought of as knowledge, is signaled from the very beginning. For Paul, faith was more frequently described as trust in God; but he also wrote of it as knowledge. This view of faith will be elaborated throughout the letter. Our author is concerned about knowledge, because it serves to refute the false teachers whose preaching our author thinks is disrupting the community of believers. In this shift from understanding faith as trust in God to understanding faith in terms of knowledge in the space of one hundred years, indicates the shift from a dominantly Jewish-Christian church to a dominantly Gentile-Christian (and therefore Greek) church.

#### 1:3-4 - God's power

<sup>3</sup>His divine power has bestowed on us everything that makes for life and devotion, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and power. <sup>4</sup>Through these, he has bestowed on us the precious and very great promises, so that through them you may come to share in the divine nature, after escaping from the corruption that is in the world because of evil desire.

God has given us everything that's good for life and devotion. How? Again, it's through knowledge of God's glory and power. As a result, because of God's promises, we "come to share in the divine nature." This is a very abstract Greek philosophical phraseology; contrast that with the same thought expressed in more Hebrew terms in 1 Peter 5:1: come to "share in the glory to be revealed." In either case the point is that we have been chosen out of the world.

#### 1:5-11 - Exhortation

<sup>5</sup>For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, virtue with knowledge, <sup>6</sup>knowledge with self-control, self-control with endurance, endurance with devotion, <sup>7</sup>devotion with mutual affection, mutual affection with love. <sup>8</sup>If these are yours and increase in abundance, they keep you from being idle or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>9</sup>Anyone who lacks them is blind and shortsighted, forgetful of the cleansing of his past sins. <sup>10</sup>Therefore, brothers, be all the more eager to make your call and election firm, for, in doing so, you will never stumble. <sup>11</sup>For, in this way, entry into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and savior Jesus Christ will be richly provided for you.

What are the ramifications to our having been chosen from out of the world? Our author spells it out in his list of virtues which our faith should inspire: knowledge, self-control, endurance, devotion, mutual affection, love. If these are ours, our knowledge of Jesus Christ will not be fruitless. Again, the importance of knowledge is central; it will lead to love. And if you can't see this, you are blind and shortsighted, having forgotten your baptism. Salvation and glory depend on this knowledge and love.

#### 1:12-15 - Peter's testament

<sup>12</sup>Therefore, I will always remind you of these things, even though you already know them and are established in the truth you have. <sup>13</sup>I think it right, as long as I am in this "tent," to stir you up by a reminder, <sup>14</sup>since I know that I will soon have to put it aside, as indeed our Lord Jesus Christ has shown me. <sup>15</sup>I shall also make every effort to enable you always to remember these things after my departure.

Wrapping himself in the mantle of Peter, our author makes this supposed deathbed appeal to his addressees. He is about to put aside his “tent,” his mortal body. He’s not folding it up; he’s putting it aside. But before he goes, he wants to remind people of what they have been taught. This literary device was common in antiquity.

1:16-19 - Not myth, but revelation

16We did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. 17For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that unique declaration came to him from the majestic glory, “This is my Son, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” 18We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven while we were with him on the holy mountain. 19Moreover, we possess the prophetic message that is altogether reliable. You will do well to be attentive to it, as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.

Because he had experienced the transfiguration, Peter did not rely on myths, but on his personal experience. In verse 16 the Greek word here translated as “coming” is “*parousia*.” Our author is using Peter’s experience of the transfiguration to demonstrate that the *parousia* will see the coming of Jesus to judge. Why use the transfiguration to prove that Jesus will come; why not Jesus’ appearance to Peter after the resurrection? Probably because the “scoffers” were always claiming that they had seen the risen Lord and received a message from him.

Besides Peter’s experience of the transfiguration, “we possess the prophetic message that is altogether reliable,” that is the Old Testament. Pay attention to it.

1:20-21 - Scripture

20Know this first of all, that there is no prophecy of scripture that is a matter of personal interpretation, 21for no prophecy ever came through human will; but rather human beings moved by holy Spirit spoke under the influence of God.

When our author wrote this sentence, he could not have foreseen the controversy it would provoke. The issue of the interpretation of scripture has divided Christian churches for centuries. This is one of those writings which cause people to characterize this letter as “early Catholicism.” While that is the dispute occasioned by this sentence, our author’s intent was merely to support from the Old Testament for the truth of the coming of Jesus at the *parousia*.

2:1-3 - False teachers

1There were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will introduce destructive heresies and even deny the Master who ransomed them, bringing swift destruction on themselves. 2Many will follow their licentious ways, and because of them the way of truth will be reviled. 3In their greed they will exploit you with fabrications, but from of old their condemnation has not been idle and their destruction does not sleep.

Following up on the previous section, our author recalls that there were false prophets in the Old Testament as well, and there will be false prophets among you. But they will go to destruction. They charge you money for their ministrations, and they are just exploiting you. But examples from the past point to their destruction.

## 2:4-10 - Examples from the past

4For if God did not spare the angels when they sinned, but condemned them to the chains of Tartarus and handed them over to be kept for judgment; 5and if he did not spare the ancient world, even though he preserved Noah, a herald of righteousness, together with seven others, when he brought a flood upon the godless world; 6and if he condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah [to destruction], reducing them to ashes, making them an example for the godless [people] of what is coming; 7and if he rescued Lot, a righteous man oppressed by the licentious conduct of unprincipled people 8(for day after day that righteous man living among them was tormented in his righteous soul at the lawless deeds that he saw and heard), 9then the Lord knows how to rescue the devout from trial and to keep the unrighteous under punishment for the day of judgment, 10and especially those who follow the flesh with its depraved desire and show contempt for lordship.

Our author has lifted this whole section right out of the Letter of Jude, using in whole or in part 19 of Jude's 25 verses, making only a few changes, and omitting Jude's non-scriptural examples. These are examples of God's judgement. In case you're interested, here are the changes.

Jude (5-7) mentioned as those punished by God: the people in the desert, the angels and Sodom and Gomorrah. 2 Peter has kept the second and third, but substituted the flood for the first. Our author knew some Greek mythology; the punishment of the angels is changed from being chained in darkness to "condemned them to the chains of Tartarus." Tartarus was the place of torment located far below Hades. It was the ultimate in punishment. 2 Peter also lists those whom God spared, and Jude does not. 2 Peter adds an offense perpetrated by the unrighteous: they "show contempt for lordship." This applies to God's lordship, but also is meant legitimate authority, like that of Peter. No wonder many see this as "early Catholicism."

In all of this our author is making his point that God does judge and save and punish.

## 2:11-22 - False teachers denounced

Bold and arrogant, they are not afraid to revile glorious beings, 11whereas angels, despite their superior strength and power, do not bring a reviling judgment against them from the Lord. (Jude 9) 12But these people, like irrational animals born by nature for capture and destruction, revile things that they do not understand, and in their destruction they will also be destroyed (Jude 10), 13suffering wrong as payment for wrongdoing. Thinking daytime revelry a delight, they are stains and defilements as they revel in their deceits while carousing with you (Jude 12). 14Their eyes are full of adultery and insatiable for sin. They seduce unstable people, and their hearts are trained in greed. Accursed children! 15Abandoning the straight road, they have gone astray, following the road of Balaam, the son of Bosor, who loved payment for wrongdoing (Jude 11), 16but he received a rebuke for his own crime: a mute beast spoke with a human voice and restrained the prophet's madness. 17These people are waterless springs and mists driven by a gale; for them the gloom of darkness has been reserved (Jude 12-13). 18For, talking empty bombast, they seduce with licentious desires of the flesh those who have barely escaped from people who live in error (Jude 16). 19They promise them freedom, though they themselves are slaves of corruption, for a person is a slave of whatever overcomes him. 20For if they, having escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of [our] Lord and savior Jesus Christ, again become entangled and overcome by them, their last condition is worse than their first. 21For it would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment handed down to them. 22What is expressed in the true proverb has happened to them, "The dog returns to its own vomit," and "A bathed sow returns to wallowing in the mire."

I have put the cross references to the Letter of Jude in the text. For their meaning, confer the Letter of Jude on page 185.

A significant addition to the Jude material is verse 20, which suggests it would have been better if the false teachers had never known about Jesus, rather than having known, they return to the defilement of the world. The message in verse 22 quotes from Proverbs 26:11. The message about the pig is found in the Greek tradition.

### 3:1-10 - The parousia is real, but only delayed

1This is now, beloved, the second letter I am writing to you; through them by way of reminder I am trying to stir up your sincere disposition, 2to recall the words previously spoken by the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and savior through your apostles. 3Know this first of all, that in the last days scoffers will come [to] scoff, living according to their own desires 4and saying, “Where is the promise of his coming? From the time when our ancestors fell asleep, everything has remained as it was from the beginning of creation.” 5They deliberately ignore the fact that the heavens existed of old and earth was formed out of water and through water by the word of God; 6through these the world that then existed was destroyed, deluged with water. 7The present heavens and earth have been reserved by the same word for fire, kept for the day of judgment and of destruction of the godless. 8But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years and a thousand years like one day. 9The Lord does not delay his promise, as some regard “delay,” but he is patient with you, not wishing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance. 10But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a mighty roar and the elements will be dissolved by fire, and the earth and everything done on it will be found out.

Once again our author is making the claim that he is Peter, by citing this as the second time he is writing. The scoffers are making fun of the believers, because the believers hope for a parousia, and clearly there has been no such thing as of yet. The scoffers maintain that things are as they have always been. In refutation to that stance, our author recalls that the world as it existed prior to Noah is gone; God started over. So things are not as they have always been. As to the present world, it is just awaiting its destruction, not by water, but by fire, when judgement will come upon the godless.

A author uses some logic to demonstrate that the parousia is only delayed, not cancelled. God’s measurement of time is much different from our own. And this delay is given because God is patient, and is giving us time for repentance. But the day of the Lord will come, albeit unexpectedly. And at that time “the earth and everything done on it will be found out.” That is, all will become manifest.

### 3:11-16 - So be prepared

11Since everything is to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought [you] to be, conducting yourselves in holiness and devotion, 12waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be dissolved in flames and the elements melted by fire. 13But according to his promise we await new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.

14Therefore, beloved, since you await these things, be eager to be found without spot or blemish before him, at peace. 15And consider the patience of our Lord as salvation, as our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, also wrote to you, 16speaking of these things as he does in all his letters. In them there are some things hard to understand that the ignorant and unstable distort to their own destruction, just as they do the other scriptures.

It was thought that by living exemplary lives people could hasten the day of the coming of the Lord. The thought was that the present earth would be destroyed in flames, and there would come a new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.

So, as we wait, be good and be at peace. Our author refers to Paul’s letters in support of his own declarations, though admitting that some of what Paul wrote is hard to understand, with the consequence that some distort his meaning.

It is an interesting note that our author refers to Paul's letters and *other* scriptures, implying that, along with the Old Testament writings, Paul's letters were already accepted as inspired scripture.

### 3:17-18 - Exhortation and doxology

17Therefore, beloved, since you are forewarned, be on your guard not to be led into the error of the unprincipled and to fall from your own stability. 18But grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory now and to the day of eternity. [Amen.]

So, hang in there. Keep steady. Praise the Lord.

I, John,  
saw and heard.

The Book of Revelation



## Foreword

The meaning of some passages of scripture can be illuminated by a commentary which is read after having read the text. Other passages can be opaque enough that the reader may benefit from a little advance information prior to reading the text. The Book of Revelation falls into the latter category. The author was so well versed in the Old Testament that without hesitance he uses images from those scriptures as if they were ordinary fare for the average person, which, of course, they are not.

Therefore I have thought it best to give the interpretation and commentary on the passages from the Book of Revelation prior to reproducing the actual text of the scripture, hopefully enabling the reader to understand and savor the sacred text as he or she reads it, rather than having to try to figure out what the text might mean.

“What it might mean” is a phrase which is used frequently in the commentaries of the professional scripture scholars I have studied. Words like “maybe” and “perhaps” are a staple in the commentaries. Does that mean we cannot know what the author meant to convey? Not really. It does mean that the reader will have to lay aside the desire for precision of meaning in every word which is used to convey the message, and just consider the impression offered by the entirety of a given passage.

Immense research has been mounted by professional scripture scholars to ascertain the source of the many images the author of the Book of Revelation uses. Those sources are usually noted in the footnotes of bibles. The average faith-filled reader is usually not interested in that research; he or she wants to know only what the author was trying to communicate.

That will be the effort undertaken in these pages, to understand what the author wanted to communicate.



## Introduction

Perhaps the most important realization one must have when beginning to read the Book of Revelation is to note that there is no “s” at the end of the word “Revelation.” This is not a book meant to reveal knowledge of specific events which would happen in the future; it is a book about events which had already taken place or were taking place as the writer put pen to paper.

When people look to the Book of Revelation and find there two thousand year old prophecies about events which happened centuries later, they are projecting ideas from their own minds onto the words which were written about something entirely different centuries earlier.

