

Finding the Gospel in the Bible

Finding the Gospel in the Bible

Then Jesus told him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed;
blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

John 20:29

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Preface

The masterful work, "A Harmony of the Gospels," by Dr. A. T. Robertson, gave me a new perspective on the life of Jesus and his ministry, seeing it over time rather than as a series of disconnected events. As Dr. Robertson says in his Preface, "One who has never read a harmony will be amazed at the flood of light that flashes from the parallel and progressive records of the life of Jesus Christ." As I followed Dr. Robertson's text, I felt that I came to have a greater understanding of Jesus's mission and Jesus as a person.

This led me to want to follow the gospel message as revealed progressively through Scripture, for the benefit of seekers interested in learning about the Christian faith, and anyone interested in the life of Jesus. This required looking at Jesus's qualifications to be the Messiah, prophetically and in life, his claims to be the Messiah, and his character as a person.

I have used Dr. Robertson's chronological framework to guide me in the selection of verses. The biblical record of Jesus's ministry is a long one and therefore impossible to cover completely in a work of this scope. I have probably omitted some verses which would be helpful and included others which could have been passed over. I take responsibility for this, and only ask that the reader join me in learning what we can from the verses.

I hope that the passages we will look at in the following pages will be adequate to convey a better understanding of our subject, the gospel message. Because context is very important in reading Scripture with understanding, I encourage every reader to read more than just the quoted text. Whether just enough before to understand the setting, or the chapter to get a better feeling of what is taking place, reading any amount of Scripture will be beneficial. See Appendix B.

This narrative is based on the premise that the Bible is a reliable record of God's interactions with humankind, and that God is the creator of the heavens and the Earth, sovereign over his Creation; the God of Abraham, Moses, the Prophets, and Jesus, with a plan for humankind.

That view could be a stretch or simply foreign to some people interested in learning about the Christian faith, and if that is you don't stop here. The history of Christianity is not as important for you to know as it is for you to know that the God who created the universe also created you individually, especially, and wants to have a relationship with you. The way to begin that relationship is through the gospel, which means the "good news." For those who are atheists or skeptics, try to approach this material with what Samuel Taylor Coleridge called a "willing suspension of disbelief," by allowing yourself to be drawn into the narrative as presented.

It is not possible to precisely date the years of Jesus's conception or birth. Dr. Robertson provided several analyses used to determine those dates, and I have followed his leading. The dates are provided to give the reader a historical context and not as precise dates. The various passages are intended to be arranged in a chronological order but there are questions about dating which make certainty impossible, and events may not follow the same order as in the Gospel books.

Any errors of fact or interpretation in this work are my responsibility.

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There are some words that will figure prominently in the texts that I thought would be helpful to look at now:

Messiah - "Messiah" comes from the Hebrew word *mashiach*, meaning "anointed one." This refers to the practice of anointing with oil someone who is appointed for a special purpose. The person of the Messiah is shown prophetically through Scripture in the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament to Christians. This means that God guided the human prophets to say and record the words that he wanted them to say, looking forward to future events. At times they looked forward to the coming Messiah and wrote about him. The Messiah was revealed as a ruler sent by God, from the earthly line of King David, who will restore the nation of Israel and the rest of the world from the consequences of "the Fall," (both original and imputed sin).

The Messiah is described both as a conquering king and as a suffering servant. In Jesus's time, some Jews expected the Messiah to overthrow the Roman occupation of Israel and defeat their enemies.

The Greek word for Messiah is *Christos*, from which we get the English word Christ. The redemptive mission of the Messiah is not limited to the people of Israel but extends to the entire world. This document uses Messiah more often than Christ; however, you can read Christ in place of Messiah if you prefer.

Gospel - "Gospel" is an English word meaning "good news," from Old English "god spel," good story or message. The Greek word being translated as "gospel" is *euaggelion* (yoo-ang-ghel'-ee-on): good news.

Repent - "Repent" is the English translation of the Greek word *metanoéo*, to change one's mind or purpose. Literally "think differently after," so that to "repent" is to "think differently afterwards" or change your mind. For example, someone might be planning to bungee jump for the first time. As they approach the edge of the platform, something changes in their thinking that they say, "Wait! I've changed my mind! I don't want to jump anymore!" They have "repented" of their desire to bungee jump.

The Christian concept of repentance for the forgiveness of sins has more layers of meaning. It involves a simultaneous spiritual and rational participation which has been much discussed. The following is accurate but concise:

The call to repentance is in the name of the Messiah, Jesus, meaning it is based on his reputation and authority.

This change of mind involves changing one's thinking about sin and about Jesus. You realize, recognize, and decide that:

- God's way is right.
- You have not followed that way; you are guilty of sin.
- You want to do what is right.

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- Jesus, the Messiah, was from God and was sent by God to offer forgiveness for sin through faith in his name.
- You put your faith in Jesus, believing that he will forgive you for your sin.

Repentance for the forgiveness of sin in the name of the Messiah, Jesus.

Believe - "Believe" is the English translation of the Greek verb *pisteuó*: to believe, entrust.

Faith - "Faith" is the English translation of the Greek noun *pistis*: faith, faithfulness. *Pistis* is related to "believe" (*pisteuó*) above. The verb "believe" (*pisteuó*) leads to "faith" (*pistis*) the noun.

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Chapter One

The Pre-incarnate Christ, the Fall, the Battle with Sin

Scene: Eternity Past. The "beginning" of Genesis 1. Everything was in darkness, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the timeless, infinite Deep.

John 1:1-5

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was with God in the beginning. 3 Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. 4 In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

In John's Gospel we see Jesus before being born as a human. The "beginning" is the same as in Genesis 1: Eternity past. John said, "the Word was with God, and the Word was God." How can a person be with someone and also be that other one? Humans like to organize things and it is hard for us to categorize something that is two things at once. Because God exists outside our frame of reference, it is no problem for him.

The Word was the agent of Creation. The Creation was made through him. Couldn't God just have created everything himself? Yes. That is what he did.

John called him "the Word," but the Greek word he used is "Logos," which has a further meaning than a group of characters. In Greek philosophy, "Logos" connoted reason and discourse. It is derived from the Greek word '*lego*,' meaning "I say."

Imagine that when God said "Let there be light" he did so through the eternal Word: the great I AM speaking the Universe into existence through the Divine I SAY.

John 1:14 tells us that "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." This is Jesus.

Scene: Mesopotamia somewhere in the region of the Tigris and Euphrates River basin.

Genesis 2:15-17, 22-25, 3:1-12

15 The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. 16 And the Lord God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; 17 but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die."

22 Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. 23 The man said,

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“This is now bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called ‘woman,’
for she was taken out of man.”

24 That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh. 25 Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.

3:1 Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden?’”

2 The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, 3 but God did say, ‘You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.’”

4 “You will not certainly die,” the serpent said to the woman. 5 “For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

6 When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. 7 Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.

8 Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. 9 But the Lord God called to the man, “Where are you?”

10 He answered, “I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.”

11 And he said, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?”

12 The man said, “The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.”

“Who told you that you were naked?” This is the transition from innocence to guilt and shame. Eve has been criticized for appearing to have expanded God's commandment to include touching as well as eating. Adam was put in the garden and received the commandment before Eve was created, and it may have been Adam who added the prohibition against touching the fruit when he told Eve about the commandment. He was with her when she took it and apparently did not say anything. And they both ate it. Adam's shame caused him to attempt to turn blame back on God, saying that his own failure was because of “The woman you [God] put here with me.”

Adam and Eve suffered severe punishments for their disobedience, including the pain of

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childbirth and the struggle to raise crops from the soil. The very earth itself was cursed as a result of their act.

Human beings may have been able to survive those punishments, but they would not be able to survive having the knowledge of good and evil, that being the knowledge of right and wrong. It seems that even though we know the difference, we sometimes choose to do wrong. Whether it be the desires of our bodies, or the attractions of the world, something induces us to do that thing we know is wrong. God warned Adam that the knowledge would result in his death, but Adam did not know it was his spiritual death that God referred to.

Scene: Mesopotamia somewhere in the region of the Tigris and Euphrates River basin.

Genesis 4:1-7

1 Adam made love to his wife Eve, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain. She said, “With the help of the Lord I have brought forth a man.” 2 Later she gave birth to his brother Abel.

Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil. 3 In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord. 4 And Abel also brought an offering—fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering, 5 but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast.

6 Then the Lord said to Cain, “Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? 7 If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it.”

There has been much speculation about why God looked with favor on the offering from Able, but not that from Cain. God assures Cain that if he does what is right, he will be accepted.

God gives a name to not doing what is right - doing what is wrong - and he calls it sin. God tells Cain that sin desires to have him, but that "you must rule over it." This offers us assurance that we are capable of mastering sin, even though we may choose not to. In a particular situation we are capable of resisting a sinful impulse, but we are not capable of always mastering sin, that is, we could not live a sinless life. James 4:7 reminds us of our ability to resist sin. That is part of the paradox of our faith: we can see that if everybody followed God's way things would be better for everyone, but we cannot give up our own perceived self-interest.

Chapter Two

The Covenant with Abram

Scene: Judea, South of Jerusalem, ca. 1875 BC

About 1890 BC, a man named Abram traveled with his father Terah, his wife Sarai, his brother Nahor and his wife, and his nephew Lot and his wife, from a place called Ur of the Chaldeans (Ur Kasdim) to go to Canaan. Ur of the Chaldeans may have been near the mouth of the Euphrates River at the Persian Gulf, and Canaan was located in present day Israel. While on the way to Canaan, the group settled at a place called Harran in ancient Syria, where Abram's father died at the age of 205. God spoke to Abram, telling him “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you.” Abram traveled with Sarai and Lot to Canaan, where God told Abram at Shechem, “To your offspring I will give this land.”

Ten years passed, during which Abram and Sarai spent time in Egypt before returning to settle near Hebron, about fifteen miles south of Jerusalem. Abram had become wealthy and had successfully pursued and regained possession of Lot and his family when they were taken captive during a battle. He had prospered financially and become able to defend himself and his family. This is where Verse 1 begins.

Genesis 15:1-6

1 After this, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision:

“Do not be afraid, Abram.
I am your shield,
your very great reward.”

2 But Abram said, “Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?” 3 And Abram said, “You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.”

4 Then the word of the Lord came to him: “This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir.” 5 He took him outside and said, “Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.”

6 Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.

Abram was about eighty-five years old when the verses above began. Up until then Sarai had not been able to conceive, so when God told Abram that he would have a son of his own flesh and blood, and that his offspring would be as many as the stars in the sky, one might have expected Abram to have doubts. Instead we are told, "Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness."

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Abram believed God - he had faith in God and his word - and God credited it to Abram as righteousness, that is, the state of being right with God. This principle of being declared right with God as a result of faith in him is foundational to the gospel message.

Chapter Three

The Voice of the Prophet Isaiah

Scene: The area surrounding Jerusalem in Judea, ca. 700 BC

The prophet Isaiah lived and prophesied in the area around Jerusalem in Judea from about 740 BC to 686 BC. It was during this time that the northern tribes of Israel, living in the area that would become Samaria, were conquered and taken into captivity by the Assyrians. Isaiah's prophecies involved numerous countries and cities in the region. Among Isaiah's prophecies, many refer to the Messiah. These three prophecies look forward to the reign of the coming Messiah.

Isaiah 9:6-7

6 For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
7 Of the greatness of his government and peace
there will be no end.
He will reign on David's throne
and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it
with justice and righteousness
from that time on and forever.
The zeal of the Lord Almighty
will accomplish this.

The titles attributed to the son - Mighty God, Everlasting Father - could not be applied to a human, so the prophecy could not be fulfilled by a human. Note the Davidic lineage referenced in this passage, "He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom," and that his kingdom will last forever.

Isaiah 11:1-9

1 A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;
from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.
2 The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—
the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and of might,
the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord—
3 and he will delight in the fear of the Lord.

He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes,

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or decide by what he hears with his ears;
4 but with righteousness he will judge the needy,
with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth.
He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth;
with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.
5 Righteousness will be his belt
and faithfulness the sash around his waist.

6 The wolf will live with the lamb,
the leopard will lie down with the goat,
the calf and the lion and the yearling together;
and a little child will lead them.
7 The cow will feed with the bear,
their young will lie down together,
and the lion will eat straw like the ox.
8 The infant will play near the cobra's den,
and the young child will put its hand into the viper's nest.
9 They will neither harm nor destroy
on all my holy mountain,
for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.

The "stump of Jesse" is a reference to Jesse who was King David's father. "Fear of the Lord" does not mean being frightened, it means awareness of his greatness and power. Isaiah says, "righteousness will be his belt," righteousness being the state of being right with God. Messiah will also judge fairly and with justice and with wisdom. Animals which would normally be predator and prey are pictured as living together in harmony during the reign of the Messiah.

Isaiah 40:1-5

1 Comfort, comfort my people,
says your God.
2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and proclaim to her
that her hard service has been completed,
that her sin has been paid for,
that she has received from the Lord's hand
double for all her sins.

3 A voice of one calling:
"In the wilderness prepare
the way for the Lord;
make straight in the desert
a highway for our God.
4 Every valley shall be raised up,
every mountain and hill made low;

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the rough ground shall become level,
the rugged places a plain.
5 And the glory of the Lord will be revealed,
and all people will see it together.

For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

The "voice of one calling" is calling for the people of the earth to prepare for the coming Messiah, stating "the glory of the Lord will be revealed." All four of the gospel writers associate this voice with John the Baptist, and Jesus himself confirmed it.

These three passages are examples that have had an earthly fulfillment, in part, but have another unfulfilled portion to be completed in the future. Isaiah is showing us two different views of the same person, separated in time.

Jesus is the promised Messiah, and the first fulfillments took place during Jesus's lifetime. Jesus told his disciples that they were witnessing prophecy being fulfilled.

The future fulfillment will occur when Jesus returns to Earth. This will occur as promised by the angels to the disciples in Acts 1:11: “Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.”

Isaiah recorded these words 700 years before Jesus was born. There are over 300 prophecies in the Old Testament regarding Jesus that were fulfilled during his lifetime. How can this be? Some people have tried to deny the fulfillment of prophecy by questioning the dating. There is no question that the words of Isaiah are much older than the life of Jesus. This is why people believe that the prophets were guided by God in what to write. A reminder of this biblical inspiration of human authors is in 2 Timothy 3:16 stating that all Scripture is *theopneustos*, or “God-breathed.”

Jesus affirmed this and other prophetic testimony regarding himself. After his death and resurrection, he told his apostles that, "Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." This confirms that at least those three sections refer to Jesus prophetically, and that the prophecies are destined to come true.

Chapter Four

The Births of John the Baptist and Jesus

Scene: In the temple at Jerusalem and the surrounding villages, ca. 7 BC

Zechariah was a priest in the temple at Jerusalem and performed scheduled duties there. While he was serving in the temple, the encounter described below took place:

Luke 1:8-20

8 Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, 9 he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. 10 And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.

11 Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. 12 When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. 13 But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. 14 He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, 15 for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. 16 He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. 17 And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

18 Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."

19 The angel said to him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. 20 And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time."

As the angel predicted, these things occurred, and Zechariah was unable to speak during Elizabeth's pregnancy. The pregnancy itself was unlikely because, as Zechariah put it, "I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."

The angel told Zechariah that John would "make ready a people prepared for the Lord," by turning "the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous" and so prepare them to hear the gospel message.

When the child was born, Zechariah wrote "His name is John" in confirmation of the angel's words. Zechariah's speech was also restored. Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and began to prophesy, including these four verses recorded in Luke 1:76-79:

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"76 And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High;
for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,
77 to give his people the knowledge of salvation
through the forgiveness of their sins,
78 because of the tender mercy of our God,
by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven
79 to shine on those living in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the path of peace."

These words, spoken by Zechariah at his son John's birth, refer to the prophecy above in Isaiah 40. John will be the one calling to prepare the way of the Lord. The apostle John in his gospel describes it this way in John 1:6-8:

"6 There was a man sent from God whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. 8 He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light."

Zechariah said that John would "give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins," which is the precept of the gospel message. Mark's gospel in Mark 1:4 states, "And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." This concept must have seemed foreign to the Jews, who were accustomed to viewing obedience to the Law and the offering of sacrifices as the basis for righteousness, but it is the root of the gospel message.

Note the two messages being conveyed here: salvation is the result of receiving forgiveness for sins, and repentance is the basis for receiving forgiveness for sins.

Scene: Town of Nazareth in Galilee, ca. 7-6 BC

Nazareth was in the hill country ten or fifteen miles to the west of the southern tip of the Sea of Galilee.

Luke 1:26-38

26 In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, 27 to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28 The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

29 Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. 30 But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. 31 You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. 32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, 33 and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

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34 “How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?”

35 The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. 36 Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. 37 For no word from God will ever fail.”

38 “I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May your word to me be fulfilled.” Then the angel left her.

God sent the angel Gabriel to tell Mary that she would conceive by the power of the Holy Spirit, that the baby to be born would be called "the Son of God," and that he was to be named Jesus, which means "the Lord saves." This happened six months after Zechariah's wife Elizabeth became pregnant with the baby who would become John the Baptist.

Gabriel said that Jesus would have "the throne of his father David" and that "his kingdom will never end." Both of these statements predicted prophetically, as a powerful testimony from the angel, that Jesus is the coming Messiah. Joseph, Mary's betrothed, was a descendant of David, and we see here the merging of Jesus's human nature with his Divine nature.

We can only admire Mary's response. In spite of being "greatly troubled," she willingly accepted the word of God which Gabriel delivered.

Scene: Town of Nazareth in Galilee, ca. 7-6 BC

While living in Nazareth, Mary had become betrothed to a man named Joseph prior to the visit from Gabriel. We don't learn a lot about Joseph, but we do know he is kind-hearted. When he learns that Mary is pregnant, he wants to separate from her quietly so as not to cause her embarrassment.

Matthew 1:20-25

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

22 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 23 “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”).

24 When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. 25 But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

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The angel told Joseph that the child was to be named Jesus, which means "God saves" because "he will save his people from their sins." This foreshadows Jesus's role as the Messiah, and is more compelling testimony from an angel about who Jesus is and that his birth was predicted prophetically.

Scene: Near the town of Bethlehem in Judea, ca. 6-5 BC

Caesar Augustus had issued a decree that a census be taken in all countries under Rome's control. This included Palestine, as the region was known to the Romans, including Idumea in the south, Judea, Samaria, and Galilee, as well as Perea, the region to the east of the Jordan River. The Jews were accustomed to being reckoned by Tribes, so their approach to fulfilling this requirement was for each person to go to the hometown of their Tribe. Joseph and his family went from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem in Judea to register, because Bethlehem was the town of David, and Joseph was a descendant of David.

Luke 2:4-11

4 So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. 5 He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. 6 While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, 7 and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

8 And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. 9 An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. 11 Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord."

These familiar verses are read each year by people celebrating the birth of Jesus at Christmas time. Joseph and Mary were in the town of David because Joseph belonged to the house of David, and the angel's message explicitly states that the baby being born is the Messiah. Note also the title of Savior; the angel Gabriel had told Mary that Jesus "will save his people from their sins."

This is the most significant event in human history: the Son of God, the eternal Word, being born in human form so that he can save humanity from their sins.

Scene: The temple in Jerusalem in Judea, eight days after Jesus's birth, ca. 6-5 BC

Luke 2:25-32

25 Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. 26 It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. 27 Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do

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for him what the custom of the Law required, 28 Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

29 “Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,
you may now dismiss your servant in peace.
30 For my eyes have seen your salvation,
31 which you have prepared in the sight of all nations:
32 a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and the glory of your people Israel.”

This visit to the temple was for Jesus's circumcision and would have taken place eight days after his birth. Before John the Baptist or Jesus had ever preached the gospel message, God planned for that message to be spoken to the non-Jewish world as "a light for revelation to the Gentiles." (A Gentile is anyone who is not Jewish.) Although the Messiah's message was intended for the Jewish people, it was always part of God's plan for the rest of the world to be able to receive salvation. It was never an afterthought or some kind of misappropriation. God always planned to redeem the whole world. Romans 1:16 repeats this stating that God “brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile.” This truth is also recorded in biblical prophecy.

Chapter Five

John the Baptist's Early Ministry and the Baptism of Jesus

Scene: Jordan River near the Dead Sea, ca. AD 24-25

John the Baptist would have had to reach 30 years of age in order to fill the role of a priest. Estimating a birth date of 6 or 5 BC would make him turn 30 in AD 24 or 25, when Mark says, "John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness."

Mark 1:1-8

1 The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, 2 as it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

“I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way” —
3 “a voice of one calling in the wilderness,
‘Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.’”

4 And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

This is the beginning of Mark's gospel, and he packs a lot into the first verse: this is the good news of salvation, proclaimed in the name of Jesus, who is the promised Messiah, and who is the Son of God.

Mark identifies John as the figure in the prophecy of Isaiah calling to prepare the way for the Lord. The wilderness referred to is probably the uninhabited area east of the Jordan River a little bit north of the Dead Sea. Mark says that, "The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him." That area would correspond to all the region to the west of the Jordan River near the entrance to the Dead Sea, including the city of Jerusalem.

At this time Jesus had not yet begun his Messianic ministry, but in John's message we have a preview of the opportunity to be forgiven for our sins through repentance, and a glimpse of one coming who is more powerful than John and who will baptize with the Holy Spirit. This is John preparing the world for Jesus's message.

We are told that John came "preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." Luke says that this is the "good news" and it is the foundation of the gospel message. The gospel, the good news, is that we have an opportunity to be forgiven for our sins through repentance and belief in Jesus the Messiah – changing our thinking to recognize that God's way is right, believing that Jesus will forgive us, and intending to follow his way going forward. Jesus had not been revealed as the Messiah at this time. During Jesus's life and following the resurrection,

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Jesus was revealed as the one who was saving those whom God had given him, and repentance was preached in his name.

For some people, forgiveness for sin may not seem like a big deal. Sin may be something they rarely, if ever, consider. But in God's eyes, sin is a big deal. Scripture clearly teaches that at some point in the future humankind will face judgment. There will be a reckoning for the evil that one has done during their life on earth. Don't be deceived by the use of the word "evil," and therefore think, "Well, I haven't killed anyone or anything like that." We are not able to see the outcome of all the choices we make, and therefore we can't really know whether our actions have had a worse result than we might have imagined. We have all sinned and fallen short and are liable to receive the consequences. Romans 3:23 reminds us that the "all" who sinned includes both believers and non-believers. There is quite a bit of discussion about the nature of those consequences, but it seems plain that it is something bad.

Scene: Jordan River, a little north of the Dead Sea, ca. AD 24-25

John the Baptist has begun his preaching ministry, baptizing on the east side of the Jordan.

Luke 3:7-18

7 John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? 8 Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. 9 The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."

10 "What should we do then?" the crowd asked.

11 John answered, "Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same."

12 Even tax collectors came to be baptized. "Teacher," they asked, "what should we do?"

13 "Don't collect any more than you are required to," he told them.

14 Then some soldiers asked him, "And what should we do?"

He replied, "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely—be content with your pay."

15 The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. 16 John answered them all, "I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 17 His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." 18 And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.

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In the Mark 1 passage above, we are told that the people confessed their sins; they recognized that God's way is right and admitted that they had not followed that way.

Then they asked, “Now that we have confessed our sins, what should we do?” John gave direct and practical advice: he told them to “produce fruit in keeping with repentance.” He then gave three examples of what that looks like, specific to the people asking. The "fruit in keeping with repentance" is the "good fruit" which we will naturally produce when we live by God's commandment to love your neighbor as yourself.

The people continued to wonder if John was the Messiah, and John continued to proclaim that one "more powerful" was to come, who would "baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." As Isaiah did, John is allowing us to see two aspects of the same person, separated in time. In his first appearance, Jesus offered forgiveness for sins and modeled humility and compassion as the way we are to live. When he returns, it will be with his "winnowing fork ... in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

John was preparing the people for Jesus's message that they could receive forgiveness for sin through repentance in his name. This is not just good news, this is great news. The old way of receiving forgiveness involved obedience to the law and the offering of sacrifices. But that way must fail because we are incapable of perfect obedience to the law. This is true whether it is the written law received by Moses or the law of our conscience speaking to us moment by moment.

Jesus's identity as Messiah had not yet been revealed, and John's message looked forward to the one more powerful who was to come after him. After Jesus's role as Messiah was revealed, the basis for forgiveness became repentance and belief in Jesus as Messiah.

Scene: Jordan River, a Little North of the Dead Sea, ca. AD 24-25

These verses describe the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist. It probably took place on the east bank of the Jordan River near the Dead Sea.

Luke 3:21-22

21 When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened 22 and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

This scene shows the presence of all three members of the Trinity: the Father, speaking to the Son, connected by the Holy Spirit. It is impossible to say whether this visual and auditory sign from God was for Jesus's benefit. Perhaps it was necessary for these things to occur in the physical world as well as the spiritual world, because the gospel touches both the physical and the spiritual worlds. Baptism itself is an outward and public declaration. A parallel and visible declaration by God would match the nature of this scene.

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It was necessary for John the Baptist to witness it, as it allowed him to testify that Jesus was God's Chosen One, because he saw the Spirit descend on Jesus like a dove. Whatever else God intended at this time, he clearly demonstrated that Jesus was rightfully called The Son of God, and that not only did God love him but also that he was pleased with him.

Scene: Jordan River, a Little North of the Dead Sea ca. 24-25 AD

John 1:29-34

29 The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! 30 This is the one I meant when I said, 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.' 31 I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel."

32 Then John gave this testimony: "I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. 33 And I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.' 34 I have seen and I testify that this is God's Chosen One."

This is a bold proclamation by John about his commission and who Jesus is. John testified that God had sent him so that the Messiah, who takes away the sin of the world, would be revealed to the Israelites. God also told him that he would recognize the Messiah by the presence of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove. John also stated that he had seen the Spirit descend on Jesus, and that Jesus was God's Chosen One.

When John calls Jesus "the Lamb of God" this is probably a reference to the Passover lamb. When the Hebrews were in slavery in Egypt, God sent Moses to tell Pharaoh to let the Israelites leave Egypt. Pharaoh refused, and God sent increasingly severe plagues on Egypt so that Pharaoh would relent. Finally, Moses told Pharaoh that God would pass through Egypt around midnight and that every firstborn would die, from the child of Pharaoh to the child of the slave and even to the firstborn of the livestock.

In order to avoid this plague of death, God told the Israelites that on the 10th of the month they must choose a one-year-old male lamb without defect and to care for it until the 14th of the month. On the evening of the 14th at twilight, they were to slaughter the lamb and sprinkle some of the blood on the door frames of their houses. In Exodus 12:12-13, God said:

On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn of both people and animals, and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the Lord. The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are, and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt.

The blood of the lamb was a sign to God to spare the lives of the Israelites. In the same way, the shed blood of Jesus, as the Lamb of God, provides life to humankind through the forgiveness of sin, taking away the sin of the world.

Chapter Six

Jesus Begins to Teach and to Demonstrate His Power

Scene: Jerusalem, ca. AD 27

Jesus had traveled to Jerusalem for the Passover festival.

John 2:23-25

23 Now while he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Festival, many people saw the signs he was performing and believed in his name. 24 But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all people. 25 He did not need any testimony about mankind, for he knew what was in each person.

John 3:1-15

1 Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. 2 He came to Jesus at night and said, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.”

3 Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.”

4 “How can someone be born when they are old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!”

5 Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. 6 Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. 7 You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ 8 The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”

9 “How can this be?” Nicodemus asked.

10 “You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things? 11 Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. 12 I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? 13 No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. 14 Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, 15 that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”

These events wrap around the end of John Chapter 2 and the beginning of John Chapter 3. We are not told the nature of the signs which Jesus performed. From other accounts we may infer that they included healings and driving out demons. These deliverances were very real for the people who received them and for the people who witnessed them. This resulted in those people

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believing in Jesus as Messiah. It is likely that some of the people witnessing these events did not have a full knowledge of the prophetic message concerning the Messiah, but the impression which was made on them caused them to believe that Jesus's power came from God, to "believe in his name," and that his words were God's words. To bring people to believe in his name, that he came from God and was sent by God, was why the Messiah came. That process of coming to believe happens in many different ways, all leading to the same result.