If you overheard your neighbor describing something which was large and black and sleek and which was capable of quite amazing speed, but didn’t know what he was talking about, and a week later you saw your neighbor pull into his driveway with his new black Lincoln Continental, you might say to yourself, “Oh, that’s what he was talking about.” You would be wrong; earlier he was describing his friend’s Black Labrador dog. However, seeing his new automobile, and recalling the words he had spoken earlier, one might be quite sure what those earlier words meant.

That’s what’s been going on with the Book of Revelation for centuries. People don’t understand what the author was writing about, but in their experience of subsequent events, they find a meaning for the words which they had read. That’s a mistake. With that caution, we will take up a study of the Book of Revelation in order to learn what the author intended us to take from his message.

In relation to the titles given to this book – Revelation and Apocalypse – both words mean an “unveiling.” “Apocalyptic” is also a word which identifies a literary genre which is esoteric but difficult to define, because there is no contemporary example of the genre. Perhaps the closest thing to apocalyptic literature in today’s world is the sports section of the daily or Sunday paper, where we are told of what has happened in a language unique to various sports venues.

“Ansah had 14 ½ sacks.” Sheahan has the size to drive the net.” “Laird spent 2009-10 with the tigers.” “Some of those calls were blatant.” “We have to fight.” “Wings sputter against anemic coyotes,” “Shooting has been an off-and-on thing for the wolverines.” “Rodger’s calf is an issue.” And here in Michigan where I live, the sport sections of the newspapers report regularly that several breeds of animals do some amazing things: the Lions, Tigers, Wolverines, Red Wings, to say nothing about what the Pistons can accomplish. If you know the genre of the writing and the venue from which it comes, all this makes sense. If you know neither, it’s utter gibberish. So we’ll try to learn the genre and the venue of the Book of Revelation.

If we were familiar with the apocalyptic literature of the Old Testament (the Books of Daniel, Ezekiel and Zechariah) this book would make much greater sense to us. The Book of Revelation draws heavily on the images and symbolism of these Old Testament works.

None of the scripture scholars whose works on the Book of Revelation I have read has called the writing spooky, but I think that word might sum up some of what I have read, but which was described with different adjectives. The apocalyptic genre is meant to be somewhat ethereal, with the meaning floating just above the words which try to convey it. The ideas are communicated, but not with precision. One scripture scholar described the apocalyptic genre of writing by saying that there is a great deal of “plasticity” in the images which are used. By which he means that the images might be indicating more than one thing, and we don’t know if he meant all or some of the possible meanings or just one of them. A modern reader might think that the author could have used an editor to help him organize and communicate his thoughts better. However, in order to get the spirit of the Book of Revelation, a modern reader must abandon himself or herself to the imprecise ethereal atmosphere of the writing, and just go along for the ride.

Our author had an amazingly thorough familiarity with the Hebrew scriptures. The book is full of allusions to events described in books of the Old Testament, or to things which had happened or were happening at the time the book was written. These allusions had meaning – sometimes historic, at other times cosmic. In both cases these meanings of the individual events are narrated in order to give the reader or hearer an overall impression which would lead to an emotional response on the part of the reader or hearer. That emotional response is what the author was trying to achieve, in the hope that the emotional response might enliven one’s faith. If we approach the Book of Revelation looking for a rational understanding of each event narrated, we will be frustrated. So, here’s what to look for: an allusion to some event (whether or not we can identify it) → which had a meaning all its own (whether or not we understand it) → which leads to an overall impression → which generates an emotional response in the reader or hearer.

If one were to try to picture in one’s imagination all that our author writes, he or she will need to think in terms of an animated cartoon feature. Our author is not trying to describe a real life drama. He’s interested only in the thought behind the images he creates.

Here’s a thought behind many of the images in many places. The victory of the Lamb and its followers is accomplished by their faithfulness unto death, not from their avoiding martyrdom. The victory of the Lamb and its followers is not concomitant with the destruction of Babylon as described in the last chapters of the book. The victory of the Lamb and the destruction of Babylon are separate events, and one is not dependent on the others.

And who is the author of this enigmatic writing? A man named John. Not John the Apostle, the son of Zebedee and brother of James, and not John the Evangelist. All we know about the author is that his name is John. 1:9 tells us that he is writing from the Island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea. He was probably the leader of the church in Ephesus. He will tell us in verse 9 that he had been so outspoken in opposition to the temple built to the “divine” Emperor Domitian in Ephesus that he was exiled to the penal colony on the Isle of Patmos. He sure knew the Hebrew scriptures; he narrated his theology through constant reference to them.

Various commentators give a variety of outlines of the book, each assuming that our author deliberately intended these various outlines. Their multiplicity challenges the veracity of any of them. What is offered here is one possibility from among the many which have been discerned, or imposed, on our authors writing.

Some scholars have discerned a pattern to the writing. That pattern would place Chapters 12 through 15 as the pinnacle of the book, the heart of the revelation. The chapters leading up to that pinnacle and the chapters following it, as well as the pinnacle itself, all involve the number 7. An outline according to this understanding looks like this.

	4. Seven signs Chapters 12-15	
3. Seven trumpets Chapters 8-11		5. Seven bowls Chapter 16
2. Seven seals Chapters 4-7		6. Seven sights Chapters 17-20
1. Seven churches Chapters 2-3		7. Seven calls Chapters 21-22

I offer this outline as only one of the possible ways to understand the organization of the book. There are as many outlines offered as there are authors who attempt to outline the book. And even this one must admit of that certain “plasticity” which is characteristic of the whole book. There are sights mentioned beyond Chapter 20, and there are calls prior to Chapter 21.

Now allow me to use my imagination and project onto our author my suppositions, none of which can be verified. If he were being punished for his proclamation of Jesus Christ, and for his opposition to the Emperor’s declaring that he was divine, I would guess he would be distraught and even angry at what was happening to him and around him. I would also guess that because of his faith, he was sure that God would eventually avenge him and the other Christians for the persecution they were suffering under the emperor. From what he wrote, it’s clear that he considered the Romans to be evil.

Traditionally, because he was thought to be John the Apostle, he was thought to be an old man. But we don’t need to think of him that way. I’ll imagine him middle-aged and angry, knowing himself to be impotent to oppose the emperor, but hoping to see his eventual vindication by God. At least that’s the way I read and understand what he has written.

When did he write it? Just before the turn of the First Century, roughly around 95 and 96 A.D.



## 1:1-3 - Prologue

The revelation (the Greek word is *apokalypsis*, and this is the only time it appear in the book) is *by* Jesus Christ, not *about* Jesus Christ, which God gave to Christ, to show his (Christ's) servants what must happen soon. God made this revelation known to the author, who is named John, by means of an angel. The first of seven blessings in the book is given next. The message is to be read aloud and heard and listened to, probably in the liturgical settings of the churches which are addressed.

<sup>1</sup>The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave to him, to show his servants what must happen soon. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, <sup>2</sup>who gives witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ by reporting what he saw. <sup>3</sup>Blessed is the one who reads aloud and blessed are those who listen to this prophetic message and heed what is written in it, for the appointed time is near.

## 1:4-6 - Greeting

The first mystic number given us is “7,” here the number of the churches in Asia. However the number “7” is always a number meaning “fullness” or “completeness.” So the letter is addressed to the whole church. (Well, actually, it's only the very first verses and the very last verses of the Book of Revelation which have the format of a letter.) The wish is for peace “from him who is and who was and who is to come,” reminiscent of the way God identified himself to Moses in exodus 3:14. Making us “into a kingdom, priests for his God and Father” is reminiscent of God's promise in Exodus 19:6. The author is reminding his readers of their dignity.

The seven spirits before his throne might actually refer to the Holy Spirit, because it would be the fullness of spirit; and since in verse 6 the Father and the Son are named, it would be customary to include mention of the Holy Spirit. Jesus is referred to as “the faithful witness,” the Greek word is “*martus*,” the root word for martyr which means “witness,” so it would refer to his passion and death. Then he is referred to as “the firstborn of the dead,” and therefore his resurrection, and also as “ruler of the kings of the earth” meaning his exaltation. The minor doxology follows.

<sup>4</sup>John, to the seven churches in Asia: grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, <sup>5</sup>and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead and ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, <sup>6</sup>who has made us into a kingdom, priests for his God and Father, to him be glory and power forever [and ever]. Amen.

## 1:7-8 - He's coming

Verse 7 pulls together sayings from Daniel 7:13 and Zechariah 12:10. Verse 8 quotes words found in Isaiah 41:4, 44:6 and 48:12. The message is the assurance that Christ will come and defeat all his enemies. The alpha and omega are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, indicating God's presence from the beginning to the end. God identified as the almighty occurs nine times in Revelation, but only once in the rest of the New Testament.

<sup>7</sup>Behold, he is coming amid the clouds,  
and every eye will see him,  
even those who pierced him.

All the peoples of the earth will lament him.

Yes. Amen.

8“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “the one who is and who was and who is to come, the almighty.”

### 1:9-20 - Inaugural vision

This begins the body of the book – 1:9 to 22:5 – with its report of the visions. There are many visions, but there is no indication that this seer ever got out of the “trance” which fell on him on the Lord’s day.

He heard a voice and turned to see who spoke. He saw the seven lampstands and the son of man walking among them. The lampstands are the seven church, and it is the risen Lord who is present to them.

There follows a description of the son of man, each item used to describe him having a meaning drawn from one or more Old Testament or New Testament narrations. [Here and throughout the rest of this commentary, I will give the meaning of the various items described, but I will not give the citations of the scripture passages from which the images are drawn. Those citations can be found in the footnotes of the New American Bible, Revised Edition.]

The long white robe designates Jesus as a priest, and the gold sash shows him to be a king. His white hair shows him to be not old, but eternal. The eyes with “fiery flame” indicate that he is all-knowing. The polished bronze feet show him to be unchangeable. The voice like water means he speaks with the authority of God. In the pagan world the Caesars were represented with the seven stars in their right hands, indicating their universal dominion. As we will learn in verse 20, here they stand for the “angels,” that is the leaders, of the seven churches. The sharp two-edged sword is the Word of God that will destroy unrepentant sinners. The brightness of his face symbolizes Christ’s divine majesty.

When our seer caught sight of him he fell down at his feet as though dead. It was the Old Testament belief that if a sinful human being saw God he or she would die. But he was assured that he didn’t have to be afraid, and that he was to write to the seven churches.

John identifies with all Christians who are suffering persecution under Emperor Domitian. He explains that he is in the penal colony on Patmos because he proclaimed God’s word and gave testimony to Jesus. This would give him great significance in the eyes of those who were also suffering for their faith.

9I, John, your brother, who share with you the distress, the kingdom, and the endurance we have in Jesus, found myself on the island called Patmos because I proclaimed God’s word and gave testimony to Jesus. 10I was caught up in spirit on the Lord’s day and heard behind me a voice as loud as a trumpet, 11which said, “Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.” 12Then I turned to see whose voice it was that spoke to me, and when I turned, I saw seven gold lampstands 13and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, wearing an ankle-length robe, with a gold sash around his chest. 14The hair of his head was as white as white wool or as snow, and his eyes were like a fiery flame. 15His feet were like polished brass refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing water. 16In his right hand he held seven stars. A sharp two-edged sword came out of his mouth, and his face shone like the sun at its brightest.

17When I caught sight of him, I fell down at his feet as though dead. He touched me with his right hand and said, “Do not be afraid. I am the first and the last, 18the one who lives. Once I was dead, but now I am alive forever and ever. I hold the keys to death and the netherworld. 19Write down, therefore, what you have seen, and what is happening, and

what will happen afterwards. 20This is the secret meaning of the seven stars you saw in my right hand, and of the seven gold lampstands: the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

Chapters 2 and 3 contain the letters the risen Lord told the seer to write to the angels of the seven churches in Asian Minor. The “angels” are the leaders of the churches, although one scholar says they are heavenly counterparts to the earthly churches. Each letter follows the same pattern, but content of each letter is different. The pattern is this: A) the title or description of the one who is addressing the church; in each case it is the risen Lord, but described in terms of Old Testament characters; B) the status of the church – good things and bad things about it; C) admonitions and encouragement; D) promise to the victors. In each case, the victor is the martyr, wh has won the victory as Christ did, by laying down his life. Our author doesn’t expect that all will be martyred, but all are called to give “witness,” the root meaning of “martyr.”

### 2:1-7 - To the church at Ephesus

**The speaker:** We’ve already seen that the speaker is the risen Lord. To the church at Ephesus the speaker identifies himself as the one who holds the seven stars and walks among the lampstands, meaning he’s present to them. **Status of the church:** They have done some good things, including discovering that some of the preachers who came to them were imposters; they were staunchly “orthodox.” But they have also done something bad: you’ve lost the love you had at first, that is love for each other. Perhaps, due to their passion for staunch orthodoxy, their unholy zeal may have led to intolerance, and extinguished their love for one another. **Admonition/encouragement:** Realize how far you have fallen and repent, or I will take away the lampstand from its place; Ephesus was the principal city of the province, and the church there was the principal church. But to your credit you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, and no one is sure who they are. **To the victors** I will give the right to eat from the tree of life in the garden of God, meaning that for those who are faithful, the condemnation in Genesis will be reversed.