Nicodemus visited Jesus at night because he was afraid of the disapproval of other members of the Jewish ruling council. Nicodemus affirmed that at least some people on the council knew that Jesus had come from God because of the miraculous signs which Jesus performed.

Jesus told Nicodemus, "No one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again," which confused Nicodemus because he was interpreting it as a physical second birth. Jesus then clarified by telling Nicodemus that, "no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit." Some have understood the reference to water as being the water of baptism. In the context of Nicodemus's question about returning to the womb, and the following line where Jesus says, "flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to Spirit," it seems more likely that Jesus is referring to physical birth as being "born of water," that is, the flesh, as opposed to being born of the Spirit. Jesus is telling Nicodemus that a spiritual birth is needed in order to see the kingdom of God. Jesus observes that, "we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony." "You people" refers to Nicodemus and the Jewish religious council, and to the religious leaders in general. This illustrates that outward religious leadership and religious activity can, sadly, occur separate from the faith of a true spiritual birth that leads to salvation and the kingdom of God.

When Jesus tells Nicodemus, "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him," he is referring to an incident described in Numbers 21. The people were grumbling against God and Moses, and God sent poisonous snakes among them. The people asked Moses to pray to God to remove the snakes. In Numbers 21:8-9 it says, "8 The Lord said to Moses, 'Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.' 9 So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived."

The Son of Man being lifted up pictures Jesus's crucifixion, along with the promise that, "everyone who believes may have eternal life in him."

Scene: Town of Cana in the hill country of southern Galilee, ca. AD 27

John 2:1-11

1 On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there, 2 and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. 3 When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, "They have no more wine."

4 "Woman, why do you involve me?" Jesus replied. "My hour has not yet come."

5 His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."

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6 Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons.

7 Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water"; so they filled them to the brim. 8 Then he told them, "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet."

They did so, 9 and the master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine. He did not realize where it had come from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew. Then he called the bridegroom aside 10 and said, "Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now."

11 What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

Jesus replied to the implied request from his mother by saying, "my hour has not yet come," perhaps meaning that it was not yet time to be publicly revealed as the Messiah. When he saw that it was important to her, and her trust in him, his love for his mother made him want to help. Note the comment of the master of the banquet that the host had "saved the best till now," suggesting that the wine which Jesus created was better than what they were accustomed to drinking.

While seeming to be an unforeseen event, Jesus uses the circumstances to allow people to witness his power. John's gospel identifies seven of Jesus's miracles as "signs" intended to identify him as the Messiah by virtue of his control over the natural world. There is an old saying that says, "Seeing is believing," and that is exactly what is happening here. Jesus was allowing his disciples to experience his power completely. They may not have understood how it was happening but the evidence of their eyes and ears was very powerful.

John ends verse 11 by saying, "his disciples believed in him." How does this happen? After seeing the miracles which Jesus was performing, somehow the disciples came to know that Jesus's power came from God, and that Jesus himself came from God. They did not fully understand it, but they believed it.

This is what happens to believers today. Even though we cannot directly see the miracles of Jesus, the testimony of Scripture leads us to the same conclusion: that Jesus's power came from God, and that Jesus himself came from God. That is why John 20:29 is at the beginning of this narrative: "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Chapter Seven

Jesus Returns to Galilee and Meets the Woman at the Well

Scene: Area from Judea to Galilee, ca. AD 27

In these three passages we see Jesus traveling from the Jerusalem area in Judea back into Galilee.

John 4:1-3

1 Now Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that he was gaining and baptizing more disciples than John— 2 although in fact it was not Jesus who baptized, but his disciples. 3 So he left Judea and went back once more to Galilee.

The fact that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was gaining more disciples than John was significant because the Pharisees had already questioned John regarding under whose authority he was teaching. It may be that Jesus felt that his time would be better spent preaching to the people in Galilee than in a confrontation with the Pharisees in Jerusalem. Jesus's declaration that he was the Son of God was viewed as religious blasphemy to the Pharisees, which ensured that the Pharisees would continually question and attempt to trap Jesus throughout the time of the gospels.

Luke 4:14-15

14 Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. 15 He was teaching in their synagogues, and everyone praised him.

Luke tells us that Jesus's return was "in the power of the Spirit," and that Jesus was teaching in the synagogues. Everything Jesus did was "in the power of the Spirit," but the people around him were not always aware of it.

Matthew 4:12-17

12 When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he withdrew to Galilee. 13 Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali— 14 to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah:

15 "Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali,
the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan,
Galilee of the Gentiles—
16 the people living in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of the shadow of death
a light has dawned."

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

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John the Baptist's imprisonment influenced Jesus's return to Galilee. King Herod Antipas imprisoned John because John criticized Herod for divorcing his wife and marrying his brother's ex-wife. Galilee was also under the control of Herod Antipas, but it would be farther away from his palace on the east shore of the Dead Sea.

Matthew identifies this return to Galilee as the fulfillment of another prophecy from Isaiah, stating that the people in the region where Jesus went have "seen a great light."

At this time Jesus moved from Nazareth and went to live in Capernaum. Capernaum is a town on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee, and Jesus continued to stay there except when he was traveling during his ministry. It appears that Jesus enjoyed the lake shore. In addition to moving there, he spent time walking and it was there where he encountered his first disciples and engaged in much teaching.

Matthew 4:17 gives us an example of Jesus's preaching: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." This sounds slightly different from John's message of repentance for the forgiveness of sins but is really the same. Forgiveness of sin is the object of repentance. John the Baptist preached repentance in the name of the One to come. When Jesus says, "the kingdom of heaven has come near," he is saying that God has approached mankind through the Messiah with his message of forgiveness. Now is the time to receive that forgiveness through repentance.

Scene: Town of Sychar in Samaria, AD 27

Jesus was in Judea, and in order to get to Galilee he had to pass through Samaria or go a long way around through Perea.

John 4:4-26, 39-42

4 Now he had to go through Samaria. 5 So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. 6 Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about noon.

7 When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?" 8 (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.)

9 The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)

10 Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."

11 "Sir," the woman said, "you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? 12 Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his livestock?"

13 Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, 14 but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a

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spring of water welling up to eternal life.”

15 The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water so that I won’t get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water.”

16 He told her, “Go, call your husband and come back.”

17 “I have no husband,” she replied.

Jesus said to her, “You are right when you say you have no husband. 18 The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true.”

19 “Sir,” the woman said, “I can see that you are a prophet. 20 Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.”

21 “Woman,” Jesus replied, “believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. 22 You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. 23 Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. 24 God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.”

25 The woman said, “I know that Messiah” (called Christ) “is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.”

26 Then Jesus declared, “I, the one speaking to you—I am he.”

39 Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I ever did.” 40 So when the Samaritans came to him, they urged him to stay with them, and he stayed two days. 41 And because of his words many more became believers.

42 They said to the woman, “We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world.”

Sychar is a town in Samaria about halfway between Jerusalem and Capernaum. Jesus spoke to the woman at the well about "living water," and like Nicodemus, she believed Jesus was talking about the physical rather than the spiritual.

Jesus's knowledge of the woman's situation convinced her that he was a prophet, which prompted her to ask Jesus a question: where was the true place of worship, Jerusalem or Mount Gerazim? The Samaritans were descended from people brought in by the Assyrians when they conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 BC, along with Jews who were not deported by the Assyrians. They had developed a synthesized version of Judaism which called for the place of

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worship to be on Mt. Gerazim in Samaria rather than Mt. Zion in Jerusalem. Jesus stated that the Jewish practice of worship in Jerusalem was correct because, "we worship what we do know, for salvation, [the Messiah] is from the Jews."

Here Jesus reveals an important truth about the kingdom of heaven: that God is seeking worshipers who will worship him "in the Spirit and in truth." He continues by saying, "God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth." The place of worship will not be on a certain mountain, or in a certain city or building; it will be in the innermost thoughts with the help of the Holy Spirit.

While being questioned by Pilate, Jesus said, "In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth." While eating the Passover meal with his disciples, Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life."

Jesus was born to testify to the truth and he himself is the truth. He was revealing himself to the world to proclaim the good news of forgiveness for sins. He is the truth in which we place our faith.

Worshiping in the Spirit and in truth then, is inviting the Holy Spirit to be a part of and guide us in our worship, with the knowledge that Messiah Jesus has allowed us to be forgiven.

The woman replied, "I know that Messiah" (called Christ) "is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us." The insertion "called Christ" is John's explanation of the term Messiah for a Greek-speaking audience. Jesus then revealed to the woman that he is the Messiah. The woman's testimony about Jesus causes some of the Samaritans to believe that he is the Messiah. He stayed with them two days and because of his words to them during that time many more became believers. Verse 42 says, "They said to the woman, 'We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world.'"

This seems extraordinary. The openness of the Samaritans to Jesus's message leads them to believe that he is the Savior of the world based on his words to them, yet the Jewish leaders, the Pharisees who witnessed miraculous signs, still did not believe.

Chapter Eight

Jesus the Healer

Scene: Town of Cana in the hill country of southern Galilee, ca. AD 27-28

John 4:46-54

46 Once more he visited Cana in Galilee, where he had turned the water into wine. And there was a certain royal official whose son lay sick at Capernaum. 47 When this man heard that Jesus had arrived in Galilee from Judea, he went to him and begged him to come and heal his son, who was close to death.

48 “Unless you people see signs and wonders,” Jesus told him, “you will never believe.”

49 The royal official said, “Sir, come down before my child dies.”

50 “Go,” Jesus replied, “your son will live.”

The man took Jesus at his word and departed. 51 While he was still on the way, his servants met him with the news that his boy was living. 52 When he inquired as to the time when his son got better, they said to him, “Yesterday, at one in the afternoon, the fever left him.”

53 Then the father realized that this was the exact time at which Jesus had said to him, “Your son will live.” So he and his whole household believed.

54 This was the second sign Jesus performed after coming from Judea to Galilee.

The royal official probably knew Jesus or at least knew of him because Jesus was living in Capernaum. It is fifteen or twenty miles from Capernaum to Cana, possibly a day’s travel if you really wanted to get there.

Jesus's comment regarding the need for "signs and wonders" was probably directed more at the bystanders than at the official. His actions indicate faith: he traveled a long way as quickly as possible to find Jesus and begged him to come and heal his son.

When Jesus replied to say, "you will never believe," the official repeated his urgent request. He didn't need to see signs and wonders to believe, he was already convinced that Jesus could help him. Perhaps he had already seen or heard of "signs and wonders" performed by Jesus in Capernaum. Because Jesus could see the thoughts of the people watching, he could perceive if they were watching with an attitude of, "can he really do it?"

The way Jesus handled this allowed for the healing of the son, which led to the official and his whole household coming to believe in Jesus, while denying the onlookers the opportunity to see Jesus put on a show. John says, "he and his whole household believed." The official already possessed enough faith for Jesus to heal his son, and his faith was strengthened while the

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household members were brought to faith by his testimony. Many Christians could testify to having an increase of faith after experiencing some intercession or provision from God.

Mark 1:32-34, Capernaum

32 That evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon-possessed. 33 The whole town gathered at the door, 34 and Jesus healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons, but he would not let the demons speak because they knew who he was.

Matthew 4:23-25, Galilee

23 Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. 24 News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed; and he healed them. 25 Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him.

These verses give us a look at the impact that Jesus's ministry was having. In Mark 1:33 it says, "The whole town gathered at the door." This would mean a crowd of several hundred if not a thousand or more people.

In the passage from Matthew, we see a large list of locations, which comprises the entire region from which people traveled to see Jesus: Syria, Galilee, the Decapolis (a loose alliance of ten cities east and northeast of the Sea of Galilee), Jerusalem, Judea, and the "region across the Jordan."

Mark tells us that, "Jesus healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons..." Matthew tells us that Jesus was "healing every disease and sickness among the people," and that, "people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed; and he healed them."

Jesus was healing hundreds, if not thousands of people. The number of people following him was in the thousands. Jesus's healing ministry was an important means to attract people and to demonstrate his divine power. It also demonstrates Jesus's compassion. He was probably tired, hungry, and thirsty while dealing with so many people, but his sympathy for them and their suffering prompted him to continue doing the work of God.

Scene: Town of Capernaum in Galilee, ca. 27-28 AD

Luke 5:17-26

17 One day Jesus was teaching, and Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting there. They had come from every village of Galilee and from Judea and Jerusalem. And the power of the Lord was with Jesus to heal the sick. 18 Some men came carrying a paralyzed man on a mat and tried to take him into the house to lay him before Jesus. 19 When they could not find a way to do this because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and lowered him on his mat through the tiles

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into the middle of the crowd, right in front of Jesus.

20 When Jesus saw their faith, he said, "Friend, your sins are forgiven."

21 The Pharisees and the teachers of the law began thinking to themselves, "Who is this fellow who speaks blasphemy? Who can forgive sins but God alone?"

22 Jesus knew what they were thinking and asked, "Why are you thinking these things in your hearts? 23 Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk'? 24 But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins." So he said to the paralyzed man, "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home." 25 Immediately he stood up in front of them, took what he had been lying on and went home praising God. 26 Everyone was amazed and gave praise to God. They were filled with awe and said, "We have seen remarkable things today."

Mark's account of this event says that it took place in Capernaum, Jesus's homebase in Galilee. The presence of the Pharisees and teachers of the law suggests that this was not a chance meeting. The area of "every village of Galilee and from Judea and Jerusalem" would encompass most of the country, and the people knew that they would either find Jesus at Capernaum or, if they waited, he would eventually return. The crowd was so thick that the friends of the paralyzed man were unable to get him into the house. They went up on the roof and made a hole through which to lower their friend. Luke tells us that, "when Jesus saw their faith, he said, 'Friend, your sins are forgiven.'" There is no mention of "repentance." This is not a new message, substituting faith for repentance.

In Christian belief, repentance for the forgiveness of sin is proclaimed in the name of the Messiah, who is Jesus. After his resurrection, Jesus spoke to his disciples in Luke 24:46-47 saying, "46 He told them, 'This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, 47 and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.'"

In his name means according to his interests and authority. There is no repentance without faith in Jesus, because it is faith in Jesus which allows for forgiveness to take place.

So, what we are really doing is recognizing that Jesus is the Messiah sent from God, that he and only he has the authority to forgive our sin; asking him to do so; and believing that he will.

For the Pharisees it was not an issue of whether salvation happened through faith or repentance. They were outraged that Jesus claimed to be able to forgive sin, something which is only possible for God. But where was the evidence that Jesus had the authority to forgive sin? Jesus told the Pharisees, "But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins," and told the paralyzed man to pick up his mat and go home. Luke tells us, "Everyone was amazed and gave praise to God."

It's a little hard for us to imagine what our reaction might have been had we witnessed that scene.

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Did we really see what we thought we saw? Could this have actually happened? For the Pharisees, this should have been strong proof that Jesus was who he said he was. Perhaps to say it was "in your face" is too strong, but it definitely sent a message.

This scene shows one way that people come to believe in Jesus: some of the people who heard his words and saw the miracles knew that Jesus came from God and believed what he said. It did not require a deliberate weighing of evidence, or theological pondering; after seeing what they saw and hearing what they heard, they knew.

We don't have the benefit of witnessing these things in person. We do have the record preserved in the Bible, and it conveys a very powerful message about how we can receive forgiveness for sins through faith in Jesus, with many proofs that Jesus is the Messiah.

Today some people will read about the teaching and the mighty works which Jesus performed and believe that he was sent by God. We will see later that this causes rejoicing in Heaven. As our theme verse John 20:29 says, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Chapter Nine

The Calling of Matthew, Increasing Conflict with the Pharisees, The Sermon on the Mount

Scene: Town of Capernaum in Galilee, ca. AD 27-28

Matthew 9:9-13

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

10 While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples. 11 When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

12 On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. 13 But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

In Luke's account of this meeting, Matthew is referred to by his Hebrew name, Levi. He was a Jew working with the Romans to collect taxes. He became one of Jesus's disciples and wrote the account which we recognize as the Gospel of Matthew, from which these verses are taken.

In celebration of being called by Jesus, Matthew hosted a dinner in his honor. It seems likely that Matthew would invite his friends to the dinner and that they would include other tax collectors. It is not clear whether the Pharisees were using the word sinners to describe the tax collectors or if there were others present who the Pharisees described as sinners. Probably both.

Jesus may have expected the metaphor about the healthy and the sick to go over the heads of the Pharisees, but when he told them to "go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice,'" it was a reference to the prophet Hosea. That passage (Hosea 6:6) continues with a severe chastisement of priests and religious leaders. The Pharisees would have been very familiar with Hosea and this passage, and they would have known that it was aimed at them.

Jesus then went on to answer their question: his reason for being there was to get the good news to sinners. Each person has to come to the realization themselves that we are all sinners. When a person believes in Jesus and puts their faith in him, their sins are forgiven, but it does not alter the fact of what they did. That is what all Christians are: forgiven sinners.

Scene: Region of Galilee, ca. AD 27-28

Mark 3:1-6

1 Another time Jesus went into the synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there. 2

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Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal him on the Sabbath. 3 Jesus said to the man with the shriveled hand, “Stand up in front of everyone.”

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

5 He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored. 6 Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.

Jesus had many disputes with the Pharisees regarding healing on the Sabbath, and Jesus demonstrated to them that it was lawful to heal on the Sabbath. We see in verse two that it was their desire to be able to accuse Jesus of violating the law which caused them to reject his teaching.

Scripture records many instances of Jesus healing people. This one is notable because it shows us something of Jesus the man. The Pharisees are unwilling to acknowledge that doing good and saving life would be lawful on the Sabbath. They would prefer for the man with the shriveled hand to remain maimed than to concede the point, and it makes Jesus angry that they would be so callous. At the same time, he is feeling compassion for the man and wants to help him. Not only does this give us insight into Jesus the man, but it also shows us that God understands what it means to be a human, because he has experienced it in the person of Jesus.

Verse six says that the Pharisees began to plot with the Herodians about how to kill Jesus. The Herodians were a political party loyal to the Herod dynasty, which had ruled over Judea and Samaria until the Romans took direct control of that region. Their aims were not the same as those of the Pharisees, but they were united with them in not wanting to see a change in the status quo. The Herodians wanted to reestablish a descendant of Herod the Great on the throne over Judea, and they did not want any sort of civil unrest that might gain Rome's notice.

Scene: Galilee Near Capernaum, ca. AD 27-28

Luke 6:17-19

17 He went down with them and stood on a level place. A large crowd of his disciples was there and a great number of people from all over Judea, from Jerusalem, and from the coastal region around Tyre and Sidon, 18 who had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases. Those troubled by impure spirits were cured, 19 and the people all tried to touch him, because power was coming from him and healing them all.

According to Luke's account this occasion took place near the Sea of Galilee, on level ground possibly near the shore. Matthew relates similar teachings taking place on a mountainside, often referred to as the Sermon on the Mount. It seems likely that they were the same occasion, with the level area adjacent to a hillside. Jesus did deliver similar teachings on multiple occasions, so

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it is possible that these could have been two separate instances.

Jesus's disciples did not consist only of the twelve apostles. Luke states that there were crowds from a wide geographic area who were following Jesus because of his message and his healing power. He says there were "a great number of people," which was likely in the hundreds if not thousands. Luke also states that they had "come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases." We know from experience that people will go to great lengths and travel long distances in the pursuit of healing, and this is what we see here.

The final sentence of this passage is remarkable: "and the people all tried to touch him, because power was coming from him and healing them all." Imagine that scene. A large crowd of people is surrounding Jesus. They are jostling and reaching out to touch him because simply that contact allowed them to be healed.

Scene: Galilee Near Capernaum, ca. 27-28 AD

Luke 6:27-36

27 "But to you who are listening 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 If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them. 30 Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. 31 Do to others as you would have them do to you.

32 "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 are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that. 34 And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, expecting to be repaid in full. 35 But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. 36 Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

This scene took place following what we read above. Jesus said, "to you who are listening." This could be a reference to the crowd. Undoubtedly among their number were many who were distracted by their children or those near them in the crowd and were not really paying attention to what Jesus was saying. Jesus wanted to catch the attention of those who were listening because he was about to tell them something important.

It could also be for the benefit of those reading this account today in the Bible. The message is as much for us as it was for those who were listening to Jesus, and it is an extraordinary message: "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you."

This is contrary to human nature. Some have argued that Jesus must have meant something else when he told us to turn the other cheek, because he could not have meant it literally.

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In Luke's account, he quotes Jesus as saying, "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful." In Matthew's account, Jesus says, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." If this is the bar, how many can ever succeed? How can we meet this standard?

We cannot meet it in our own power. The power is in the gospel message, in which God offers his forgiveness in return for our faith in him through the person of the Messiah, Jesus. This is another paradox of Christian faith: we strive for a goal which we cannot reach in our own strength, knowing that only God's mercy allows us to be saved, but also knowing that we must continue to strive to grow in faith.

The phrase "in return" does not exactly describe this change in relationship, although it does provide a picture from a human perspective. It makes it sound like we have something to offer that has any value to God. We don't. This is better seen as a change in relationship. God is the model and standard for our behavior, and being perfect is a standard which we cannot attain. When we believe in Jesus he will forgive our sin, redeeming us from the penalty of death.

We need Jesus for this to happen. Although he lived a sinless life, Jesus was put to death. In that death he paid the penalty of death for our sin. In effect, God paid the penalty for sin himself, through the life and death of Jesus on earth. This is why Jesus becomes the object of our faith and belief. As God's Messiah, Jesus is reconciling us to God the Father through himself.

After this change in our relationship with God we will want to follow his ways, and a concise statement of that is to do to others what you would have them do to you, or "love your neighbor as yourself." This will spread God's love in the world, and often times will provide the one showing loving behavior with joy as well.

How should we respond to our real-world enemies? Those who curse us, and hate us, and want to take what belongs to us. Those who want to strike us. This teaching to love your enemies is challenging. Those sorts of actions and attitudes naturally make us feel defensive. We want to protect ourselves and our possessions. Are the extreme examples of doing good to our enemies, blessing them, and praying for them really what we are called to do?

It seems they are. There is no way to anticipate how this might be lived out in a real situation. The challenge would be to be mindful of this teaching while in a very stressful position. God would provide guidance, if sought. Someone might say, "That's easy enough if you are sitting behind a keyboard," and that is very true. We do not know how we would respond in a dire situation. We can only hope that it would be with courage and faith in God.

We have seen some of the prophetic witness about Jesus, some of his teaching, and some of the miraculous healings that testify to who he is. We have seen the effect of those things on the people who were there. Some were simply amazed. Others recognized that Jesus was sent from God. When Jesus told them that their sins were forgiven and that they should show love to one another, they believed him as they would have believed God. If you have also come to believe that Jesus was sent from God to forgive you for your sins, and you trust in him to do that and intend to follow God's way from now on, see Appendix A.

Chapter Ten

Healing the Centurion's Servant, Raising the Dead at Nain, Sending the Twelve, Inquiry from John the Baptist, At a Pharisee's House

Scene: Capernaum in Galilee, ca. AD 27-28

Luke 7:1-10

1 When Jesus had finished saying all this to the people who were listening, he entered Capernaum. 2 There a centurion's servant, whom his master valued highly, was sick and about to die. 3 The centurion heard of Jesus and sent some elders of the Jews to him, asking him to come and heal his servant. 4 When they came to Jesus, they pleaded earnestly with him, "This man deserves to have you do this, 5 because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue." 6 So Jesus went with them.

He was not far from the house when the centurion sent friends to say to him: "Lord, don't trouble yourself, for I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. 7 That is why I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you. But say the word, and my servant will be healed. 8 For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it."

9 When Jesus heard this, he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd following him, he said, "I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel." 10 Then the men who had been sent returned to the house and found the servant well.

The centurion was a Roman soldier and not a Jew, so he sent some of the Jewish elders to ask Jesus to come and heal the servant. The Jewish elders encouraged Jesus to respond because the centurion "loves our nation and has built our synagogue," which explains the centurion's familiarity with the Jewish elders and understanding of Jewish customs. When the centurion sent word to Jesus that "I do not deserve to have you come under my roof," he was showing respect to Jesus by recognizing the Jewish rule that Jews were not to enter Gentile households, while phrasing it in a way which placed him at fault.

When he continued with the metaphor of a man under authority, he was recognizing that Jesus did not need any mumbo-jumbo, any fancy props or incantations, but he simply had to say the word and the servant would be healed. He was exactly right!

Luke tells us that the centurion had "heard of Jesus," but we do not know how much he had heard. Certainly it included miraculous healings. And somehow, likely without knowledge of Messianic prophecy and perhaps without hearing the message of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, the centurion believed in Jesus. He knew that Jesus only had to say the word and his servant would be healed. The centurion did not need to think about his response to Jesus, he just believed.

This scene is notable in that the centurion was not the one healed, although it was his faith which

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was acknowledged by Jesus. It was the servant who was healed. This provides us with good support for the idea of intercessory prayer, that is, praying on behalf of someone else.

Scene: Town of Nain in Galilee, ca. AD 27-28

Luke 7:11-17

11 Soon afterward, Jesus went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went along with him. 12 As he approached the town gate, a dead person was being carried out—the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. And a large crowd from the town was with her. 13 When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her and he said, “Don’t cry.”

14 Then he went up and touched the bier they were carrying him on, and the bearers stood still. He said, “Young man, I say to you, get up!” 15 The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother.

16 They were all filled with awe and praised God. “A great prophet has appeared among us,” they said. “God has come to help his people.” 17 This news about Jesus spread throughout Judea and the surrounding country.

We can't know how much Jesus knew in his Divine nature about what was going to happen. What we do see is that in this moment Jesus felt compassion for the mother and wanted to comfort her. There was no stating of or testing of faith. The joy of the mother could not be described, and Jesus also felt joy as he watched mother and son be reunited. And the people knew that this had happened from God and therefore praised God.

How does this relate to the gospel? The invitation of the gospel is to put your faith in Jesus for the forgiveness of sin. What is he like? He is someone who has compassion for those who are grieving. You would like him.

We are told that a large crowd was with Jesus and that a large crowd from the town accompanied the bier. With so many witnesses, it is easy to see how news about Jesus would have spread. Slower than the Internet or the telephone, but just as thorough is word of mouth. People enjoy getting news and spreading news, and through social and family interaction and through commerce it would not have taken a long time for word to spread through the region and adjacent territories. Some might have reported a startling experience, and others that they had witnessed the Messiah, sent from God. And some hearing about the Messiah would have believed based on their account, as the people at Sychar did with the woman at the well.

Matthew 11:1-6

1 After Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in the towns of Galilee.

2 When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples 3 to

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ask him, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?"

4 Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: 5 The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. 6 Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me."

Jesus had sent the twelve apostles to heal and to preach in the towns of Galilee. Matthew 10:5-8 says:

5 These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: "Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. 6 Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. 7 As you go, proclaim this message: 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' 8 Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received; freely give.

Remembering how forcefully John testified that Jesus was the Messiah, we might wonder at his now sending people to ask Jesus if he was the "one who is to come." John was in prison, cut off from any direct contact with the outside world, and doubt began to creep in.

Jesus stated in John 5:31 that "If I testify about myself, my testimony is not true," so he does not tell John's disciples that he is the Messiah. But he does tell them to testify to what they saw and heard, that the "blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor." Jesus knew that John would recognize the prophetic fulfillments taking place through what he was doing and know that Jesus was the Messiah. The statement about not stumbling on account of Jesus may have been in reference to John's disciples, some of whom may have felt that they needed to remain loyal to John, while others were drawn to Jesus.

This is a good example of why it is a benefit to be part of a group of believers. In addition to gathering for worship (described in Hebrews 10:25), it provides opportunities to give and receive love and friendship, opportunities to give and receive help and encouragement, opportunities to hear about and to share life experiences, opportunities to learn more about what the Bible teaches us. Just for starters. Life is hard, and that is why we must help each other. A group of believers working together in the power of the Spirit is what we are called to be as the Church, and is an earthly representation of the spiritual relationship we share as believers.

Scene: Capernaum in Galilee, ca. AD 27-28

Luke 7:36-50

36 When one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. 37 A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume. 38 As she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.