1“To the angel of the church in Ephesus, write this:

“The one who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks in the midst of the seven gold lampstands says this: 2“I know your works, your labor, and your endurance, and that you cannot tolerate the wicked; you have tested those who call themselves apostles but are not, and discovered that they are impostors. 3Moreover, you have endurance and have suffered for my name, and you have not grown weary. 4Yet I hold this against you: you have lost the love you had at first. 5Realize how far you have fallen. Repent, and do the works you did at first. Otherwise, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. 6But you have this in your favor: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

7““Whoever has ears ought to hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the victor I will give the right to eat from the tree of life that is in the garden of God.””

### 2:8-11 - To the church at Smyrna

Christians in Smyrna were being harassed by the Jewish synagogue. The large Jewish population in Smyrna was recognized by the Roman authorities as a “legitimate cult.” The early believers in Christ were originally members of this cult, and therefore protected by the Roman magistrates. But as the Christians began to assert that they were the “true Israel “ the Jews resented

this. They therefore informed the Romans that the new sect no longer fell under Roman protection, because they had separated themselves from the protected cult of Judaism. **The speaker:** The risen Lord, once dead, but now alive. **Status:** They are suffering poverty and harassment. “You will face an ordeal for ten days” means that your time of trial will be limited. **Encouragement:** Don’t be afraid even when you are persecuted; remain faithful. You will receive the crown of life. (There is no admonition given to Smyrna.) **To the victors:** The faithful need not fear condemnation after their death.

8“To the angel of the church in Smyrna, write this:

“The first and the last, who once died but came to life, says this: 9“I know your tribulation and poverty, but you are rich. I know the slander of those who claim to be Jews and are not, but rather are members of the assembly of Satan. 10Do not be afraid of anything that you are going to suffer. Indeed, the devil will throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will face an ordeal for ten days. Remain faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.

11““Whoever has ears ought to hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The victor shall not be harmed by the second death.””

## 2:12-17 - To the church at Pergamum

**The speaker:** The one with the sharp two-edged sword. **Status:** You live where Satan’s throne is. Pergamum was a seat for the Roman governor and the site of the Roman temple to Zeus, as well as a center for emperor worship. **Encouragement/admonition:** You’ve held fast to my name (the emperor claimed the names of Lord and god). You’ve kept the faith even in time of persecution, when Antipas, my faithful witness, was martyred. Remember, the Greek word for witness is the root of the word martyr. Apparently Antipas was arrested and interrogated by the Roman governor and then killed. However, among you are some who, like Balaam, who convinced the Israelites to betray the laws of God and eat food sacrificed to idols. (Numbers 31:16) “To play the harlot” probably refers to breaking God’s laws in order to gain acceptance among the pagans. And there were some who adhered to the teaching of the Nicolaitans (whatever they were), but their teaching may have resembled Balaam’s, namely a willing assimilation into the pagan practices. Therefore repent. **To the victor:** I will give the hidden manna, that is the food of life. The amulet is symbol of victory and joy.

12“To the angel of the church in Pergamum, write this:

“The one with the sharp two-edged sword says this: 13“I know that you live where Satan’s throne is, and yet you hold fast to my name and have not denied your faith in me, not even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was martyred among you, where Satan lives. 14Yet I have a few things against you. You have some people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who instructed Balak to put a stumbling block before the Israelites: to eat food sacrificed to idols and to play the harlot. 15Likewise, you also have some people who hold to the teaching of [the] Nicolaitans. 16Therefore, repent. Otherwise, I will come to you quickly and wage war against them with the sword of my mouth.

17““Whoever has ears ought to hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the victor I shall give some of the hidden manna; I shall also give a white amulet upon which is inscribed a new name, which no one knows except the one who receives it.””

## 2:18-29 - To the church at Thyatira

**The speaker:** He has eyes like a fiery flame and feet like polished brass, that is, he sees all and is unchangeable. **Status:** Good, especially in the past; but bad now because Jezebel has seduced

you to eat forbidden food and to worship idols. Jezebel may have been an actual prophetess in Thyatira. She will be punished. **Encouragement/admonition:** Don't get caught up in the teaching of the so-called secrets of Satan. Other than that, just hang in there until I come. **To the victor:** I will give authority to rule nations. And the "morning star" means victory over death.

18 "To the angel of the church in Thyatira, write this:

"The Son of God, whose eyes are like a fiery flame and whose feet are like polished brass, says this: 19 "I know your works, your love, faith, service, and endurance, and that your last works are greater than the first. 20 Yet I hold this against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, who teaches and misleads my servants to play the harlot and to eat food sacrificed to idols. 21 I have given her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her harlotry. 22 So I will cast her on a sickbed and plunge those who commit adultery with her into intense suffering unless they repent of her works. 23 I will also put her children to death. Thus shall all the churches come to know that I am the searcher of hearts and minds and that I will give each of you what your works deserve. 24 But I say to the rest of you in Thyatira, who do not uphold this teaching and know nothing of the so-called deep secrets of Satan: on you I will place no further burden, 25 except that you must hold fast to what you have until I come.

26 " "To the victor, who keeps to my ways until the end,

I will give authority over the nations.

27 He will rule them with an iron rod.

Like clay vessels will they be smashed,

28 just as I received authority from my Father. And to him I will give the morning star.

29 " "Whoever has ears ought to hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

### 3:1-6 - To the church at Sardis

**The speaker:** The one who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. **Status:** Many have not been faithful to their baptism, but some have. **Encouragement/admonition:** Remember how you were after your baptism. Keep that; go back to that; retrieve what is left of that. I will come like a thief and you won't know when. (This is reminiscent of the fact that Sardis had a citadel which they thought was impregnable, but was twice overrun by enemies because of lack of vigilance. It was overrun by stealth rather than by force. In verse 3 the Lord says that unless they repent, he too will come like a thief.) There is no praise for any of the works of the people of Sardis, but there a few who have been faithful. **To the victor:** The victor will be dressed in white (their glorified bodies) and their names are written in the book of life.

1 "To the angel of the church in Sardis, write this:

"The one who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars says this: "I know your works, that you have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. 2 Be watchful and strengthen what is left, which is going to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. 3 Remember then how you accepted and heard; keep it, and repent. If you are not watchful, I will come like a thief, and you will never know at what hour I will come upon you. 4 However, you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their garments; they will walk with me dressed in white, because they are worthy.

5 " "The victor will thus be dressed in white, and I will never erase his name from the book of life but will acknowledge his name in the presence of my Father and of his angels.

6 " "Whoever has ears ought to hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

### 3:7-13 - To the church at Philadelphia

**The speaker:** In Isaiah 22:22 Eliakim, who will be given authority over the house of David, is described in the words of verse 7. Eliakim will be the only mediator between the king and the people. So will Christ be. **Status:** Christians were being ejected from the synagogue and locked out.

The notion that Jesus is the open door for access to God would come as good news to the people of Philadelphia. The citizens have kept the Lord's word. The Lord will defeat those of the assembly of Satan. **Encouragement:** I will keep you safe; hold fast. Verse 9 needs to be read with the emphasis on the word "you" to contrast the elect with the Jewish synagogue; it is the new Israel which the Lord loves. The whole letter is something of a polemic against the Jewish community at Philadelphia. But because the Christians "have kept my message of endurance, I "will keep" *you* safe in the time of trial that is going to come to the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth." This is the first time the universal judgement is mentioned in the book; it will become the major theme later. [I note here that our author is writing about, not only things which are actually happening to the believers in Christ, but also about what he foresees as about to happen. In his opinion things were already bad; but worse is yet to come.] **To the victor:** Our author is clever here. Those locked out of the synagogue will be made a pillar in the temple of my God and inscribe the name of my God and the new Jerusalem as well as the name of Jesus on them.

7" To the angel of the church in Philadelphia, write this:

"The holy one, the true,  
who holds the key of David,  
who opens and no one shall close,  
who closes and no one shall open,

says this:

8" "I know your works (behold, I have left an open door before you, which no one can close). You have limited strength, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. 9 Behold, I will make those of the assembly of Satan who claim to be Jews and are not, but are lying, behold I will make them come and fall prostrate at your feet, and they will realize that I love you. 10 Because you have kept my message of endurance, I will keep you safe in the time of trial that is going to come to the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth. 11 I am coming quickly. Hold fast to what you have, so that no one may take your crown.

12" "The victor I will make into a pillar in the temple of my God, and he will never leave it again. On him I will inscribe the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from my God, as well as my new name.

13" "Whoever has ears ought to hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

### 3:14-22 - To the church at Laodicea

Laodicea was known for three things: they had a gold refinery, a sort of pharmaceutical company which made eye ointment, and a way of bleaching wool so it was unusually white. **The speaker:** the faithful and true witness is Jesus. **Status:** They have become poor (with their gold refinery) and blind (with their eye ointment) and naked (with all their white wool). They've become lukewarm, neither hot (as one likes coffee) nor cold (as one likes beer). Why have they become lukewarm? They have come to rely too heavily on their prosperity. **Admonition:** (There is no encouragement for Laodicea.) Depend more on me than on your gold and eye ointment and white wool. I reprove you because I love you. Although you have grown tepid in your relating to me, I'm still anxious to relate to you. I stand at your door knocking. **There is no mention of victor here:** However, there is hope. Turn back to me and I will enter and share a meal with you (a sign of intimacy).

14“To the angel of the church in Laodicea, write this:

“The Amen, the faithful and true witness, the source of God’s creation, says this: 15“I know your works; I know that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either cold or hot. 16So, because you are lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth. 17For you say, ‘I am rich and affluent and have no need of anything,’ and yet do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. 18I advise you to buy from me gold refined by fire so that you may be rich, and white garments to put on so that your shameful nakedness may not be exposed, and buy ointment to smear on your eyes so that you may see. 19Those whom I love, I reprove and chastise. Be earnest, therefore, and repent.

20““Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, [then] I will enter his house and dine with him, and he with me. 21I will give the victor the right to sit with me on my throne, as I myself first won the victory and sit with my Father on his throne.

22““Whoever has ears ought to hear what the Spirit says to the churches.””

All commentators agree that it is difficult to discern what outline the author might have intended in his writing. But some see a division between 4:1 to 11:19 and 12:1 to 22:5. The first section opens and closes with a vision of the heavens open.

#### 4:1-5:14 - God, the Lamb and the scroll

I am going to take this two-chapter chunk of the Book of Revelation as one unit. I will include some of the interpretation of the details, but the over-arching message may be considered the heart of the Book of Revelation. I’ll give short shrift to some of the descriptions of the heavenly realm, in the hope that the basic message may become clear. I will, however, break up the text for some commentary on each section. But prepare your self for this grand heavenly vision.

Having addressed the seven churches here on earth, our author will now be taken up into heaven to hear and see the mysteries of God unfold. However, he will always be referencing the ramification his heavenly visions have on the earth.

#### 4:1-11 - Stage instructions (setting the scene)

The key to understanding chapters 4 and 5 is verse 4:1: “Come up here and I will show you what must happen afterwards.” I like the translation which says, “I will show you what must happen hereafter.” We are not to expect a description of future events, but rather a description of the setting in which future events will take place. But we have to wait until verse 5:1 to learn what that is. Everything between here and there is a description of the heavenly scene.

1After this I had a vision of an open door to heaven, and I heard the trumpetlike voice that had spoken to me before, saying, “Come up here and I will show you what must happen afterwards.”

Much of this imagery which follows is drawn from Ezechiel chapters 1 and 10. It is meant to show God’s majesty. God is the one seated on the throne, the one with real power, not the emperor on his throne. The twenty-four elders represent the twelve tribes of the old Israel and the twelve apostles of the new Israel. The whole description given in Chapter 4 is designed to show that God is almighty. It’s telling the emperor that he can just stuff it; real authority is from God and is in God!

Take all of this descriptive material as representing the majesty of God. The four living creatures represent attributes of God: lion = noble, calf = strong, human = wise, and eagle = swift.

The hymns found in this section and throughout the rest of the book probably come from liturgical hymns used by the Christian community.

2At once I was caught up in spirit. A throne was there in heaven, and on the throne sat 3one whose appearance sparkled like jasper and carnelian. Around the throne was a halo as brilliant as an emerald. 4Surrounding the throne I saw twenty-four other thrones on which twenty-four elders sat, dressed in white garments and with gold crowns on their heads. 5From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings, and peals of thunder. Seven flaming torches burned in front of the throne, which are the seven spirits of God. 6In front of the throne was something that resembled a sea of glass like crystal.

In the center and around the throne, there were four living creatures covered with eyes in front and in back. 7The first creature resembled a lion, the second was like a calf, the third had a face like that of a human being, and the fourth looked like an eagle in flight. 8The four living creatures, each of them with six wings, were covered with eyes inside and out. Day and night they do not stop exclaiming:

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God almighty,  
who was, and who is, and who is to come.”

9Whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to the one who sits on the throne, who lives forever and ever, 10the twenty-four elders fall down before the one who sits on the throne and worship him, who lives forever and ever. They throw down their crowns before the throne, exclaiming:

11“Worthy are you, Lord our God,  
to receive glory and honor and power,  
for you created all things;  
because of your will they came to be and were created.”

#### 5:1-14 - The action

The scroll which is all sealed up refers back to Chapter 4, verse 1: “what must happen afterwards,” or “hereafter.” The scroll contains all the events of human history. It is sealed with seven seals, that is, it is perfectly sealed; no one can open and read it.

1I saw a scroll in the right hand of the one who sat on the throne. It had writing on both sides and was sealed with seven seals. 2Then I saw a mighty angel who proclaimed in a loud voice, “Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?” 3But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to examine it. 4I shed many tears because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to examine it. 5One of the elders said to me, “Do not weep. The lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David, has triumphed, enabling him to open the scroll with its seven seals.”

Who can be present to all the events of human history? The lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David. And who is that? The remainder of this section answers that question. It is the lamb who is standing (alive) but who seemed to have been slain (he had been dead). The rest of Chapter 5 is a celebration of the risen all-powerful (seven horns) and all-seeing (seven eyes) Lord who is present to all events in human history which were sealed up in the scroll. That’s the message of hope given by the Book of Revelation. Jesus is Lord of every event of human history. No matter how much those events may escape our dominion, they do not escape the dominion of the risen Lord.

In 4:11 the hymn pronounces that God is worthy. Here in 5:9 and 12, the Lamb is proclaimed as worthy, thus giving Jesus and God the same dignity. The entirety of Chapter 5:6 to 14 is the heavenly celebration, and the invitation to celebrate also here on earth! Jesus is Lord!

The rest of Chapter 5 is a heavenly celebration of that fact.

6Then I saw standing in the midst of the throne and the four living creatures and the elders a Lamb that seemed to have been slain. He had seven horns and seven eyes; these are the [seven] spirits of God sent out into the whole world. 7He came and received the scroll from the right hand of the one who sat on the throne. 8When he took it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each of the elders held a harp and gold bowls filled with incense, which are the prayers of the holy ones. 9They sang a new hymn:

“Worthy are you to receive the scroll  
and to break open its seals,  
for you were slain and with your blood you purchased for God  
those from every tribe and tongue, people and nation.  
10You made them a kingdom and priests for our God,  
and they will reign on earth.”

11I looked again and heard the voices of many angels who surrounded the throne and the living creatures and the elders. They were countless in number, 12and they cried out in a loud voice:

“Worthy is the Lamb that was slain  
to receive power and riches, wisdom and strength,  
honor and glory and blessing.”

13Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, everything in the universe, cry out:

“To the one who sits on the throne and to the Lamb  
be blessing and honor, glory and might,  
forever and ever.”

14The four living creatures answered, “Amen,” and the elders fell down and worshiped.

Before we look at the seals, here's a bit of information about what we will read. The seals contain allusions to things which have already happened or are happening as the author writes. The allusions are presented in order to show the meaning of the whole series.

## 6:1-17 - The first six seals

### 6:1-2 - First seal

The allusion in the first seal is to the Parthian warriors on the eastern edge of the Roman empire, who used bows and arrows in their harassing of the Romans on their border. It would appear that John is cheering them on as they ride forth to further victories. The white horse is a symbol of conquest. The words “Come forward” are addressed to the contents of each seal, not to the seer.

1Then I watched while the Lamb broke open the first of the seven seals, and I heard one of the four living creatures cry out in a voice like thunder, “Come forward.” 2I looked, and there was a white horse, and its rider had a bow. He was given a crown, and he rode forth victorious to further his victories.

### 6:3-4 - Second seal

The second allusion is to war. The red horse is a symbol of war and bloodshed. The meaning of the second seal is the absence of peace.

3When he broke open the second seal, I heard the second living creature cry out, “Come forward.” 4Another horse came out, a red one. Its rider was given power to take peace away from the earth, so that people would slaughter one another. And he was given a huge sword.

### 6:5-6 - Third seal

The third allusion is to famine. The scale in the rider's hand is for measuring the weight of grain. Wheat was the preferred grain, and more expensive. But in time of war, wheat was scarce and very expensive; barley was the substitute. In time of famine olive oil and wine were to be used sparingly. In 92 A.D. Emperor Domitian decreed that half the vineyards be cut down to make room for planting more grain. Perhaps our author has this in mind.

5When he broke open the third seal, I heard the third living creature cry out, "Come forward." I looked, and there was a black horse, and its rider held a scale in his hand. 6I heard what seemed to be a voice in the midst of the four living creatures. It said, "A ration of wheat costs a day's pay, and three rations of barley cost a day's pay. But do not damage the olive oil or the wine."

### 6:7-8 - Fourth seal

The fourth allusion of the pale green horse is a symbol of pestilence, and the rider's name is Death. His squire is Hades, the realm of the dead. One-fourth of the earth will be affected by death from pestilence.

7When he broke open the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature cry out, "Come forward." 8I looked, and there was a pale green horse. Its rider was named Death, and Hades accompanied him. They were given authority over a quarter of the earth, to kill with sword, famine, and plague, and by means of the beasts of the earth.

### 6:9-11 - Fifth seal

In the breaking of the fifth seal, our seer is now given a vision of those who have been martyred. They cry out before justice is achieved. In the meantime, while they wait for their number to be completed, they are given white robes, a symbol of the glorified body of the righteous dead, or simply a symbol of their martyrdom. These are probably the ones killed by the Emperor Nero in the 60's. John expects others will be killed in the bad times he foresees.

9When he broke open the fifth seal, I saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered because of the witness they bore to the word of God. 10They cried out in a loud voice, "How long will it be, holy and true master, before you sit in judgment and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?" 11Each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to be patient a little while longer until the number was filled of their fellow servants and brothers who were going to be killed as they had been.

### 6:12-17 - Sixth seal

Next is the climax of the first six seals of the scroll. God's vindication of the faithful who have suffered, and recompense meted out to those who caused their suffering. The cosmic descriptions are not to be taken literally; they indicate that the coming of God will affect the entire universe. The image of the sky being divided like a torn scroll curling up is clever. Obviously the scroll was rolled up. If someone cut it, both sides of the cut would curl up, so that anything which was sitting on either side of the cut would be moved as each side of the cut began to roll up; that's why every mountain and island was moved from its place.

The point? God's vindication of the just will come, and it will be complete. Scripture scholars differ in their interpretations of the allusions mentioned as each seal is broken, but the overall meaning of the seals is this: things are going to be bad for the bad people, and they're going to be good for the good people. All the people mentioned in verse 15 will be conscience-stricken at the prospect of impending judgement. What emotional response might people have after hearing all this? Faith, joy, patience, hope? That's what the author intended to evoke.

12Then I watched while he broke open the sixth seal, and there was a great earthquake; the sun turned as black as dark sackcloth and the whole moon became like blood. 13The stars in the sky fell to the earth like unripe figs shaken loose from the tree in a strong wind. 14Then the sky was divided like a torn scroll curling up, and every mountain and island was moved from its place. 15The kings of the earth, the nobles, the military officers, the rich, the powerful, and every slave and free person hid themselves in caves and among mountain crags. 16They cried out to the mountains and the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of the one who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb, 17because the great day of their wrath has come and who can withstand it?"

The seventh seal will not be broken until Chapter 8, verse 1. It will introduce us to the seven trumpets.

7:1-8 - 144,000 sealed

Why this and the following section are inserted before the breaking of the seventh seal is a mystery.

The four angels are standing at the corners of the earth. Of course at that time the earth was thought to be flat like a table top. They are holding back the four winds of the earth. Another angel comes up from out of the east, considered the source of light and the place of paradise. This angel has the seal of the living God, and is going to make the servants of God who will be protected through the destruction which is to come. Then the author lists 12,000 from each of the tribes of Israel who will be sealed. The seal image is of a signet ring. Whoever is stamped with that seal belongs to God, and will be protected by God. Our author has a profound image of what God's protection might be. He compares it frequently to the Lamb who is standing, but with the marks of slaughter on him. God's protection does not insure that everything will work out well in this life for the believers. It's only God's final victory and the believers' final vindication which are assured.

The Tribe of Dan is omitted from the list of the tribes of Israel, because of a later tradition that the antichrist would arise from it. (Judges 18; 1 Kings 12:28-30) The tribe of Levi replaces Dan in the list.

That takes care of the members of the twelve tribes; they are now protected by God. In the next section our seer moves on in his vision to a more universal symbol of salvation.

1After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth so that no wind could blow on land or sea or against any tree. 2Then I saw another angel come up from the East, holding the seal of the living God. He cried out in a loud voice to the four angels who were given power to damage the land and the sea, 3"Do not damage the land or the sea or the trees until we put the seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God." 4I heard the number of those who had been marked with the seal, one hundred and forty-four thousand marked from every tribe of the Israelites: 5twelve thousand were marked from the tribe of Judah, twelve thousand from the tribe of Reuben, twelve thousand from the tribe of Gad, 6twelve thousand from the tribe of Asher,

twelve thousand from the tribe of Naphtali, twelve thousand from the tribe of Manasseh, 7twelve thousand from the tribe of Simeon, twelve thousand from the tribe of Levi, twelve thousand from the tribe of Issachar, 8twelve thousand from the tribe of Zebulun, twelve thousand from the tribe of Joseph, and twelve thousand were marked from the tribe of Benjamin.

### 7:9-17 - Universal salvation

This second group is too large to count. They are people from every nation, race, people, and tongue, wearing white robes (joy) and holding palm branches in their hands (victory). They are apparently in heaven, where they praise God, and then are joined by the rest of the heavenly court, who also praise God. So, who are these who have survived the time of great distress and have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb? Commentators suggest that both the 144,000 and the multitude which no one can count are respectively the church on earth, and the church in heaven. Verses 15 to 17 describe the happiness of those who suffered martyrdom under Emperor Nero and are now in heaven. They won by accepting death, rather than by inflicting hurt.

The point here for both the 144,000 and the uncountable multitude is that God saves. To use a phrase used earlier in this commentary, this is the meaning which floats ethereally above the words which are attempting to describe it. Our author is attempting to evoke sentiments of faith in God, comfort and hope in the midst of trial. A hearer or reader who gets too caught up in trying to identify and understand each segment of the description can miss that message.

9After this I had a vision of a great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation, race, people, and tongue. They stood before the throne and before the Lamb, wearing white robes and holding palm branches in their hands. 10They cried out in a loud voice:

“Salvation comes from our God, who is seated on the throne,  
and from the Lamb.”

11All the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They prostrated themselves before the throne, worshiped God, 12and exclaimed:

“Amen. Blessing and glory, wisdom and thanksgiving,  
honor, power, and might  
be to our God forever and ever. Amen.”

13Then one of the elders spoke up and said to me, “Who are these wearing white robes, and where did they come from?” 14I said to him, “My lord, you are the one who knows.” He said to me, “These are the ones who have survived the time of great distress; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

15“For this reason they stand before God’s throne  
and worship him day and night in his temple.

The one who sits on the throne will shelter them.

16They will not hunger or thirst anymore,  
nor will the sun or any heat strike them.

17For the Lamb who is in the center of the throne will shepherd them  
and lead them to springs of life-giving water,  
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

### 8:1-2 - The seventh seal

The opening of the seventh seal introduces the reader or hearer to the next group of seven – the seven angels with seven trumpets – and makes a connection between the two sections. The

silence does not represent reprieve or rest, but anticipation of what is to come. Before we get to the trumpets, we have a liturgical moment in 8:3-5.

1When he broke open the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. 2And I saw that the seven angels who stood before God were given seven trumpets.

### 8:3-5 - Liturgical moment

The liturgical drama is presented in anticipation of the seven trumpets – and the three woes – which will be presented next. The liturgical drama indicates that the coming section is about world-shaking events. So the message is: pay attention. Previously the prayers of the holy ones were likened to the incense rising from the altar. Here they are likened to the coals on which the incense is put. The angel takes the prayers of the holy ones and dashes them back to earth. What is about to be described in the trumpets and woes is the answer to the prayers.

3Another angel came and stood at the altar, holding a gold censer. He was given a great quantity of incense to offer, along with the prayers of all the holy ones, on the gold altar that was before the throne. 4The smoke of the incense along with the prayers of the holy ones went up before God from the hand of the angel. 5Then the angel took the censer, filled it with burning coals from the altar, and hurled it down to the earth. There were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake.

### 8:6 - Introduction of the trumpets

This verse sets up for the coming sections. The background for these trumpets or woes is the narration from the plagues of Exodus. The point of comparison here is that the persecution of the Christians by Roman authorities is similar to the slavery of the Chosen People in Egypt.

6The seven angels who were holding the seven trumpets prepared to blow them.