39 When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a

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prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner.”

40 Jesus answered him, “Simon, I have something to tell you.”

“Tell me, teacher,” he said.

41 “Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. 42 Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?”

43 Simon replied, “I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven.”

“You have judged correctly,” Jesus said.

44 Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, “Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. 45 You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. 46 You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. 47 Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little.”

48 Then Jesus said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.”

49 The other guests began to say among themselves, “Who is this who even forgives sins?”

50 Jesus said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

This dinner probably took place in Capernaum and was not the first time that the woman had encountered Jesus or his teaching. For Jesus's words to Simon to make sense, the woman's tears were tears of gratitude, not remorse. There would have been a lot of discussion about Jesus in Capernaum, including from many who were present or had heard firsthand accounts of his teaching and of miraculous healings. It is impossible to know what is in someone's heart. Whether the woman had heard the message of forgiveness beforehand or came seeking forgiveness, it seems clear that she knew that her sins were forgiven, and that knowledge resulted in a love for Jesus which she expressed in the anointing of his feet.

When Jesus told the woman that "your sins are forgiven" and "your faith has saved you," those comments were intended for the others present and not for the woman herself. As the comments from the guests reveal, they knew that by saying this, Jesus was comparing himself to God. In a way, Jesus was challenging the Pharisees. The people in the towns, who did not have formal religious teaching, recognized that Jesus was the Messiah. But the Pharisees, who devoted themselves to studying the law, refused to recognize who Jesus was. They should have known, both from fulfilled prophecy and because of the miracles which they had observed. Jesus may have been thinking, "What is it going to take to get through to you?"

Chapter Eleven

More Conflict with the Pharisees, The Use of Parables, Jairus's Daughter

Scene: Galilee ca. 27-28 AD

Matthew 12:22-28

22 Then they brought him a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute, and Jesus healed him, so that he could both talk and see. 23 All the people were astonished and said, "Could this be the Son of David?"

24 But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, "It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons."

25 Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them, "Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand. 26 If Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then can his kingdom stand? 27 And if I drive out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your people drive them out? So then, 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."

The people who were with Jesus when he performed this miraculous healing were astonished and may have had trouble grasping what had just happened. People who followed Jesus might have seen more than one miracle be performed. So the expectation was – at least for some of the people – that Jesus was going to heal the person who was ill. But even expecting it, it seems that witnessing the act is astonishing. There must be something so awesome about witnessing the power of God that it takes us out of our usual frame of reference. We are briefly in the Kingdom.

The people who witnessed this healing thought that Jesus was perhaps the Messiah. The Pharisees said, "he is doing this through the power of the Devil." It seems a little odd that they went there right away. They could have hedged quite a bit. "Gee, that is quite astonishing! How did that happen? It does seem like God might be behind something like that..."

Instead, they pick God's greatest enemy and accuse Jesus of working with HIM to perform these miracles. It's hard to imagine a greater insult they could have made against God and Jesus. Jesus disposed of their accusation with a logical response, but he went on to give them a warning: Jesus's claim was that his works were through the power of God the Father. He was as much as telling the Pharisees, "If what I say is true, then while I am with you, you are in the Kingdom, and subject to its rules. Do you want to line up in opposition to God? Pick which side you want to be on, but be careful how you choose."

Jesus spoke the words below while responding to the accusation about using the power of Beelzebul.

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Matthew 12:33-37

33 “Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit. 34 You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of. 35 A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. 36 But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken. 37 For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.”

This is reminiscent of the preaching of John the Baptist in Luke 3. John said, “You brood of vipers!...Produce fruit in keeping with repentance...every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.”

Jesus expanded on this theme, saying that the good or bad things which we say are the result of the good or evil stored in us. We are told further that what we speak is capable of producing good fruit or bad fruit. What might that look like? It may look like words of love, approval, encouragement, politeness, courtesy, respect. (Philippians 4:8) But good fruit would not include words of anger, accusation, insult, threat, and the like.

It must be a very powerful mechanism that can cause the words we speak to produce good fruit or bad fruit. It offers an opportunity for someone who desires to produce good fruit to speak good words to the people near them. Some might consider this a trivial observation, but an awareness of the power of the tongue is among the greatest life lessons. It can cause great harm if used in the wrong way. So, we should be mindful of what we say and the power of the words we speak. Speaking words of affirmation to the people we meet can be very powerful. In fact, others will take notice of this kindness according to John 13:35.

Scene: Beside the Sea of Galilee, ca. AD 27-28

Mark 4:1-20

1 Again Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water’s edge. 2 He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said: 3 “Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. 4 As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. 5 Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. 6 But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. 7 Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. 8 Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times.”

9 Then Jesus said, “Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.”

10 When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. 11 He told them, “The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the

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outside everything is said in parables 12 so that,

‘they may be ever seeing but never perceiving,
and ever hearing but never understanding;
otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!’”

13 Then Jesus said to them, “Don’t you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable? 14 The farmer sows the word. 15 Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them. 16 Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. 17 But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. 18 Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; 19 but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful. 20 Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop—some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times what was sown.”

A parable is an extended simile, where one thing is being compared to another, often using the word “like.” It sometimes has the elements of a short story to illustrate a principle or a concept. Many of Jesus's parables involved agriculture, because that was something easily understood by his audience. This example is helpful because it provides Jesus's explanation of the parable.

Verse 2 states that he taught them many things by parables. Jesus explains the reason for this in verses 11 and 12, by quoting the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 6:9-10), "they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!" This might seem counterintuitive to us, because we expect that Jesus wants the word to be understood and spread. This prophecy from Isaiah is part of God's judgment on Israel. Isaiah is prophesying a period of devastation and punishment on Israel. Albert Barnes paraphrases this in his commentary by saying, "Go, and proclaim truth to a corrupt and sensual people, and the result will be that they will not hear; they are so wicked that they will not attend to it; they will become even more hardened; yet go, and though certain of producing this effect, still proclaim it." Jesus is here talking about the response to the gospel message from the Jewish people.

This parable also speaks to us. We share the characteristics of the various responses to the word as pictured by the plants which result from the seed. Jesus says, "The farmer sows the word," which is the gospel message, but for the various reasons listed it fails to thrive. However, some people hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop. The nature of the crop is not described. Based on other similes which we have seen, it might be supposed to be a crop of good fruit, that is, good works. It is equally likely that this is referring to the expanding effects of people sharing the gospel message. As we share the good news about Jesus with other people, and they believe it and in turn share it with others, the original "seed" sown in us grows to encompass many others. Christian faith calls for us to share the gospel message.

Why is the spreading of the good news necessary? Because it provides for the forgiveness of sin,

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which leads to the spiritual life or death of the person being forgiven. This means very little to the non-believer, but for those who recognize that God's way is right it is a source of sincere concern. If you knew that someone had a terminal condition and you also knew how to cure it, you would likely desire to share the information with them. A second reason for spreading the word is that as people "produce fruit in keeping with repentance," they spread the love of God in the world, which in turn spreads to the benefit of all who encounter it.

So many people were trying to get near Jesus there was not even room on the shore, and he had to retreat to a boat. Verse 1 begins, "Jesus began to teach by the lake." He was not touching people so as to heal them. He was not distributing food as to a multitude. He was simply teaching them. And there was something about his teaching which drew a great crowd of people, sometimes from a large geographic area, so that they could hear it. We have examples in the Gospels of Jesus's teaching, and it seems reasonable to think that once again he was telling the people about the good news and the kingdom of heaven. That is what they wanted to hear about. And they were so hungry for it that they were willing to travel long distances, perhaps over many days, in order to be near Jesus.

Sometimes we have a rather blasé attitude about forgiveness of sin. "It's no big deal, one way or the other." This work would be failing in its duty to the reader to not tell you that it is a big deal. We have the opportunity for forgiveness through faith in Jesus and that deserves careful consideration.

Scene: Capernaum beside the Sea of Galilee, ca. AD 27-28

Jesus had been in the region of the Gerasenes, where he healed a demon-possessed man and a herd of pigs was drowned. He had just crossed back to Capernaum when the scene below occurred.

Mark 5:21-43

21 When Jesus had again crossed over by boat to the other side of the lake, a large crowd gathered around him while he was by the lake. 22 Then one of the synagogue leaders, named Jairus, came, and when he saw Jesus, he fell at his feet. 23 He pleaded earnestly with him, "My little daughter is dying. Please come and put your hands on her so that she will be healed and live." 24 So Jesus went with him.

A large crowd followed and pressed around him. 25 And a woman was there who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years. 26 She had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse. 27 When she heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, 28 because she thought, "If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed." 29 Immediately her bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering.

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

31 "You see the people crowding against you," his disciples answered, "and yet you can ask,

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‘Who touched me?’”

32 But Jesus kept looking around to see who had done it. 33 Then the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came and fell at his feet and, trembling with fear, told him the whole truth. 34 He said to her, “Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering.”

35 While Jesus was still speaking, some people came from the house of Jairus, the synagogue leader. “Your daughter is dead,” they said. “Why bother the teacher anymore?”

36 Overhearing what they said, Jesus told him, “Don’t be afraid; just believe.”

37 He did not let anyone follow him except Peter, James and John the brother of James. 38 When they came to the home of the synagogue leader, Jesus saw a commotion, with people crying and wailing loudly. 39 He went in and said to them, “Why all this commotion and wailing? The child is not dead but asleep.” 40 But they laughed at him.

After he put them all out, he took the child’s father and mother and the disciples who were with him, and went in where the child was. 41 He took her by the hand and said to her, “Talitha koum!” (which means “Little girl, I say to you, get up!”). 42 Immediately the girl stood up and began to walk around (she was twelve years old). At this they were completely astonished. 43 He gave strict orders not to let anyone know about this, and told them to give her something to eat.

Here we have a story within a story. The outside story involves a plea to Jesus from one of the synagogue leaders to come and heal his daughter. The inside story is about a woman who suffered for many years from chronic bleeding.

The inside story introduces a new element: the woman is healed just by touching Jesus's garment, apparently without his knowledge. We were told in the Luke 6:19 passage above that, "... the people all tried to touch him, because power was coming from him and healing them all."

Neither here in the case of the woman, nor in the case of the Luke 6:19 passage, should the power to heal be thought of like someone grabbing an electrical wire. This was Jesus seeing the faith of each one and deciding to heal them.

In the case of the woman with chronic bleeding we are told that Jesus did not know who it was. This is unlikely because this healing happened through the power of the Holy Spirit, which is not a mindless force of nature that can have unforeseen results or somehow do something unintended or by accident. This is a Person, sent from God, endowed with power by God, and who is part of the trinity with God the Father and God the Son. Jesus did know who it was but wanted her to be able to speak, for herself and for the other people there, her confession of faith. In other words, he knew what had happened at that moment but for the benefit of the woman and the others he wanted her to speak.

In the outside story, Jairus, one of the synagogue leaders in Capernaum, had gone to Jesus to ask

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him to come and put his hands on Jairus's dying daughter so that she would be healed and live. We are not told how it was that one of the synagogue leaders would ask Jesus for help, but clearly he knew enough of what Jesus had been doing to believe that Jesus could help him. Jesus agreed to go with him and was once again accompanied by a large crowd, which Mark tells us "pressed around him."

While they were on the way to Jairus's house, the inside story took place. As that was coming to a close, word came saying that Jairus's daughter had died and there was no need to trouble Jesus any longer. Jesus said to Jairus, "Don't be afraid; just believe."

Taking only Peter, James, and John, Jesus continued to Jairus's house, where he encountered a large group of mourners who were making a noisy commotion. Jesus told them, "She's not dead, she's just asleep." The mourners laughed at that, and it diffused some of the tension. Jesus would not do anything which might be viewed as a performance, and therefore did not want to create expectations of a miraculous event.

Jesus put everyone out of the house, and taking only his three disciples and the child's parents, he went into the room where the child lay. Jesus took her by the hand and told her to get up. She did get up and started walking around. Mark says, "At this they were completely astonished." Peter, James, and John may have had an idea of what might happen, but the parents were in shock. Jesus gave them strict orders to not tell anyone about this, and "told them to give her something to eat." We don't know how long the daughter had been ill. Now that she had been healed, Jesus wanted to be sure she got some food in her.

What does this have to do with the gospel message? Here we see Jesus as the personification of the gospel message, in the person of the Messiah, demonstrating mastery over illness and death. In addition to his divine power, we see his compassion and his wisdom. As Christians, this is the person in whom we are asked to place our faith. Do you think that you could trust him?

Chapter Twelve

The Feeding of the Five Thousand, The Yeast of the Pharisees

Scene: Capernaum beside the Sea of Galilee, ca. AD 27-28

Mark 6:30-44

30 The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught. 31 Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, “Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.”

32 So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place. 33 But many who saw them leaving recognized them and ran on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them. 34 When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things.

35 By this time it was late in the day, so his disciples came to him. “This is a remote place,” they said, “and it’s already very late. 36 Send the people away so that they can go to the surrounding countryside and villages and buy themselves something to eat.”

37 But he answered, “You give them something to eat.”

They said to him, “That would take more than half a year’s wages! Are we to go and spend that much on bread and give it to them to eat?”

38 “How many loaves do you have?” he asked. “Go and see.”

When they found out, they said, “Five—and two fish.”

39 Then Jesus directed them to have all the people sit down in groups on the green grass. 40 So they sat down in groups of hundreds and fifties. 41 Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to his disciples to distribute to the people. He also divided the two fish among them all. 42 They all ate and were satisfied, 43 and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces of bread and fish. 44 The number of the men who had eaten was five thousand.

Jesus had sent out the twelve apostles to travel among the towns and villages preaching that people should repent, healing the sick, and driving out demons. They had now returned and wanted to tell Jesus what had happened on their journeys. We cannot tell whether the commotion around them was due to Jesus being there or if they were just in a busy place. Trying to get away by boat suggests the former, as well as the response of the people in the towns who ran along the lake shore and were already there when the boat landed.

Jesus and the apostles had gone to a lot of effort to try to be alone. When they got to the remote place, a crowd was already waiting for them. What was Jesus's response? He felt sorry for them.

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They had just run five or ten miles around the lake shore to be there when the boat arrived, without making a plan for such a journey, milling around the lake and not really knowing what was going on. So, Jesus began to teach them. This was what they had come for.

It started to get late and the apostles were concerned about the people; it was a remote spot and they had brought no provision. Jesus had them check how many loaves they actually had; nobody would have any doubts about that.

As the disciples continued to distribute the bread and fish to the crowd, and they realized what was happening, perhaps they began to exchange looks and laughter. What a wonderful thing to be in the middle of a miracle!

This does not disagree with what was written earlier about healings being performed specifically for an individual, and not at random. This was God pouring out his provision on a group of people who had abandoned everything for the moment to run after Jesus. We will learn later that some were more interested in the bread than in the gospel message, but the faith of some allowed them all to be blessed. And God did not just meet their need – twelve baskets of pieces were collected. Perhaps as in the case of turning water to wine at Cana, as the people were leaving, they were saying to each other, "Wasn't that really good bread?"

Scene: Capernaum beside the Sea of Galilee, ca. AD 27-28

The day after the feeding of the five thousand.

John 6:22-29

22 The next day the crowd that had stayed on the opposite shore of the lake realized that only one boat had been there, and that Jesus had not entered it with his disciples, but that they had gone away alone. 23 Then some boats from Tiberias landed near the place where the people had eaten the bread after the Lord had given thanks. 24 Once the crowd realized that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they got into the boats and went to Capernaum in search of Jesus.

25 When they found him on the other side of the lake, they asked him, "Rabbi, when did you get here?"

26 Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw the signs I performed but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. 27 Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For on him God the Father has placed his seal of approval."

28 Then they asked him, "What must we do to do the works God requires?"

29 Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent."

This passage happened on the day after the feeding of the five thousand we just read about, but

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the scene is now being described by John the writer, whereas in the prior passage it was from Mark's gospel.

John's statement that Jesus had not entered the boat is correct; during the previous night Jesus had joined them in the boat after walking across the surface of the water in the Sea of Galilee. The crowd was now on a mission to find Jesus, which they did after sailing back to Capernaum.

The question to Jesus about "When did you get here?" sounds overly casual. Jesus saw their true motivation – they wanted more bread. They did not understand the significance of what Jesus did, or that it was about more than satisfying their hunger. Jesus told them that he would give them "food that endures to eternal life", which they did not understand as meaning something spiritual and not physical.

"Then they asked him, 'What must we do to do the works God requires?' Jesus answered, 'the work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.' " This question and answer is a very concise statement of the gospel: God is sovereign over his creation; he requires us to do his work; we are to believe and demonstrate faith; in the one sent from God, Jesus.

Scene: Bethsaida, ca. AD 27-28

Bethsaida was a town near the north shore of the Sea of Galilee.

Shortly prior to the scene in the passage below, there had been a circumstance similar to the feeding of the five thousand. They were in a remote place and a large crowd had gathered. Mark 8:2-3 quotes Jesus as saying, "I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. If I send them home hungry, they will collapse on the way, because some of them have come a long distance."

Jesus again asked the disciples to determine how much food they had, and the answer was seven loaves and a few small fish. Jesus had everyone in the crowd sit down, gave thanks for the food, and broke the loaves for the disciples to distribute to the crowd. As before, everyone in a crowd of four thousand was satisfied and seven baskets of pieces were picked up. Jesus and the disciples had crossed the lake and were on the return trip when the verses below took place.

Mark 8:14-21

14 The disciples had forgotten to bring bread, except for one loaf they had with them in the boat.
15 "Be careful," Jesus warned them. "Watch out for the yeast of the Pharisees and that of Herod."

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

17 Aware of their discussion, Jesus asked them: "Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened? 18 Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear? And don't you remember? 19 When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?"

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“Twelve,” they replied.

20 “And when I broke the seven loaves for the four thousand, how many basketfuls of pieces did you pick up?”

They answered, “Seven.”

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

We have looked at some scenes where it is easy to imagine a joking and casual attitude. This is not one of those times. We see impatience on Jesus's part, as the disciples fail to understand the spiritual nature of his comment.

The Pharisees had been demanding a "sign" miracle which would prove Jesus's divine origin, but Jesus refused to do anything that might be interpreted as a performance. Jesus was trying to convey an important message and his disciples were worried about not having enough bread.

"Why are you talking about having no bread?", Jesus asked incredulously, and proceeded to ask seven more questions in a row. You can almost feel the desire of the apostles to get back in Jesus's good graces as they correctly answered his questions about the number of basketsful of pieces that were picked up. They wanted to understand, but it was difficult.

We sometimes face the same difficulty. We want to understand the things of God, but they remain beyond our grasp. We desire to understand the ways of God, but we may allow it to become a stumbling block if we decide we must understand everything about God before we put our trust in God. A moment's reflection will show that to be an unrealistic expectation. We cannot understand everything about our own Earth or our own bodies, let alone the Creator of the universe. We have to recognize and submit to God's sovereignty over his creation, which includes us.

If there are things in the Bible which seem wrong to you or that you do not agree with, talk to God about it. Tell him that you don't agree or that you don't understand why something had to be the way it was. God welcomes those questions and wants to engage with us.

Chapter Thirteen

In Cæsarea Philippi, Forgive Seventy-Seven Times

Scene: Region of Cæsarea Philippi ca. AD 28-29

Cæsarea Philippi was at the northern end of the Jordan River Valley. When Herod the Great died, the town Paneas was renamed Caesarea Philippi in honor of Caesar Augustus and Herod's son Philip, who controlled that region.

Mark 8:27-30

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

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

29 "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"

Peter answered, "You are the Messiah."

30 Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.

When Simon Peter's brother Andrew first introduced Simon to Jesus (John 1:41), Andrew said, "We have found the Messiah." Now, after being with Jesus for about a year, Peter could attest from his own experience who Jesus was.

About a week after what we read above, Jesus led Peter, James, and John to a mountaintop. While there, Jesus's clothing became dazzling white and Moses and Elijah appeared and began talking with Jesus. Possibly Jesus was allowing Peter, James, and John to witness more of his divine nature after Peter had acknowledged him as the Messiah. The four have just returned to the other disciples when the scene below takes place.

Mark 9:14-27

14 When they came to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and the teachers of the law arguing with them. 15 As soon as all the people saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet him.

16 "What are you arguing with them about?" he asked.

17 A man in the crowd answered, "Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. 18 Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not."

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19 “You unbelieving generation,” Jesus replied, “how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me.”

20 So they brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth.

21 Jesus asked the boy’s father, “How long has he been like this?”

“From childhood,” he answered. 22 “It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.”

23 “ ‘If you can?’ ” said Jesus. “Everything is possible for one who believes.”

24 Immediately the boy’s father exclaimed, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!”

25 When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the impure spirit. “You deaf and mute spirit,” he said, “I command you, come out of him and never enter him again.”

26 The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, “He’s dead.” 27 But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up.

When Jesus approached his disciples as they argued with the teachers of the law he asked, "What are you arguing with them about?" We don't hear the answer to that, because a man in the crowd responds about his son and the boy's dire condition. Jesus responds by asking rhetorically, "You unbelieving generation, how long shall I stay with you?" Perhaps he is responding based on what he can see of the father's faith, or perhaps he is commenting more generally about the crowd. Probably the latter, because we have seen Jesus elsewhere ask how long he must remain with an unbelieving generation.

The father begs Jesus, "But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us." Jesus questions this formulation by asking, "If you can?" This is as much as to say, if you don't think that I can help you, why are you asking me for help? Jesus does take pity on him, assuring him that, "Everything is possible for one who believes." In reply, the boy's father cries out, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"

This is one of the most encouraging verses in the Bible. The father is desperate. He would do anything to help his son. As he exclaims, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!", he is perhaps foreshadowing generations of believers who will cry out to the Lord from their need, with nowhere else to turn for help and willing to do anything. When Jesus tells the father to believe, the father is willing, but he does not know how and begs Jesus for help to do this necessary thing.

Here is an example for one considering putting their trust in Jesus. He is merciful. He does know what it is like to walk in our shoes, and he has compassion for us. Jesus did the very thing that

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the father asked: he helped his unbelief. As the father joyfully embraced his son, he believed in his innermost self that Jesus was able to help him.

Scene: Capernaum beside the Sea of Galilee, ca. AD 28-29

Jesus has returned to Galilee with the Twelve.

Matthew 18:21-35

21 Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?”

22 Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

23 “Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. 24 As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. 25 Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

26 “At this the servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ 27 The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

28 “But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded.

29 “His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.’

30 “But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. 31 When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.

32 “Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. 33 Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ 34 In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

35 “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

This scene goes from zero to 100 in a heartbeat. We don't know if Peter has some specific offense in mind, but we get the sense that he thinks seven times is an upper limit that might even be a little too much. Before Peter has a chance to comprehend the need to forgive seventy-seven times, Jesus takes the meaning from the worldly to the Kingdom.

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We need to understand that the debt of ten thousand bags of gold is one which could never possibly be repaid. It would represent multiple millions of dollars in current value. The servant asks for patience, that is, he is asking for more time to repay the debt. Instead, the king forgives the debt.

The king is God and we are the debtor with a debt impossible to repay. God is willing to forgive us when we confess that we have failed to meet his standard (in this example showing mercy to others) and promise that we will try to do things his way in the future (in this example by forgiving others).

The debt of the second servant would be a few months wages, and the second servant represents those people we encounter in the world. By forgiving our sins, God has forgiven us more than we could possibly repay. In turn, we should be merciful and forgive the offenses we receive in this world because God has been merciful and forgiven us first.

Why talk about this in a book about the gospel message? Because if you put your faith in Jesus this is what you are choosing: recognizing that God's way is right. If Jesus modeled mercy and forgiveness in his life and in his teaching, we are expected to also demonstrate mercy and forgiveness. Is the idea of modeling Jesus's behavior appealing to you? See Appendix A

Chapter Fourteen

In Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles and the Feast of Dedication

Scene: Galilee and Jerusalem, ca. AD 28-29

Jesus had been traveling in Galilee because he knew that the Jewish leaders in Judea were plotting to kill him. At that time, the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles was approaching, and the custom was for people to travel to Jerusalem for the festival. Jesus's brothers encouraged him to go up to the festival, so that he could show off to the people in Jerusalem the works he had been doing in Galilee. Jesus told them to go on without him and after the brothers left, Jesus went up to the festival in secret. The Jewish leaders were looking for Jesus and the people in the crowds knew about it, which led to discussion about who the people thought that Jesus was. Halfway through the festival, Jesus appeared and went into the temple courts to teach.

Scene: Jerusalem, October or November, during the Feast of Tabernacles.

John 7:25-32

25 At that point some of the people of Jerusalem began to ask, “Isn’t this the man they are trying to kill? 26 Here he is, speaking publicly, and they are not saying a word to him. Have the authorities really concluded that he is the Messiah? 27 But we know where this man is from; when the Messiah comes, no one will know where he is from.”

28 Then Jesus, still teaching in the temple courts, cried out, “Yes, you know me, and you know where I am from. I am not here on my own authority, but he who sent me is true. You do not know him, 29 but I know him because I am from him and he sent me.”

30 At this they tried to seize him, but no one laid a hand on him, because his hour had not yet come. 31 Still, many in the crowd believed in him. They said, “When the Messiah comes, will he perform more signs than this man?”

32 The Pharisees heard the crowd whispering such things about him. Then the chief priests and the Pharisees sent temple guards to arrest him.

In the John 7 passage, some people were wondering if Jesus was the Messiah, both because of the attention he was receiving from the Jewish leaders and because of the miraculous works he had performed. Jesus's words in verse 29 cause some in the crowd to try to seize him because claiming to be from God and to be sent from God was blasphemy to the Jews. Yet amid all the argument and dispute, we see in verse 31 that, "Still, many in the crowd believed in him. They said, 'When the Messiah comes, will he perform more signs than this man?'" This comment reveals more consideration than belief following the witnessing of a miracle. The cumulative effect of multiple miracles set aside any possibility that this was happening due to confusion on the part of the viewer. For these things to happen, Jesus must have had the power of God.

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This belief from seeing was an important reason for Jesus's miracles. In addition to the conviction which results from seeing and hearing something for oneself, eyewitness testimony is also very powerful. We saw in the example of the woman at the well in Sychar that after encountering Jesus, her words caused others in the town to believe.

This process of testimony resulting in belief is essential in spreading the gospel message. After a relatively short time anyone who was an eyewitness or who had spoken to an eyewitness of Jesus's miracles would be gone. That is why a written record about what Jesus said and did is so important, to preserve accuracy and as an aid to distribution. The biblical Gospel books were written by people who were eyewitnesses or who heard from eyewitnesses. By reading this material you have become part of the process. Perhaps it will lead to belief.

Scene: Jerusalem, during the Feast of Tabernacles.

John 8:21-30

21 Once more Jesus said to them, "I am going away, and you will look for me, and you will die in your sin. Where I go, you cannot come."

22 This made the Jews ask, "Will he kill himself? Is that why he says, 'Where I go, you cannot come'?"

23 But he continued, "You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world. 24 I told you that you would die in your sins; if you do not believe that I am he, you will indeed die in your sins."

25 "Who are you?" they asked.

"Just what I have been telling you from the beginning," Jesus replied. 26 "I have much to say in judgment of you. But he who sent me is trustworthy, and what I have heard from him I tell the world."

27 They did not understand that he was telling them about his Father. 28 So Jesus said, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me. 29 The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what pleases him." 30 Even as he spoke, many believed in him.

The 8:21-30 passage takes place on the day following the Chapter 7 passage. Jesus argued with the Jewish leaders regarding the validity of Jesus's testimony based on Jewish law. Jesus then told them, "I am going away... Where I go you cannot come." This puzzled the Jews, and Jesus's statements about being from above and not of this world did not help their confusion.

When Jesus said, "if you do not believe that I am he, you will indeed die in your sins", "he" referred to the Messiah. The Jewish leaders would have preferred that Jesus say, "I am the Messiah", because then they would have had something concrete over which to attack him, and

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so they asked, "Who are you?" Even though Jesus had told a few others that he was the Messiah, he would not do anything for the Pharisees which might be considered a performance. Instead he confirmed that he was "Just what I have been telling you from the beginning..."