### 8:7 - First trumpet

In Exodus 9:23-24 the seventh plague sent upon Egypt is described in terms similar to those used here.

7When the first one blew his trumpet, there came hail and fire mixed with blood, which was hurled down to the earth. A third of the land was burned up, along with a third of the trees and all green grass.

### 8:8-9 - Second trumpet

In Exodus 7:20-21 the first plague sent upon Egypt is recounted in terms similar to those used here. It's just possible that the narration about the large burning mountain, which does not appear in Exodus, was reminiscent of what the author experienced in 79 A.D. when Mount Vesuvius erupted.

8When the second angel blew his trumpet, something like a large burning mountain was hurled into the sea. A third of the sea turned to blood, 9a third of the creatures living in the sea died, and a third of the ships were wrecked.

### 8:10-11 - Third trumpet

There is no corresponding Egyptian plague for this trumpet, but the wording of these verses could remind one of the wording found in Isaiah 14:12. Wormwood is a very bitter substance.

10When the third angel blew his trumpet, a large star burning like a torch fell from the sky. It fell on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water. 11The star was called “Wormwood,” and a third of all the water turned to wormwood. Many people died from this water, because it was made bitter.

### 8:12 - Fourth trumpet

This is reminiscent of the ninth plague of darkness in Egypt. It is also close to the threats of some of the prophets.

12When the fourth angel blew his trumpet, a third of the sun, a third of the moon, and a third of the stars were struck, so that a third of them became dark. The day lost its light for a third of the time, as did the night.

### 8:13 - Introduction to the next trumpets

In 4:8 the living creatures sang “Holy, holy, holy.” Here, by contrast, the eagle pronounces a triple “Woe.” It is the introduction to the narration of the last three trumpets, each of which is much longer than the first four, as the fifth and sixth seals in Chapter 6 were considerably longer than the first four. Each of these last three trumpets contain a “woe.”

13Then I looked again and heard an eagle flying high overhead cry out in a loud voice, “Woe! Woe! Woe to the inhabitants of the earth from the rest of the trumpet blasts that the three angels are about to blow!”

### 9:1-12 - Fifth trumpet (first woe)

This passage begins with a star falling to earth. Although stars have been the representation of several things in the Old Testament, here it seems to mean an angel, and in this case perhaps a bad angel, because he opens the passage to the abyss. The passage to the abyss refers to Sheol, the netherworld, where Satan and the fallen angels are kept for a thousand years, to be cast afterwards into the pool of fire. The abyss was conceived of as a vast subterranean cavern full of fire. Its only link with the earth was a kind of passage or mine shaft, which was kept locked.

This star (angel) who had fallen to earth opens the door to the passage, and out come locusts which look like horses. Don’t try to find a meaning in each item of the description of these locust-horses-scorpions. Take only this message from the whole scene: it’s going to bad for somebody, maybe even for everybody, but not for the Christians, who have on their foreheads the seal of the living God.

The name of the king of the angels of the abyss means “Destroyer.”

1Then the fifth angel blew his trumpet, and I saw a star that had fallen from the sky to the earth. It was given the key for the passage to the abyss. 2It opened the passage to the abyss, and smoke came up out of the passage like smoke from a huge furnace. The sun and the air were darkened by the smoke from the passage. 3Locusts came out of the smoke onto the land, and they were given the same power as scorpions of the earth. 4They were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any plant or any tree, but only those people who did not have the seal of God on their foreheads. 5They were not allowed to kill them but only to torment them for five months; the torment they inflicted was like that of a scorpion when it stings a person. 6During that time these people will seek death but will not find it, and they will long to die but death will escape them.

7The appearance of the locusts was like that of horses ready for battle. On their heads they wore what looked like crowns of gold; their faces were like human faces, and they had hair like women's hair. Their teeth were like lions' teeth, 9and they had chests like iron breastplates. The sound of their wings was like the sound of many horse-drawn chariots racing into battle. 10They had tails like scorpions, with stingers; with their tails they had power to harm people for five months. 11They had as their king the angel of the abyss, whose name in Hebrew is Abaddon and in Greek Apollyon.

12The first woe has passed, but there are two more to come.

### 9:13-21 - Sixth trumpet (second woe)

If one thought the death and destruction described in the previous section was bad, it was nothing compared with this section's narrative. But the point is the same: it's going to be bad for the bad guys. Beyond that comment, I'll quote a professional scripture scholar: The description here is purposely veiled and mysterious. And to me it remains a mystery.

The point in verses 20 and 21 is that, instead of repenting when faced with the destruction of the bad guys, they continued to sin.

13Then the sixth angel blew his trumpet, and I heard a voice coming from the [four] horns of the gold altar before God, 14telling the sixth angel who held the trumpet, "Release the four angels who are bound at the banks of the great river Euphrates." 15So the four angels were released, who were prepared for this hour, day, month, and year to kill a third of the human race. 16The number of cavalry troops was two hundred million; I heard their number. 17Now in my vision this is how I saw the horses and their riders. They wore red, blue, and yellow breastplates, and the horses' heads were like heads of lions, and out of their mouths came fire, smoke, and sulfur. 18By these three plagues of fire, smoke, and sulfur that came out of their mouths a third of the human race was killed. 19For the power of the horses is in their mouths and in their tails; for their tails are like snakes, with heads that inflict harm.

20The rest of the human race, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands, to give up the worship of demons and idols made from gold, silver, bronze, stone, and wood, which cannot see or hear or walk. 21Nor did they repent of their murders, their magic potions, their unchastity, or their robberies.

### 10:1-11 - Interlude (small scroll)

As with the case with the seals in Chapter 6, so here too, prior to the last trumpet two episodes are interjected. The seventh trumpet will not be sounded until 11:15. This first interjection is of an angel like a giant colossus with one foot on the land and the other on the sea. It is an angel or the glorified Christ. In his hand is a small scroll which has already been opened. The loud voice in which he speaks is accompanied by the seven thunders. Whatever it is the thunders said we don't know, because John was forbidden to write it down. The giant Jesus or angel says that the time of fulfillment has come. When the seventh trumpet sounds, the mysterious plan of God will be revealed.

Our seer is told to take the small scroll and eat it. It will be sweet tasting in his mouth, but it will turn his stomach sour. The sweet taste is the pleasant news of the victory of the faithful; the sour stomach is the bitter news of the painful disaster which is coming on the world, which the seer must prophesy about peoples, nations, tongues and kings.

1Then I saw another mighty angel come down from heaven wrapped in a cloud, with a halo around his head; his face was like the sun and his feet were like pillars of fire. 2In his hand he held a small scroll that had been opened. He placed his right foot on the sea and his left foot on the land, 3and then he cried out in a loud voice as a lion roars. When he cried out, the seven thunders raised their voices, too. 4When the seven thunders had spoken, I was about to write it down; but I heard a voice from heaven say, "Seal up what the seven thunders have spoken, but do not write it down." 5Then the angel I saw standing on the sea and on the land raised his right hand to heaven 6and swore by the one who lives forever and ever, who created heaven and earth and sea and all that is in them, "There shall be no more delay. 7At the time when you hear the seventh angel blow his trumpet, the mysterious plan of God shall be fulfilled, as he promised to his servants the prophets."

8Then the voice that I had heard from heaven spoke to me again and said, "Go, take the scroll that lies open in the hand of the angel who is standing on the sea and on the land." 9So I went up to the angel and told him to give me the small scroll. He said to me, "Take and swallow it. It will turn your stomach sour, but in your mouth it will taste as sweet as honey." 10I took the small scroll from the angel's hand and swallowed it. In my mouth it was like sweet honey, but when I had eaten it, my stomach turned sour. 11Then someone said to me, "You must prophesy again about many peoples, nations, tongues, and kings."

#### 11:1-14 - The two witnesses

In the Jewish law, and in the Christian practice (Mark 6:7, and John 8:17) it is on the testimony of two witnesses that some assertion can be verified.

In this passage our seer has really allowed his imagination to roam to a host of possibilities for the meaning of what he is writing.

The command to measure the temple, but only the inner sanctuary, not the outer Court of the Gentiles, is a symbol of God's protection of the faithful, in contrast to the trampling of the outer court, which may refer to the destruction of the Jerusalem temple, or even to the entire Jewish law and worship. The Christians are protected, the rest are destroyed. Forty-two months is half of seven years; half of seven is symbolic of very imperfect things.

Who are the two witnesses? There are quite a few possibilities, some or all of which the author may have had in mind. In Zechariah 4:1-4, Zerubbabel and Joshua are referred to as olive trees. Other possibilities are Peter and Paul who were martyred, and Moses and Elijah. Whoever the author might be referring to, they preach powerfully and successfully, until the beast comes up and kills them. The beast is almost always Rome. Their bodies lie in the streets for three and a half days (again, half of seven) so the killers must have been Gentiles, because Jews would bury the dead on the day they died. It is probably Rome that our author has in mind as the murderers. But after another three and a half days, God's breath enlivens the corpses, and they are taken up into heaven. After their ascent an earthquake happened which caused the seven thousand to be killed, and the rest glorified God.

1Then I was given a measuring rod like a staff and I was told, "Come and measure the temple of God and the altar, and count those who are worshiping in it. 2But exclude the outer court of the temple; do not measure it, for it has been handed over to the Gentiles, who will trample the holy city for forty-two months. 3I will commission my two witnesses to prophesy for those twelve hundred and sixty days, wearing sackcloth." 4These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth. 5If anyone wants to harm them, fire comes out of their

mouths and devours their enemies. In this way, anyone wanting to harm them is sure to be slain. 6They have the power to close up the sky so that no rain can fall during the time of their prophesying. They also have power to turn water into blood and to afflict the earth with any plague as often as they wish.

7When they have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up from the abyss will wage war against them and conquer them and kill them. 8Their corpses will lie in the main street of the great city, which has the symbolic names "Sodom" and "Egypt," where indeed their Lord was crucified. 9Those from every people, tribe, tongue, and nation will gaze on their corpses for three and a half days, and they will not allow their corpses to be buried. 10The inhabitants of the earth will gloat over them and be glad and exchange gifts because these two prophets tormented the inhabitants of the earth. 11But after the three and a half days, a breath of life from God entered them. When they stood on their feet, great fear fell on those who saw them. 12Then they heard a loud voice from heaven say to them, "Come up here." So they went up to heaven in a cloud as their enemies looked on. 13At that moment there was a great earthquake, and a tenth of the city fell in ruins. Seven thousand people were killed during the earthquake; the rest were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven.

14The second woe has passed, but the third is coming soon.

### 11:15-19 - Seventh trumpet (third woe?)

Recall that the writer of this book wanted to elicit from his readers and hearers an emotional response to what he describes. So, if you feel as though he has just dragged us through a war zone of tragedy and struggle made up of seals and trumpets and what they reveal, it is now time to relax. The seventh trumpet declares that victory is within grasp. Back in 10:7 we read: "At the time when you hear the seventh angel blow his trumpet, the mysterious plan of God shall be fulfilled, as he promised to his servants the prophets." That time to rejoice has come. And we are provided with a hymn with which to do so.

The loud voices proclaim that the world now belongs to God and his Anointed, and he shall reign forever. And the twenty-four elders proclaim God's power and glory.

15Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet. There were loud voices in heaven, saying, "The kingdom of the world now belongs to our Lord and to his Anointed, and he will reign forever and ever." 16The twenty-four elders who sat on their thrones before God prostrated themselves and worshiped God 17and said:

"We give thanks to you, Lord God almighty,  
who are and who were.  
For you have assumed your great power  
and have established your reign.  
18The nations raged,  
but your wrath has come,  
and the time for the dead to be judged,  
and to recompense your servants, the prophets,  
and the holy ones and those who fear your name,  
the small and the great alike,  
and to destroy those who destroy the earth."

19Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant could be seen in the temple. There were flashes of lightning, rumblings, and peals of thunder, an earthquake, and a violent hailstorm.

This concludes the first part of the Book of Revelation. In some instances our author has already identified the death of Jesus as his glorification, and therefore the victory of his followers, who may well follow Jesus to their deaths. This writing is contemporary with the writing of the Gospel according to John. It is doubtful that our author had any contact with that gospel, but he shares the same vision as the author of the Gospel. From this point on in the Book of Revelation, it is important to keep in our minds that for our author, victory comes through the cross. Victory

does not mean avoiding the cross and death; it means being faithful unto death, both for Jesus and for his followers.

One scholarly commentator maintains that throughout Chapters 12 to 18, which contain narrations of battle between the forces of good and those of evil, all that God does is done for the salvation of all, even those who would be God's enemies. The "wrath" of God is displayed against those who would be God's enemies, but always for the sake of their conversion. My own opinion is divided. I share this commentator's penchant for conceiving God as always a saving God. I'm not sure I can share that commentator's belief that the author of Revelation shares our view.

#### 12:1-14:20 - The woman, the dragon, the beasts and the lamb

This is all one long drama. I will break it up into its various scenes, but the understanding of it must take into consideration all the scenes together. Among the things which might impress one who reads or listens to this section is the wealth of knowledge our writer had of the Old Testament. The images throughout the narrative refer back to the Hebrew scriptures.

Even though Chapters 12 to 14 narrate one fast-moving drama, in each small segment I will alert you to the passages from the Old Testament from which the images are taken. Hang on; this is a wild, whirlwind ride. As you read these three chapters, imagine that you were a First Century persecuted Christian, and ask yourself what message might you have received by the end of this wild ride.

#### 12:1-2 - The woman

The woman with the sun and moon and stars is Israel. Our author is recalling Genesis 37:9, where Joseph tells his father and brothers of his dream: "The sun and the moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me." The descendants of Joseph and his brothers made up the twelve tribes of Israel. She, Israel, is giving birth to the messiah.

<sup>1</sup>A great sign appeared in the sky, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. <sup>2</sup>She was with child and wailed aloud in pain as she labored to give birth.

#### 12:3-6 - The dragon

Such a creature is portrayed as God's opponent throughout Isaiah and the Book of Job. In verse 9 we will learn that the dragon is Satan. Our author is recalling the "ten horns" from Daniel 7:7. The seven diadems indicate great power. In this short passage our author is heavily influenced by Greco-Roman mythology about the birth of Apollo, whose mother was also pursued before she gave birth to him, and whom a dragon wanted to kill. Both Emperors Augustus and Nero assumed the personage of Apollo, explicitly claiming that they would introduce the golden age to the Roman Empire. Our author is reversing the claim that the emperors would make the nation great. The messiah would restore the nation; the emperors are personified as the devil who will attempt to destroy the nation.

In mentioning the birth pangs of the woman he is recalling the passage from Micah 4:9-10. "You are seized with pains like a woman in labor."

Our author is recalling some of the images from Genesis 3:15-16. “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; They will strike at your head, while you strike at their heel. To the woman he said: I will intensify your toil in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children.” The bit about the dragon sweeping away the stars is from Daniel 8:10. God will, however, protect Israel, at least the new Israel.

The woman, who originally personified Israel, is now personifying the church, which after Jesus has been taken up to heaven, must wait in the desert until the parousia, and Jesus’ final return.

3Then another sign appeared in the sky; it was a huge red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on its heads were seven diadems. 4Its tail swept away a third of the stars in the sky and hurled them down to the earth. Then the dragon stood before the woman about to give birth, to devour her child when she gave birth. 5She gave birth to a son, a male child, destined to rule all the nations with an iron rod. Her child was caught up to God and his throne. 6The woman herself fled into the desert where she had a place prepared by God, that there she might be taken care of for twelve hundred and sixty days.

### 12:7-9 - Interlude with Michael

In the New Testament, Michael shows up in only one other place: in the letter of Jude. But he is mentioned frequently in the Book of Daniel. Michael and his angels throw the dragon and his angels out of heaven and down to the earth. This gets Satan down on the earth where he teams up with two beasts in Chapter 13.

7Then war broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels battled against the dragon. The dragon and its angels fought back, 8but they did not prevail and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. 9The huge dragon, the ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, who deceived the whole world, was thrown down to earth, and its angels were thrown down with it.

### 12:10-12 - The voice

An identified voice gives a sort of narrative about what has gone on in 12:7-9, and what will be narrated in 12:13-17. “The accuser of our brothers” is the devil. He has been thrown out of the heavenly court. The irony here is that the Roman courts have condemned Christians because of “the word of their testimony,” but in the heavenly court they are vindicated, even if they have suffered martyrdom. But the voice warns the earth and the sea that the devil has now come down upon them.

10Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say:  
“Now have salvation and power come,  
and the kingdom of our God  
and the authority of his Anointed.  
For the accuser of our brothers is cast out,  
who accuses them before our God day and night.  
11They conquered him by the blood of the Lamb  
and by the word of their testimony;  
love for life did not deter them from death.  
12Therefore, rejoice, you heavens,  
and you who dwell in them.

But woe to you, earth and sea,  
for the Devil has come down to you in great fury,  
for he knows he has but a short time.”

### 12:13-18 - The angry devil

Now the dragon has been hurled down to earth, and it goes after the woman. But the woman is given eagle wings, the power and swiftness of divine help, as God described his saving help to Moses in Exodus 19:4 (You have seen how I treated the Egyptians and how I bore you up on eagles’ wings.) and Deuteronomy 32:11 (As an eagle incites its nestlings, hovering over its young, so he spread his wings, took them, and bore them upon his pinions.) and in Isaiah in 40:31 (They that hope in the Lord will renew their strength, they will soar on eagles’ wings.).

The woman goes into the desert, and the serpent spews water to sweep the woman away, but the earth swallowed up the water, thus frustrating the dragon. So he decides to go after the woman’s offspring, namely the Christians. Remember, in the mind of our author, the Devil is the dragon or the serpent. He takes his stand on the sand of the sea; and from the sea the first beast will arise.

13When the dragon saw that it had been thrown down to the earth, it pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child. 14But the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle, so that she could fly to her place in the desert, where, far from the serpent, she was taken care of for a year, two years, and a half-year. 15The serpent, however, spewed a torrent of water out of his mouth after the woman to sweep her away with the current. 16But the earth helped the woman and opened its mouth and swallowed the flood that the dragon spewed out of its mouth. 17Then the dragon became angry with the woman and went off to wage war against the rest of her offspring, those who keep God’s commandments and bear witness to Jesus. 18It took its position on the sand of the sea.

### 13:1-10 - The first beast from the sea

The first beast comes from the sea, and is an ally of the dragon. The sea in Old Testament writing is frequently a hostile element, and the home of evil. The beast has horns and heads like the dragon (12:3). Seven heads means fullness of power and might – a totalitarian state. On each head is a blasphemous name – the titles the Roman emperors had taken for themselves, including Domitian who claimed the titles “Lord and god.” The beast is the Roman Empire, whom our author sees as in the service of Satan, and whom he describes in terms taken from Chapter 7 of the Book of Daniel. The blasphemous names on the seven heads are seven Roman emperors. The dragon empowers the beast, in other words, the devil empowers the Roman Empire. The emperor who was mortally wounded refers to Nero, who reportedly received a self-inflicted wound of a dagger. The current emperor, Domitian, might be considered Nero reincarnated, because he was equally bad.

This is the fourth time we hear of something lasting for forty-two months: 11:2 – the trampling of the Gentiles; 11:3 – the prophesying of the two witnesses; and 12:6, 14 – the time the woman spent in the wilderness. It means three and a half years, the approximate time of the persecution of the Jews by Antiochus IV, and therefore a symbol terrible times.

The beast’s propaganda caused all people to worship the devil. All, that is, except the holy ones whose names are written in the book of life. The things written at the end of the section simply mean that what will happen will happen, and what is required is faithful endurance.

1Then I saw a beast come out of the sea with ten horns and seven heads; on its horns were ten diadems, and on its heads blasphemous name[s]. 2The beast I saw was like a leopard, but it had feet like a bear's, and its mouth was like the mouth of a lion. To it the dragon gave its own power and throne, along with great authority. 3I saw that one of its heads seemed to have been mortally wounded, but this mortal wound was healed. Fascinated, the whole world followed after the beast. 4They worshiped the dragon because it gave its authority to the beast; they also worshiped the beast and said, "Who can compare with the beast or who can fight against it?"

5The beast was given a mouth uttering proud boasts and blasphemies, and it was given authority to act for forty-two months. 6It opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling and those who dwell in heaven. 7It was also allowed to wage war against the holy ones and conquer them, and it was granted authority over every tribe, people, tongue, and nation. 8All the inhabitants of the earth will worship it, all whose names were not written from the foundation of the world in the book of life, which belongs to the Lamb who was slain.

9Whoever has ears ought to hear these words.

10Anyone destined for captivity goes into captivity.

Anyone destined to be slain by the sword shall be slain by the sword.

Such is the faithful endurance of the holy ones.

### 13:11-17 - The second beast from the earth

This second beast indicates false prophets who urge the worship of the first beast or its image. These are the Roman minions who do the bidding of Rome and encourage emperor worship. The mortal wound which was healed is again a reference to the Emperor Domitian, who succeeded Nero who killed himself. Domitian is in the same vein as Nero, only even worse. He is "permitted to breathe life into the beast's image" means Domitian is just like Nero, really wicked. The reference to the image stamped on the hands or foreheads is probably a reference to Roman coins which bore the image of the emperor. Without that image they couldn't buy anything.

11Then I saw another beast come up out of the earth; it had two horns like a lamb's but spoke like a dragon. 12It wielded all the authority of the first beast in its sight and made the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose mortal wound had been healed. 13It performed great signs, even making fire come down from heaven to earth in the sight of everyone. 14It deceived the inhabitants of the earth with the signs it was allowed to perform in the sight of the first beast, telling them to make an image for the beast who had been wounded by the sword and revived. 15It was then permitted to breathe life into the beast's image, so that the beast's image could speak and [could] have anyone who did not worship it put to death. 16It forced all the people, small and great, rich and poor, free and slave, to be given a stamped image on their right hands or their foreheads, 17so that no one could buy or sell except one who had the stamped image of the beast's name or the number that stood for its name.

### 13:18 - Nero

In the Hebrew and Latin languages, there are no numerals; letters are substituted for numbers. Our author wants us to know that he is talking about Nero, and his double, Domitian. The letters of Nero's name add up to 666. Another possible meaning is that of complete imperfection, since 7 is the perfect number, and this one falls short of perfection three times, indicating that he is really imperfect.

18Wisdom is needed here; one who understands can calculate the number of the beast, for it is a number that stands for a person. His number is six hundred and sixty-six.

## 14:1-5 - The Lamb's companions

Chapter 13 showed us the beast and his entourage. Chapter 14 shows us the Lamb and his companions. Our author directs his readers and hearers to 2 Kings 19:30-31: "The remaining survivors of the house of Judah shall again strike root below and bear fruit above. For out of Jerusalem shall come a remnant, and from Mount Zion, survivors." The redeemed 144,000 have the name of his Father on their foreheads, contrasting them with those who have the sign of the beast on theirs. The virginity mentioned here is metaphorical, meaning that they have not indulged in idolatry. The harp music is just meant to be a consoling image for the faithful. These are the really good men and women.

These 144,000 have already followed the Lamb; they have been martyred and thereby followed the Lamb to the same kind of victory the Lamb enjoys.

1Then I looked and there was the Lamb standing on Mount Zion, and with him a hundred and forty-four thousand who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads. 2I heard a sound from heaven like the sound of rushing water or a loud peal of thunder. The sound I heard was like that of harpists playing their harps. 3They were singing [what seemed to be] a new hymn before the throne, before the four living creatures and the elders. No one could learn this hymn except the hundred and forty-four thousand who had been ransomed from the earth. 4These are they who were not defiled with women; they are virgins and these are the ones who follow the Lamb wherever he goes. They have been ransomed as the firstfruits of the human race for God and the Lamb. 5On their lips no deceit has been found; they are unblemished.

## 14:6-13 - Three angels and a voice

This is a proclamation of victory not yet achieved, and of encouragement. Fear God and give God glory, for judgement is coming upon the earth. Babylon (Rome) will fall. God's wrath will fall on those who worship the beast or its image. Their punishment will be eternal. This hope is what sustains the faithful, that is, it functions as a scare tactic, not as an invitation for the good people to rejoice over the punishment of others.

The voice assures that the good people have done will stand them in good stead when they appear before the court of God.

6Then I saw another angel flying high overhead, with everlasting good news to announce to those who dwell on earth, to every nation, tribe, tongue, and people. 7He said in a loud voice, "Fear God and give him glory, for his time has come to sit in judgment. Worship him who made heaven and earth and sea and springs of water." 8A second angel followed, saying:

"Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great,  
that made all the nations drink  
the wine of her licentious passion."

9A third angel followed them and said in a loud voice, "Anyone who worships the beast or its image, or accepts its mark on forehead or hand, 10will also drink the wine of God's fury, poured full strength into the cup of his wrath, and will be tormented in burning sulfur before the holy angels and before the Lamb. 11The smoke of the fire that torments them will rise forever and ever, and there will be no relief day or night for those who worship the beast or its image or accept the mark of its name." 12Here is what sustains the holy ones who keep God's commandments and their faith in Jesus.

13I heard a voice from heaven say, "Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on." "Yes," said the Spirit, "let them find rest from their labors, for their works accompany them."

## 14:14-20 - Harvest time is at hand

Our author returns to the Book of Daniel for this image of the son of man coming on a cloud, although Daniel has him coming on clouds. Here the term “son of man” is not a title but merely a description indicating that this person is human. Does it refer to Christ? Possibly, but the next verse says “another angel,” so this could also be an angel. The images of the sickles and the winepress are taken from the Book of Joel, Chapter 4. The notion of harvest and vintage are not synonymous; in fact, they’re opposites. Harvest means salvation; vintage means judgement.

This segment clearly indicates a battle. That battle will not be spelled out completely until 19:19, but here notice has been served, and the final battle has been announced.