John, the author of this account, tells us in verse 27 that, "They did not understand that he was telling them about his Father." This brings to mind the prophecy from Isaiah 6:9-10 which we saw earlier, explaining Jesus's frequent use of parables, "they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding."

Jesus went on to tell them, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he..." This is a reference to his death by crucifixion and that he would be revealed as the Messiah by his resurrection.

And then, in verse 30, something marvelous happened: "Even as he spoke, many believed in him." These people had the same evidence as the Pharisees. They were hearing and seeing the same actions and words from Jesus. And yet for them, something changed, and they went from hearing to belief in that moment. That is how the gospel message is spread.

Scene: Jerusalem, during the Feast of Tabernacles.

John 8:48-59

48 The Jews answered him, "Aren't we right in saying that you are a Samaritan and demon-possessed?"

49 "I am not possessed by a demon," said Jesus, "but I honor my Father and you dishonor me. 50 I am not seeking glory for myself; but there is one who seeks it, and he is the judge. 51 Very truly I tell you, whoever obeys my word will never see death."

52 At this they exclaimed, "Now we know that you are demon-possessed! Abraham died and so did the prophets, yet you say that whoever obeys your word will never taste death. 53 Are you greater than our father Abraham? He died, and so did the prophets. Who do you think you are?"

54 Jesus replied, "If I glorify myself, my glory means nothing. My Father, whom you claim as your God, is the one who glorifies me. 55 Though you do not know him, I know him. If I said I did not, I would be a liar like you, but I do know him and obey his word. 56 Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad."

57 "You are not yet fifty years old," they said to him, "and you have seen Abraham!"

58 "Very truly I tell you," Jesus answered, "before Abraham was born, I am!" 59 At this, they picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus hid himself, slipping away from the temple grounds.

The outburst in the John 8:52-59 passage occurred the second day following Jesus's arrival in Jerusalem, when Jesus said, "Very truly I tell you, whoever obeys my word will never see death."

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When Jesus tried to talk about the spiritual, people often wanted to cling to the physical, and that is how the Jewish leaders understood him.

Jesus had previously been accused of being demon-possessed, and this attempt seems intended more to ridicule him than as a serious accusation. As we saw in verse 25 above, the Jewish leaders asked, "Who do you think you are?" This time, Jesus makes it very plain by stating explicitly, "My Father, whom you claim as your God, is the one who glorifies me." This dispelled any doubts about who Jesus was talking about which we saw in John 8:27 above. There is boldness and clarity in the phrase, "whom you claim as your God." This reveals the Father as the God of Genesis, Exodus, and the Prophets, and it also reveals the inadequacy of the Pharisees.

In the exchange about Abraham, Jesus is once again talking about the spiritual and the Jewish leaders persist in taking him literally. The crisis occurs when Jesus says, "before Abraham was born, I am!" The reason the Jews reacted so strongly to this statement is that when Moses encountered God in the burning bush in Exodus 3, Moses asked God what he should tell the Hebrews if they asked Moses who had sent him. Exodus 3:14 says, "God said to Moses, 'I Am Who I Am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.' " The Jews recognized that Jesus was not only claiming to be the Messiah, he was also claiming to be God himself. The penalty for blasphemy was death, and that is why the Jews reached for stones to kill Jesus. But as we saw before, the timing of Jesus's death was not under human control, and Jesus left the scene.

Scene: Jerusalem, ca. AD 28-29

Jerusalem, during the Feast of Tabernacles.

John 9:1-41

1 As he went along, 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 "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him. 4 As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. 5 While I am in the world, I am the light of the world."

6 After saying this, he spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man's eyes. 7 "Go," he told him, "wash in the Pool of Siloam" (this word means "Sent"). So, the man went and washed, and came home seeing.

8 His neighbors and those who had formerly seen him begging asked, "Isn't this the same man who used to sit and beg?" 9 Some claimed that he was.

Others said, "No, he only looks like him."

But he himself insisted, "I am the man."

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10 “How then were your eyes opened?” they asked.

11 He replied, “The man they call Jesus made some mud and put it on my eyes. He told me to go to Siloam and wash. So I went and washed, and then I could see.”

12 “Where is this man?” they asked him.

“I don’t know,” he said.

13 They brought to the Pharisees the man who had been blind. 14 Now the day on which Jesus had made the mud and opened the man’s eyes was a Sabbath. 15 Therefore the Pharisees also asked him how he had received his sight. “He put mud on my eyes,” the man replied, “and I washed, and now I see.”

16 Some of the Pharisees said, “This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath.”

But others asked, “How can a sinner perform such signs?” So they were divided.

17 Then they turned again to the blind man, “What have you to say about him? It was your eyes he opened.”

The man replied, “He is a prophet.”

18 They still did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they sent for the man’s parents. 19 “Is this your son?” they asked. “Is this the one you say was born blind? How is it that now he can see?”

20 “We know he is our son,” the parents answered, “and we know he was born blind. 21 But how he can see now, or who opened his eyes, we don’t know. Ask him. He is of age; he will speak for himself.” 22 His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders, who already had decided that anyone who acknowledged that Jesus was the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. 23 That was why his parents said, “He is of age; ask him.”

24 A second time they summoned the man who had been blind. “Give glory to God by telling the truth,” they said. “We know this man is a sinner.”

25 He replied, “Whether he is a sinner or not, I don’t know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!”

26 Then they asked him, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?”

27 He answered, “I have 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 Then they hurled insults at him and said, “You are this fellow’s disciple! We are disciples of

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Moses! 29 We know that God spoke to Moses, but as for this fellow, we don't even know where he comes from."

30 The man answered, "Now that is remarkable! You don't know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. 31 We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly person who does his will. 32 Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind. 33 If this man were not from God, he could do nothing."

34 To this they replied, "You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us!" And they threw him out.

35 Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?"

36 "Who is he, sir?" the man asked. "Tell me so that I may believe in him."

37 Jesus said, "You have now seen him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you."

38 Then the man said, "Lord, I believe," and he worshiped him.

39 Jesus said, "For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind."

40 Some Pharisees who were with him heard him say this and asked, "What? Are we blind too?"

41 Jesus said, "If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains.

Here we see a series of scenes in which people are filled with doubt. This doubting becomes almost ironic or comic as people begin to doubt things which were obvious a few moments before. This is in contrast to the man who had been blind and is now very confident about what had happened to him.

In the opening scene, Jesus and his disciples encounter the man blind from birth. The disciples ask Jesus, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus explains that neither the man nor his parents were responsible, and his blindness was so that God's works might be revealed. This demonstrates that God already knows everything that will happen and can use it for his purposes.

After being anointed with mud, the man obeyed Jesus's instructions, regained his sight, and returned to his neighborhood with his sight restored. His neighbors began to doubt whether it was really him or not, with some claiming this new person only looked like the blind man. These were people who had been around him every day for most of his life. We can feel his frustration as he insisted, "I am the man."

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The neighbors wanted to know, if he was the same man, how was it that he could now see? The man gave a summary of what had happened and identified "the man they call Jesus" as the one who anointed him. When the neighbors asked, "Where is this man?" and he replied, "I don't know," he is telling them the truth and we can imagine him looking around in confusion, keeping in mind that up until a short time ago he had been blind from birth.

The neighbors took the man to the Pharisees, who were the religious leaders and had authority over the people. Jesus had had previous disagreements with the Pharisees about healing on the Sabbath, and they were eager to make this charge again after hearing what had happened. The Sabbath regulations prohibited preparing or using medicine to heal on the Sabbath, and according to Barnes' comments on John 9:6, "it was particularly forbidden among them to use spittle on that day to heal diseased eyes."

This time, the man did not mention the name of Jesus. We saw in Verse 22 that the Jewish leaders planned to banish from the synagogue anyone who said that Jesus was the Messiah, and the man was probably aware of this. The Pharisees started arguing about whether Jesus's ability to do miraculous works outweighed the fact that he was violating the Sabbath regulations.

Then the Pharisees then began to doubt whether the man had actually been blind at all, even though they were probably familiar with his presence as a blind beggar. The Pharisees called in the man's parents and asked them, "Is this your son? Is this the one you say was born blind?" Notice the, "you say." The parents no longer have the benefit of the doubt; now they must convince the Pharisees that he really was their son. They confirmed that yes, he was their son, and that he had been blind from birth, but for fear of the Pharisees they denied any knowledge of how it was that he could now see.

The Pharisees again called in the formerly-blind man and assured him that they knew Jesus was a sinner. And now this man, blind until that day, standing before the Jewish religious court, boldly proclaimed, "Whether he is a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!"

The neighbors doubted whether he was the same man, and the Pharisees doubted that he had actually been blind, but for this man there was no doubt: "I was blind but now I see!"

When the Pharisees attempted to taunt the man about Jesus by telling him, "we don't even know where he comes from," the man's reply shows that God picked just the right person for that moment. Here was a man, blind from birth, with probably no education, and who likely knew only the area from his home to his begging spot, responding to the Pharisees statement by saying, "Now that is remarkable! You don't know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes." This is bold! He goes on to instruct them about something which some of them knew but were unwilling to say: "If this man were not from God, he could do nothing."

Jesus found the man after the Pharisees threw him out of the temple, and asked him if he believed in the Son of Man. When asked who that is, Jesus replied, "you have now seen him" because when they first met, the man could not see him. Jesus continued that it was he who was speaking to the man, and the man, bolstered by the knowledge that only through God's power

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could this change have been made and his complete confidence in what had happened, replied, "Lord, I believe."

What was otherwise a happy ending took on a more serious tone when Jesus said, "For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind." Here he is using "see" in two senses – to see with the eyes and to have understanding. We saw previously that both of these occurrences were predicted prophetically.

When the Pharisees ask, "Are we blind too?" we have just seen both meanings take place. The man has had his sight restored, while the Pharisees, who prided themselves on their knowledge and understanding, were revealed to be unable to see the truth.

There is third a meaning of "so that the blind will see" which relates to the spreading of the gospel message, and that is the change which occurs from understanding that God's way is right and that we have not followed that way. Something happens in that moment which allows us to see that which we were not able to see previously.

Scene: Jerusalem, ca. AD 28-29

While in Jerusalem, Jesus had a long discourse with the Pharisees. This is a short excerpt from that passage.

John 10:14-18

14 "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me— 15 just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. 16 I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. 17 The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. 18 No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father."

In the discourse with the Pharisees, Jesus used the metaphor of himself as a shepherd and those who believe in him as his sheep. This portion from that longer passage shows us more about the spiritual relationship between Jesus and those who believe in him. Jesus loves the sheep - believers - and willingly sacrifices his life for them.

In his role as Messiah, Jesus took the penalty for our sin on himself. Through his death he paid the penalty in our place.

The comment about "sheep that are not of this sheep pen" may have been for our benefit. The Pharisees did not understand what he was talking about in the first place and would not have known what to make of it. But reading this passage as a Gentile (anyone who is not Jewish), it says that the worldwide spread of the gospel message was always God's plan. Jesus knew that

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people far from Jerusalem, reading the words and actions recorded in the Gospels, would believe in him and become part of his flock.

Jesus must have been thinking about the upcoming trial of crucifixion and that is why he talked about laying down his life. Jesus made clear that all which was about to happen was under his control and that of the Father. He said, "I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again." This brings to mind his demonstration to the Pharisees that he had authority to forgive sin. After the crucifixion, Jesus will demonstrate his authority by rising from the dead.

Scene: Jerusalem, ca. AD 28-29

Jesus was in Jerusalem for the Festival of Dedication, which we know as Hanukkah. It usually falls in mid to late December.

John 10:22-30, 37-42

22 Then came the Festival of Dedication at Jerusalem. It was winter, 23 and Jesus was in the temple courts walking in Solomon's Colonnade. 24 The Jews who were there gathered around him, saying, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly."

25 Jesus answered, "I did tell you, but you do not believe. The works I do in my Father's name testify about me, 26 but you do not believe because you are not my sheep. 27 My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. 28 I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand. 29 My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. 30 I and the Father are one."

37 Do not believe me unless I do the works of my Father. 38 But if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father." 39 Again they tried to seize him, but he escaped their grasp.

40 Then Jesus went back across the Jordan to the place where John had been baptizing in the early days. There he stayed, 41 and many people came to him. They said, "Though John never performed a sign, all that John said about this man was true." 42 And in that place many believed in Jesus.

This exchange took place six or eight weeks after what we read above in verses 14 to 18, and Jesus continued to use the image of himself as a shepherd and those who believe in him as his sheep. As before, the Pharisees were trying to make Jesus say, "I am the Messiah" so that they would have a specific charge to make. Jesus replied, "I did tell you, but you do not believe." He told them that they do not believe because, "you are not my sheep." He said, "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me." Jesus's sheep, those who believe in him, have a special, irrevocable relationship with him.

In verse 28, Jesus makes an extraordinary promise: "I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish..." This is also part of the gospel message. When our sins have been forgiven, we are no

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longer under the penalty of spiritual death. That penalty was paid by the death of Jesus. After that happens, we are free to spend eternity with the Lord.

An interruption took place following verse 30, when the Jews wanted to stone Jesus because they considered his statement that "I and the Father are one" to be blasphemy.

Jesus resumed his statement in verse 37, telling them that, "even though you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father." This makes clear the importance of the miracles which Jesus had been performing. In addition to being an expression of God's love, because of their miraculous nature they provided undeniable proof that Jesus had power over the physical world and even over life and death.

Jesus wanted them to stop and recognize that no one could do what he was doing if they were not from God. But the Pharisees were in a rage, and once again attempted to hold Jesus so that they could stone him.

The gospel writer John then tells us that Jesus went across the Jordan River "to the place where John [the Baptist] had been baptizing in the early days." This was also the place of Jesus's baptism, and where he began his early ministry. It must have been a bittersweet time for Jesus, as he recalled the joys of those early days while still being conscious of his coming trial.

And then John tells us, "And in that place many believed in Jesus." Like the people at Sychar who said, "...now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world," being in the presence of Jesus was enough.

Chapter Fifteen

In Perea at the House of a Pharisee, the Death and Resurrection of Lazarus

Scene: Perea, ca. AD 29-30

Jesus had crossed the Jordan River from Jerusalem to travel in the region of Perea. He had been invited for a meal at the house of a prominent Pharisee.