14Then I looked and there was a white cloud, and sitting on the cloud one who looked like a son of man, with a gold crown on his head and a sharp sickle in his hand. 15Another angel came out of the temple, crying out in a loud voice to the one sitting on the cloud, “Use your sickle and reap the harvest, for the time to reap has come, because the earth’s harvest is fully ripe.” 16So the one who was sitting on the cloud swung his sickle over the earth, and the earth was harvested.

17Then another angel came out of the temple in heaven who also had a sharp sickle. 18Then another angel [came] from the altar, [who] was in charge of the fire, and cried out in a loud voice to the one who had the sharp sickle, “Use your sharp sickle and cut the clusters from the earth’s vines, for its grapes are ripe.” 19So the angel swung his sickle over the earth and cut the earth’s vintage. He threw it into the great wine press of God’s fury. 20The wine press was trodden outside the city and blood poured out of the wine press to the height of a horse’s bridle for two hundred miles.

## 15:1-8 - The seven plagues

Things are beginning to reach their climax. God’s salvation and God’s wrath are about to find their accomplishment.

First, in verses 1 through 4, the redeemed are put safely on the sea of glass. They are the faithful ones who have not worshiped the dragon or the beast. They sing the song of Moses. (It’s a short version of the song sung by the Israelites after they had passed safely through the sea that drowned Pharaoh and his army. The song is found in Exodus 15:1-18.)

Then seven angels are given seven plagues and seven bowls to contain them. No one can enter the temple until the seven plagues have been accomplished.

1Then I saw in heaven another sign, great and awe-inspiring: seven angels with the seven last plagues, for through them God’s fury is accomplished.

2Then I saw something like a sea of glass mingled with fire. On the sea of glass were standing those who had won the victory over the beast and its image and the number that signified its name. They were holding God’s harps, 3and they sang the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb:

“Great and wonderful are your works,

Lord God almighty.

Just and true are your ways,

O king of the nations.

4Who will not fear you, Lord,

or glorify your name?

For you alone are holy.

All the nations will come

and worship before you,

for your righteous acts have been revealed.”

5After this I had another vision. The temple that is the heavenly tent of testimony opened, 6and the seven angels with the seven plagues came out of the temple. They were dressed in clean white linen, with a gold sash around their chests. 7One of the four living creatures gave the seven angels seven gold bowls filled with the fury of God, who lives forever and ever. 8Then the temple became so filled with the smoke from God’s glory and might that no one could enter it until the seven plagues of the seven angels had been accomplished.

## 16:1-16 - Pouring out the plagues

All this is reminiscent of the plagues Moses cast on Egypt. The whole idea here is a representation of the Exodus event, when God saved God’s people, and poured out God’s wrath on those who oppose and persecute the Christians.

In verse 2, the plague of festering and ugly sores is on those who gave divine honors to Rome and the emperors. It is an adaptation of the sixth plague which Moses caused to fall on the Egyptians (Exodus 9:8-12).

Verse 3 recalls the first plague on the Egyptians, the sea turned to blood (Exodus 7:14-24).

Verses 4 to 6 recall the Nile turning into blood.

Verses 8 and 9 show the angel pouring the bowl on the sun which scorched the people, but again, they did not repent, rather than blasphemed God.

The first four bowls concern nature: earth, sea, water and sun. The remaining three are more political.

The fifth bowl in verses 10 and 11 concern Rome, the throne of the beast. It recalls the ninth plague in Egypt (Exodus 10:21-29).

Verses 12 to 16 make reference to the kings from the east, across the Euphrates River. These would be the Parthian who harassed the Roman Empire’s eastern border. The frogs recall the plague narrated in Exodus 7:25-8:15. “Blessed is the one who watches and keeps his clothes ready, so that he may not go naked and people see him exposed” means be ready for battle.

The refrain in the last three bowls is that despite the punishment, people only complained; they did not repent.

In verse 16, the place of the upcoming battle is Armageddon. This was a place of many battles, including a great defeat of the Hebrew forces under Josiah (2 Kings 23:29-30), and became a symbol of disaster.

I heard a loud voice speaking from the temple to the seven angels, “Go and pour out the seven bowls of God’s fury upon the earth.”

2The first angel went and poured out his bowl on the earth. Festering and ugly sores broke out on those who had the mark of the beast or worshiped its image.

3The second angel poured out his bowl on the sea. The sea turned to blood like that from a corpse; every creature living in the sea died.

4The third angel poured out his bowl on the rivers and springs of water. These also turned to blood. 5Then I heard the angel in charge of the waters say:

“You are just, O Holy One,  
who are and who were,  
in passing this sentence.

6For they have shed the blood of the holy ones and the prophets,  
and you [have] given them blood to drink;  
it is what they deserve.”

7Then I heard the altar cry out,

“Yes, Lord God almighty,  
your judgments are true and just.”

8The fourth angel poured out his bowl on the sun. It was given the power to burn people with fire. 9People were burned by the scorching heat and blasphemed the name of God who had power over these plagues, but they did not repent or give him glory.

10The fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast. Its kingdom was plunged into darkness, and people bit their tongues in pain 11and blasphemed the God of heaven because of their pains and sores. But they did not repent of their works.

12The sixth angel emptied his bowl on the great river Euphrates. Its water was dried up to prepare the way for the kings of the East. 13I saw three unclean spirits like frogs come from the mouth of the dragon, from the mouth of the beast, and from the mouth of the false prophet. 14These were demonic spirits who performed signs. They went out to the kings of the whole world to assemble them for the battle on the great day of God the almighty. 15(“Behold, I am coming like a thief.” Blessed is the one who watches and keeps his clothes ready, so that he may not go naked and people see him exposed.) 16They then assembled the kings in the place that is named Armageddon in Hebrew.

### 16:17-21 - The seventh bowl

This is the end. A voice from the throne, presumably God’s, declares, “It is done.” This is the last plague. As acknowledgment of the end, there are cosmic eruptions, including an earthquake the likes of which had never before been seen. The great city Babylon – which we know means Rome – is split, and the cities which were accomplices with her fall. Babylon must now drink of the cup of God’s wrath, as back in Chapter 14:8, Babylon “made all the nations drink the wine of her licentious passion.” Other cosmic upheavals occur, but still the people do not repent.

17The seventh angel poured out his bowl into the air. A loud voice came out of the temple from the throne, saying, “It is done.” 18Then there were lightning flashes, rumblings, and peals of thunder, and a great earthquake. It was such a violent earthquake that there has never been one like it since the human race began on earth. 19The great city was split into three parts, and the gentile cities fell. But God remembered great Babylon, giving it the cup filled with the wine of his fury and wrath. 20Every island fled, and mountains disappeared. 21Large hailstones like huge weights came down from the sky on people, and they blasphemed God for the plague of hail because this plague was so severe.

### 17:1-19:10 - The destruction of Babylon (Rome)

These chapters are the victory narration for Christians and the defeat of Rome.

### 17:1-6 - Babylon the Great

What does our author think of Rome? Here it is. She is a harlot. Kings of the earth have had intercourse with her to such an extent that they are drunk with her harlotry. Those are the pagan kings who have subscribed to the cult of the emperor. The many waters will not be made clear until verse 15 when they are identified as the same as the kings who are vassals of Rome. The woman on the scarlet beast is also Rome. She is prosperous because of her abominable deeds in relationship to other nations.

1Then one of the seven angels who were holding the seven bowls came and said to me, “Come here. I will show you the judgment on the great harlot who lives near the many waters. 2The kings of the earth have had intercourse with her, and the inhabitants of the earth became drunk on the wine of her harlotry.” 3Then he carried me

away in spirit to a deserted place where I saw a woman seated on a scarlet beast that was covered with blasphemous names, with seven heads and ten horns. 4The woman was wearing purple and scarlet and adorned with gold, precious stones, and pearls. She held in her hand a gold cup that was filled with the abominable and sordid deeds of her harlotry. 5On her forehead was written a name, which is a mystery, "Babylon the great, the mother of harlots and of the abominations of the earth." 6I saw that the woman was drunk on the blood of the holy ones and on the blood of the witnesses to Jesus.

When I saw her I was greatly amazed.

## 17:7-18 - The meaning of the beast and the harlot

It is unusual for our author to give the meaning of his allegorical writing. He does so here, but the meaning he gives also needs a bit of interpretation. The beast in verse 8 refers to Nero. He was, and now he's dead. But Domitian is like Nero come to life, and he too is headed for destruction. The clue is the seven hills on which Rome is built. And seven also stands for a succession of emperors, and the one who is emperor now is also headed for destruction. The kings will fight with the Lamb, but the Lamb will conquer them all. The beast in verse 11 is Nero.

In verse 16, the ten horns are ten pagan kings who will march against Rome. In Roman lore, these will be led by the re-enlivened Nero. God is defeating Rome through these invaders.

7The angel said to me, "Why are you amazed? I will explain to you the mystery of the woman and of the beast that carries her, the beast with the seven heads and the ten horns. 8The beast that you saw existed once but now exists no longer. It will come up from the abyss and is headed for destruction. The inhabitants of the earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world shall be amazed when they see the beast, because it existed once but exists no longer, and yet it will come again. 9Here is a clue for one who has wisdom. The seven heads represent seven hills upon which the woman sits. They also represent seven kings: 10five have already fallen, one still lives, and the last has not yet come, and when he comes he must remain only a short while. 11The beast that existed once but exists no longer is an eighth king, but really belongs to the seven and is headed for destruction. 12The ten horns that you saw represent ten kings who have not yet been crowned; they will receive royal authority along with the beast for one hour. 13They are of one mind and will give their power and authority to the beast. 14They will fight with the Lamb, but the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and king of kings, and those with him are called, chosen, and faithful."

15Then he said to me, "The waters that you saw where the harlot lives represent large numbers of peoples, nations, and tongues. 16The ten horns that you saw and the beast will hate the harlot; they will leave her desolate and naked; they will eat her flesh and consume her with fire. 17For God has put it into their minds to carry out his purpose and to make them come to an agreement to give their kingdom to the beast until the words of God are accomplished. 18The woman whom you saw represents the great city that has sovereignty over the kings of the earth."

Dear reader,

We have slogged our way through seals and bowls, battles and bloodshed and plagues, visions and prophecies which our author has presented to us. The point of his descriptions has been to evoke from us an emotional response. I will continue the somewhat picayune commentary on passages. However, if you wish to experience the emotional effect and affect which our author wants us to get in Chapters 18 and 19, I suggest that you go on your computer to Google Search and enter "The Ride of the Valkyries" from Wagner's *Ring Cycle*. Select a YouTube version, turn up the volume and read aloud the text of the next two chapters. At the end I think you will have experienced the emotional response our author intended.

## 18:1-19:21 - The fall of Babylon (voices)

Twice before we have read about the destruction of Babylon. In 16:17-19 with the plague of the seventh bowl the destruction was announced. And back in 17:1, we read: Then one of the seven angels who were holding the seven bowls came and said to me, “Come here. I will show you the judgment on the great harlot who lives near the many waters.” Here is that judgement. As is typical of apocalyptic language, the future is presented as already happening. That’s what’s going on here. Things which will happen are spoken of as having already happened.

### 18:1-3 - First voice

#### The proclamation of Babylon’s fall.

1After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven, having great authority, and the earth became illumined by his splendor. 2He cried out in a mighty voice:

“Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great.  
She has become a haunt for demons.  
She is a cage for every unclean spirit,  
a cage for every unclean bird,  
[a cage for every unclean] and disgusting [beast].  
3For all the nations have drunk  
the wine of her licentious passion.  
The kings of the earth had intercourse with her,  
and the merchants of the earth grew rich from her drive for luxury.”

### 18:4-8 - Second voice

The call to depart from Babylon is not a call for an evacuation of the city, but an apocalyptic call for the just to separate from this abomination.

4Then I heard another voice from heaven say:

“Depart from her, my people,  
so as not to take part in her sins  
and receive a share in her plagues,  
5for her sins are piled up to the sky,  
and God remembers her crimes.  
6Pay her back as she has paid others.  
Pay her back double for her deeds.  
Into her cup pour double what she poured.  
7To the measure of her boasting and wantonness  
repay her in torment and grief;  
for she said to herself,  
‘I sit enthroned as queen;  
I am no widow,  
and I will never know grief.’  
8Therefore, her plagues will come in one day,  
pestilence, grief, and famine;  
she will be consumed by fire.  
For mighty is the Lord God who judges her.”

## 18:9-20 - The city's abandonment

Our author foresees that all (kings, merchants, sea captains) will abandon the city, and will consider it right that she should be punished (verse 20). Their fealty to Rome has been based solely on their own self-interest. The mourn for the destruction of the city, not out of love for her, but for the sake of their own loss.

9The kings of the earth who had intercourse with her in their wantonness will weep and mourn over her when they see the smoke of her pyre. 10They will keep their distance for fear of the torment inflicted on her, and they will say:

“Alas, alas, great city,  
Babylon, mighty city.

In one hour your judgment has come.”

11The merchants of the earth will weep and mourn for her, because there will be no more markets for their cargo: 12their cargo of gold, silver, precious stones, and pearls; fine linen, purple silk, and scarlet cloth; fragrant wood of every kind, all articles of ivory and all articles of the most expensive wood, bronze, iron, and marble; 13cinnamon, spice, incense, myrrh, and frankincense; wine, olive oil, fine flour, and wheat; cattle and sheep, horses and chariots, and slaves, that is, human beings.

14“The fruit you craved  
has left you.

All your luxury and splendor are gone,  
never again will one find them.”

15The merchants who deal in these goods, who grew rich from her, will keep their distance for fear of the torment inflicted on her. Weeping and mourning, 16they cry out:

“Alas, alas, great city,  
wearing fine linen, purple and scarlet,  
adorned [in] gold, precious stones, and pearls.

17In one hour this great wealth has been ruined.”

Every captain of a ship, every traveler at sea, sailors, and seafaring merchants stood at a distance 18and cried out when they saw the smoke of her pyre, “What city could compare with the great city?” 19They threw dust on their heads and cried out, weeping and mourning:

“Alas, alas, great city,  
in which all who had ships at sea  
grew rich from her wealth.  
In one hour she has been ruined.  
20Rejoice over her, heaven,  
you holy ones, apostles, and prophets.  
For God has judged your case against her.”

## 18:21-24 - Third voice

The condemning sentence continues.

21A mighty angel picked up a stone like a huge millstone and threw it into the sea and said:

“With such force will Babylon the great city be thrown down,  
and will never be found again.

22No melodies of harpists and musicians,  
flutists and trumpeters,  
will ever be heard in you again.  
No craftsmen in any trade

will ever be found in you again.  
No sound of the millstone  
will ever be heard in you again.  
23No light from a lamp  
will ever be seen in you again.  
No voices of bride and groom  
will ever be heard in you again.

Because your merchants were the great ones of the world,  
all nations were led astray by your magic potion.  
24In her was found the blood of prophets and holy ones  
and all who have been slain on the earth.”

#### 19:1-4 - Fourth voice

There is rejoicing in heaven over the destruction of the city.

1After this I heard what sounded like the loud voice of a great multitude in heaven, saying:

“Alleluia!  
Salvation, glory, and might belong to our God,  
2for true and just are his judgments.  
He has condemned the great harlot  
who corrupted the earth with her harlotry.  
He has avenged on her the blood of his servants.”

3They said a second time:

“Alleluia! Smoke will rise from her forever and ever.”

4The twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshiped God who sat on the throne, saying,  
“Amen. Alleluia.”

#### 19:5-10 - Fifth voice: Victory

The entire community of believers sings praise to God because of the marriage of the Lamb.

5A voice coming from the throne said:

“Praise our God, all you his servants,  
[and] you who revere him, small and great.”

6Then I heard something like the sound of a great multitude or the sound of rushing water or mighty peals of thunder,  
as they said:

“Alleluia!  
The Lord has established his reign,  
[our] God, the almighty.  
7Let us rejoice and be glad  
and give him glory.  
For the wedding day of the Lamb has come,  
his bride has made herself ready.  
8She was allowed to wear  
a bright, clean linen garment.”

(The linen represents the righteous deeds of the holy ones.)

9Then the angel said to me, “Write this: Blessed are those who have been called to the wedding feast of the Lamb.” And he said to me, “These words are true; they come from God.” 10I fell at his feet to worship him. But he said to me, “Don’t! I am a fellow servant of yours and of your brothers who bear witness to Jesus. Worship God. Witness to Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.”

## 19:11-22:5 - Visions of the last things

There are eight visions in this section. Little commentary is required, although much has been made. But it is usually made in the subjunctive voice: might, maybe, perhaps, possibly, etc. I choose, for the most part, simply to read the text with a heart filled with hopeful expectation. That's what our author intended to convey. The New American Bible, Revised Edition contains footnotes which identify all the allusions our author makes in his descriptions of the events which follow. I will not incorporate those references in my commentary.

One could just read this whole section aloud with Handel's *Alleluia Chorus* playing in the background, and by so doing would get the message our author wants to convey.

## 19:11-16 - The second coming of Christ

Isaiah 63:16 seems to be the model on which this section is based. In Isaiah, the prophet is alone in his battle with evil; here the risen Lord leads an army. The cloak dipped in blood shows up in the Isaiah passage also.

11Then I saw the heavens opened, and there was a white horse; its rider was [called] "Faithful and True." He judges and wages war in righteousness. 12His eyes were [like] a fiery flame, and on his head were many diadems. He had a name inscribed that no one knows except himself. 13He wore a cloak that had been dipped in blood, and his name was called the Word of God. 14The armies of heaven followed him, mounted on white horses and wearing clean white linen. 15Out of his mouth came a sharp sword to strike the nations. He will rule them with an iron rod, and he himself will tread out in the wine press the wine of the fury and wrath of God the almighty. 16He has a name written on his cloak and on his thigh, "King of kings and Lord of lords."

## 19:17-18 - Call to the banquet

This is anticipating the victory which will be described in the following verses.

17Then I saw an angel standing on the sun. He cried out [in] a loud voice to all the birds flying high overhead, "Come here. Gather for God's great feast, 18to eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of military officers, and the flesh of warriors, the flesh of horses and of their riders, and the flesh of all, free and slave, small and great."

## 19:19-21 - The final battle

19Then I saw the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies gathered to fight against the one riding the horse and against his army. 20The beast was caught and with it the false prophet who had performed in its sight the signs by which he led astray those who had accepted the mark of the beast and those who had worshiped its image. The two were thrown alive into the fiery pool burning with sulfur. 21The rest were killed by the sword that came out of the mouth of the one riding the horse, and all the birds gorged themselves on their flesh.

## 20:1-3 - The binding of Satan

1Then I saw an angel come down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the abyss and a heavy chain. 2He seized the dragon, the ancient serpent, which is the Devil or Satan, and tied it up for a thousand years 3and threw

it into the abyss, which he locked over it and sealed, so that it could no longer lead the nations astray until the thousand years are completed. After this, it is to be released for a short time.

#### 20:4-10 - The thousand year

Gog and Magog was probably only one person. He led an army against Israel and defeated them. But later he was defeated in battle. They appear in Ezekiel, Chapters 38 and 39. The point here is that there was carnage which the birds of the air ate. Gog and Magog became a symbol of destruction. Our author conceives of two judgments of which this is the first. The second one is found in the following section.

I am amused by the commentary of one scholar who wrote: “This passage has been controversial among Christians from the early church up to the present day.” However, the judges are not identified, but speculation suggests that they are those who “came to life and they reigned with Christ for a thousand years” (verse 5). The author of the Book of Revelation is alone in his positing two resurrections; such an idea is absent from both Jewish and Christian traditions. His intent seems to be to give the Christian dead a leg up on the rest of the world.

4Then I saw thrones; those who sat on them were entrusted with judgment. I also saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their witness to Jesus and for the word of God, and who had not worshiped the beast or its image nor had accepted its mark on their foreheads or hands. They came to life and they reigned with Christ for a thousand years. 5The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were over. This is the first resurrection. 6Blessed and holy is the one who shares in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over these; they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him for [the] thousand years.

7When the thousand years are completed, Satan will be released from his prison. 8He will go out to deceive the nations at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them for battle; their number is like the sand of the sea. 9They invaded the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of the holy ones and the beloved city. But fire came down from heaven and consumed them. 10The Devil who had led them astray was thrown into the pool of fire and sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet were. There they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.

#### 20:11-15 - The last judgement

This is the second or general judgement. Two impressions are deftly joined. There is election by God, and there is the responsibility of the individual for his or her actions as recorded in the book.

11Next I saw a large white throne and the one who was sitting on it. The earth and the sky fled from his presence and there was no place for them. 12I saw the dead, the great and the lowly, standing before the throne, and scrolls were opened. Then another scroll was opened, the book of life. The dead were judged according to their deeds, by what was written in the scrolls. 13The sea gave up its dead; then Death and Hades gave up their dead. All the dead were judged according to their deeds. 14Then Death and Hades were thrown into the pool of fire. (This pool of fire is the second death.) 15Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the pool of fire.

#### 21:1-8 - New heavens and new earth and new Jerusalem

1Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth. The former heaven and the former earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. 2I also saw the holy city, a new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, God’s dwelling is with the

human race. He will dwell with them and they will be his people and God himself will always be with them [as their God]. 4He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there shall be no more death or mourning, wailing or pain, [for] the old order has passed away.”

5The one who sat on the throne said, “Behold, I make all things new.” Then he said, “Write these words down, for they are trustworthy and true.” 6He said to me, “They are accomplished. I [am] the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give a gift from the spring of life-giving water. 7The victor will inherit these gifts, and I shall be his God, and he will be my son. 8But as for cowards, the unfaithful, the depraved, murderers, the unchaste, sorcerers, idol-worshippers, and deceivers of every sort, their lot is in the burning pool of fire and sulfur, which is the second death.”

## 21:9-22:5 - The new Jerusalem

In verse 22, there is no temple in the new Jerusalem, because the risen Lord is present throughout the whole church; there is no need for one location. Nor is there need for sun; the glory of God and the lamp of the Lamb illuminate the city.

In verses 19 and 20 the stones mentioned were on the breastplate of the high priest. In verse 27, what had been true of the sanctuary in the temple is now true of the entire city: nothing unclean shall enter it.

9One of the seven angels who held the seven bowls filled with the seven last plagues came and **said** to me, “Come here. I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.” 10He took me in spirit to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. 11It gleamed with the splendor of God. Its radiance was like that of a precious stone, like jasper, clear as crystal. 12It had a massive, high wall, with twelve gates where twelve angels were stationed and on which names were inscribed, [the names] of the twelve tribes of the Israelites. 13There were three gates facing east, three north, three south, and three west. 14The wall of the city had twelve courses of stones as its foundation, on which were inscribed the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

15The one who spoke to me held a gold measuring rod to measure the city, its gates, and its wall. 16The city was square, its length the same as [also] its width. He measured the city with the rod and found it fifteen hundred miles in length and width and height. 17He also measured its wall: one hundred and forty-four cubits according to the standard unit of measurement the angel used. 18The wall was constructed of jasper, while the city was pure gold, clear as glass. 19The foundations of the city wall were decorated with every precious stone; the first course of stones was jasper, the second sapphire, the third chalcedony, the fourth emerald, 20the fifth sardonyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh hyacinth, and the twelfth amethyst. 21The twelve gates were twelve pearls, each of the gates made from a single pearl; and the street of the city was of pure gold, transparent as glass.

22I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God almighty and the Lamb. 23The city had no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gave it light, and its lamp was the Lamb. 24The nations will walk by its light, and to it the kings of the earth will bring their treasure. 25During the day its gates will never be shut, and there will be no night there. 26The treasure and wealth of the nations will be brought there, 27but nothing unclean will enter it, nor any[one] who does abominable things or tells lies. Only those will enter whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life.

22:1Then the angel showed me the river of life-giving water, sparkling like crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb 2down the middle of its street. On either side of the river grew the tree of life that produces fruit twelve times a year, once each month; the leaves of the trees serve as medicine for the nations. 3Nothing accursed will be found there anymore. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. 4They will look upon his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. 5Night will be no more, nor will they need light from lamp or sun, for the Lord God shall give them light, and they shall reign forever and ever.

## 22:6-21 - Epilogue

This revelation is not to be kept secret, as were some of the revelations to the prophets of old. This is to be publicized to all.

6And he said to me, "These words are trustworthy and true, and the Lord, the God of prophetic spirits, sent his angel to show his servants what must happen soon."

7"Behold, I am coming soon." Blessed is the one who keeps the prophetic message of this book.

8It is I, John, who heard and saw these things, and when I heard and saw them I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who showed them to me. 9But he said to me, "Don't! I am a fellow servant of yours and of your brothers the prophets and of those who keep the message of this book. Worship God."

10Then he said to me, "Do not seal up the prophetic words of this book, for the appointed time is near. 11Let the wicked still act wickedly, and the filthy still be filthy. The righteous must still do right, and the holy still be holy."

12"Behold, I am coming soon. I bring with me the recompense I will give to each according to his deeds. 13I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end."

14Blessed are they who wash their robes so as to have the right to the tree of life and enter the city through its gates. 15Outside are the dogs, the sorcerers, the unchaste, the murderers, the idol-worshippers, and all who love and practice deceit.

16"I, Jesus, sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches. I am the root and offspring of David, the bright morning star."

17The Spirit and the bride say, "Come." Let the hearer say, "Come." Let the one who thirsts come forward, and the one who wants it receive the gift of life-giving water.

18I warn everyone who hears the prophetic words in this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, 19and if anyone takes away from the words in this prophetic book, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city described in this book.

20The one who gives this testimony says, "Yes, I am coming soon." Amen! Come, Lord Jesus!

21The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all.