Luke 15:1-32

1 Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. 2 But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

Tax collectors were often Jews who were employed by the Romans to receive tax payments. They were looked down upon by other Jews because they were cooperating with the Roman occupation and because of a reputation for collecting more than was owed, to benefit themselves. Who the other "sinners" were is not clear. Some commenters view these people as representing a lower economic segment of society, and therefore lower in morals. It is likely that the Pharisees would view anyone who did not follow their ultra-legalistic approach to the law as a "sinner" and therefore as an object of disdain. Not someone you would want nearby when you were eating.

The Parable of the Lost Sheep

3 Then Jesus told them this parable: 4 “Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn’t he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? 5 And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders 6 and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.’ 7 I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.

The Parable of the Lost Coin

8 “Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Doesn’t she light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? 9 And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.’ 10 In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

The Parable of the Lost Son

11 Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons. 12 The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them.

13 “Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. 14 After he had spent everything, there was a severe

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famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. 15 So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. 16 He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

17 “When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! 18 I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ 20 So he got up and went to his father.

“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

21 “The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

22 “But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23 Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. 24 For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.

25 “Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 27 ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’

28 “The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. 29 But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’

31 “ ‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. 32 But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ ”

Jesus told three stories to contrast how sinners were viewed in the kingdom of heaven with how the Pharisees viewed them. The subjects of the three stories are not meant for the Pharisees, who would not be likely to identify with the anxiety followed by joy of finding a lost sheep or a lost coin or a wayward child.

These were examples which ordinary people could understand. They knew the impact of losing a sheep. The person who found the sheep carried it back on his shoulders. The sheep may have been tired from wandering, and while it was being carried back it would be resting "up close and personal" with its owner. The shepherd's happiness is too great to keep to himself; he has to share it with his friends and neighbors. "Rejoice with me" he says to them. That's the kind of happiness

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that Jesus was telling us takes place in heaven when a sinner repents.

We have looked quite a bit at the word "repent" and at the idea of repentance for the forgiveness of sin, and that is what Jesus is talking about. Why would that cause such joy? If the wandering sheep represents the sinner and the other sheep the ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent, that's only a 1% loss. You've still got 99%! Isn't that pretty good? No, it's not. Not when the loss represents someone that is dear to the shepherd, someone that is known by name and is precious. Someone who merits rejoicing and celebration when they are saved.

Why is this a cause for celebration? What is the sinner being saved from? Remember what Jesus said to the Pharisees in Jerusalem: "if you do not believe that I am he, you will indeed die in your sins." John the Baptist told the crowd, "Every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."

That is the proposition here: no one has always done what is right, we have all sinned, and the penalty for that sin is death. If we believe in Jesus and recognize that God's way is right, and that we have not followed that way, and we trust that he will forgive us, and we intend to follow his way going forward, that is repentance for the forgiveness of sin. Our sin will be forgiven and there will be rejoicing in heaven because we have become part of the kingdom of heaven and are no longer subject to the penalty of death.

The story of the woman with the lost coin has a different emphasis. She does not have a relationship with the coin as she might to an animal or a person, but it is precious to her. And what is her response when she learns that it is missing? She does not say, "Gee, I hope that coin turns up." Instead, she will "light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it." This should be a great encouragement to people learning about the gospel, because even as we are seeking him, God is seeking us.

The story of the lost son is quite different. The son was not lost the way a sheep or coin could be lost, he has deliberately rejected his father. He asked for his share of his father's estate, took it all, and left. Imagine being in a large city where opportunities were available to spend a large amount on wild living. When he can no longer feed himself, he is hired out to feed pigs, which would have been particularly demeaning to a Jew because pigs were considered unclean.

Hungry and with no prospect of getting food, Jesus says, "he came to his senses." What a great way to put it! His behavior did not make sense, and he finally realized it. He decided to return to his father, confess his sin, and beg to have a place as a servant.

When the father saw the son "still a long way off" he did not tell the servants to "Tell him I'm not at home." Instead, he ran to him, and embraced him, and kissed him. The son said, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you." Did the father say, "You certainly have! I hope you have learned your lesson! You received your inheritance and you won't get any more from me?" The father's only response was to, "Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23 Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. 24 For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."

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This story portrays God as the loving father and the lost son as the wayward sinner. When we believe in the name of Jesus, we receive the right to become sons and daughters of God. And God receives us with joy. Why so? The father says, "this son of mine was dead and is alive again." Is this exaggeration, in the way that a parent might tell a child, "You're dead to me"? When Jesus told the Pharisees in Jerusalem, "if you do not believe that I am he, you will indeed die in your sins.", he was not exaggerating for effect. Instead, he was giving them a solemn warning. Separation from the Father leads to spiritual death. Now, with the relationship restored, the son is indeed alive again. Jesus has the father repeat this twice; emphasized so that we will not miss it.

We also get to see one of the "ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent" mentioned in the story of the lost sheep. "Righteous" means to have a right relationship with God. A dictionary might define a righteous person as someone with a good moral character, although we have already seen that no one is living a completely moral life. So, when Jesus talks about "righteous persons who do not need to repent," he is talking about people who do not need to repent because they have already repented and their sins are forgiven. The object of repentance is to receive forgiveness for sin. These are people who have received that forgiveness and are now working in the kingdom to produce good fruit.

Jesus allows us to see the humanness of the older brother. Instead of rejoicing with the father at his brother's return, he resents the celebration out of jealousy because he feels that he has not been appropriately celebrated for his constant obedience to the father. Someone might say that he does not deserve to be celebrated because he has simply been doing what he was supposed to be doing, doing the father's work. In Luke 17:10, Jesus tells the apostles, "So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'" But the Father wants us to live joyful lives. He tells the older son, "everything I have is yours." If the older son wanted to celebrate with his friends, that would be fine. But he also tells the older son "we had to celebrate and be glad" because "this brother of yours was dead and is alive again."

Before we leave these three stories, how do they relate to the gospel message? The point of the stories is that God is not indifferent to our spiritual condition. He longs for us to come to him. There is celebration in heaven when someone comes into a right relationship with the Father. If you are reading this study to better understand what is the Christian gospel message, and what it means to put your faith in Jesus, these stories picture how much God wants you to have a right relationship with him. That happens through repentance and putting your faith in Jesus.

Scene: Perea and Bethany, ca. AD 29-30

Jesus was still on the eastern side of the Jordan River. In order to get to the village of Bethany, which was near Jerusalem, he had to go back across the Jordan into Judea.

John 11:1-46

1 Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. 2 (This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured

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perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair.) 3 So the sisters sent word to Jesus, “Lord, the one you love is sick.”

4 When he heard this, Jesus said, “This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God’s glory so that God’s Son may be glorified through it.” 5 Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. 6 So when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days, 7 and then he said to his disciples, “Let us go back to Judea.”

8 “But Rabbi,” they said, “a short while ago the Jews there tried to stone you, and yet you are going back?”

9 Jesus answered, “Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Anyone who walks in the daytime will not stumble, for they see by this world’s light. 10 It is when a person walks at night that they stumble, for they have no light.”

11 After he had said this, he went on to tell them, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up.”

12 His disciples replied, “Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better.” 13 Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep.

14 So then he told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead, 15 and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.”

16 Then Thomas (also known as Didymus) said to the rest of the disciples, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.”

17 On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. 18 Now Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, 19 and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. 20 When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.

21 “Lord,” Martha said to Jesus, “if you had been here, my brother would not have died. 22 But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.”

23 Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.”

24 Martha answered, “I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.”

25 Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; 26 and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

27 “Yes, Lord,” she replied, “I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.”

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28 After she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary aside. “The Teacher is here,” she said, “and is asking for you.” 29 When Mary heard this, she got up quickly and went to him. 30 Now Jesus had not yet entered the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. 31 When the Jews who had been with Mary in the house, comforting her, noticed how quickly she got up and went out, they followed her, supposing she was going to the tomb to mourn there.

32 When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

33 When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. 34 “Where have you laid him?” he asked.

“Come and see, Lord,” they replied.

35 Jesus wept.

36 Then the Jews said, “See how he loved him!”

37 But some of them said, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?”

38 Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. 39 “Take away the stone,” he said.

“But, Lord,” said Martha, the sister of the dead man, “by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days.”

40 Then Jesus said, “Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?”

41 So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. 42 I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.”

43 When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” 44 The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face.

Jesus said to them, “Take off the grave clothes and let him go.”

45 Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him. 46 But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done.

It is possible that Jesus met Martha, Mary, and Lazarus while he was doing ministry at the Jordan River following his baptism by John the Baptist. Verse 18 tells us that Bethany was not far from Jerusalem and it is in the in the direction of the Jordan River. It is not stated, but it seems likely

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that the brother and sisters were baptized by Jesus or his disciples during that time and they began a friendship. Verse 5 says, "Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus." They have known Jesus since the early days of his ministry and they have become close.

John the gospel writer's parenthetical comment in verse 2 about anointing Jesus's feet had not yet happened when the events he is describing took place.

When Jesus learned that Lazarus was sick, he told the disciples, "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it."

The disciples did not understand what Jesus was telling them. They were similarly confused when he told them that Lazarus had fallen asleep, which they saw as a good step toward his recovery. Jesus explained, saying "Lazarus is dead, and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe." Jesus had been allowing his disciples to witness his power so that their belief could be strengthened. Even though Peter had told Jesus that he believed he was the Messiah, Jesus made it plain here that he hoped all of the disciples' faith would be strengthened by witnessing Lazarus's resurrection, although the disciples had no idea what was going to happen.

Thomas's comment about "that we may die with him" was in reference to the earlier discussion about the Pharisees attempting to kill Jesus, and he was concerned about the possibility.

Jesus arrived in the outskirts of Bethany and learned that Lazarus had been in the tomb for four days. It is easy to picture a child seeing Jesus in the distance and running into the house calling, "Martha! Jesus is coming!" She went to meet Jesus and said, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask." This pictures the faith of Jesus's mother when he changed the water to wine at Cana. She may not have understood all the theology, but she trusted in Jesus's compassion and power. Martha had some confusion about what Jesus meant by "rise again," and then Jesus asked her what seems a rather complicated question: "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?" Martha replied with the faith which must have been born and grew as she came to know Jesus after her baptism, "Yes, Lord," she replied, "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world."

Martha returned to the house and told Mary that Jesus was waiting for her. When Mary left the house, some of the people who had come from Jerusalem to mourn with them saw her leave and thought that she was going to the tomb, so they followed her. When Jesus saw Mary weeping, and the weeping of the other mourners, he also felt a great grief. This emotional response by Jesus tells us something about him as a man. Even knowing that Lazarus would be restored to her, seeing Mary weeping made Jesus sad and he had compassion for her and for the others.

He asked to see the grave, and on arriving there directed that the stone covering the opening be removed. Martha reminded Jesus that after four days there would be a bad odor from the tomb. Jesus replied, "Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?" He then made what must have seemed an unusual statement: "Father, I thank you that you have heard me."

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I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me" and then Jesus called Lazarus out of the tomb. The "people standing here" included his disciples, Mary and Martha, and the people who had come from Jerusalem. Jesus said to his disciples in verse 14, "I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe" and this event likely had the desired effect. The faith of Martha and Mary must also have been strengthened to have their brother restored to them. And John tells us in verse 45, "Therefore many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him."

We see several references to "the Jews" in this passage. In verse 8 the disciples say, "But Rabbi, a short while ago the Jews there tried to stone you, and yet you are going back?" This referred to Jesus's enemies among the Pharisees. However, verse 19 tells us that, "many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them." This might seem like a superfluous description, because most of the population were Jews. But John is writing to an audience which includes both Jews and Gentiles and wants to clarify the situation for his readers. Among the Jews who had come to comfort Martha and Mary were some who were hostile to Jesus (although they would have known that Martha and Mary were friends with Jesus). John writes that "many of the Jews who... had seen what Jesus did, believed in him," but we are also told, "... some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done."

Chapter Sixteen

Jesus's Teaching at the Passover Meal

Scene: Jerusalem, ca. AD 29-30

Jesus was together with the Twelve disciples to eat the meal to celebrate the Passover. This would be his final meal. Jesus had a lot that he wanted to tell the apostles, and we will look at some of those things in the following passages. One of the disciples, named Judas Iscariot, knew that the Chief Priests and religious leaders had been looking for an opportunity to arrest Jesus but, because of his popularity, they were afraid of the crowds. Judas offered to lead them to Jesus, at a place where there would be no crowd, in exchange for money.

John 13:1-17

1 It was just before the Passover Festival. Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

2 The evening meal was in progress, and the devil had already prompted Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, to betray Jesus. 3 Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; 4 so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. 5 After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

6 He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?"

7 Jesus replied, "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand."

8 "No," said Peter, "you shall never wash my feet."

Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me."

9 "Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!"

10 Jesus answered, "Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet; their whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you." 11 For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not every one was clean.

12 When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. 13 "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. 14 Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. 15 I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. 16 Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. 17 Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.

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We have seen that Jesus was thinking about his upcoming crucifixion and death, and now John tells us that Jesus knew his death was coming soon. In fact, it would come the following day.

Jesus told the Apostles in verse 15 that, "I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you." Foot washing would normally have been performed by a servant, someone below the status of the one whose feet were being washed. Jesus told them that he was doing this as their Lord and Teacher, not only as their Rabbi but also as the Messiah. That distinction makes the contrast between master and servant immeasurably greater. It would be one thing for a distinguished Rabbi to serve in that way, but it is another for God's Son, his Anointed One, to serve that way. In addition to demonstrating humility, Jesus was showing us that because acts of service were modeled in his role as Messiah, they are things we should perform. Does the concept of a servant-leader resonate with you?

We saw in the story of Lazarus that Jesus felt strong compassion for Mary and the mourners, so much so that he wept with them. Now we see him teaching his disciples to be humble by modeling humble behavior himself.

It is remarkable that the Creator of the universe, the only one who is actually worthy of praise, reveals himself to us as a humble servant who has compassion for us. The object of the gospel message is to allow us to have a relationship with the Father, our sins having been forgiven through belief in Jesus. Would you like that? See Appendix A

Luke 22:14-20

14 When the hour came, Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table. 15 And he said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. 16 For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God."

17 After taking the cup, he gave thanks and said, "Take this and divide it among you. 18 For I tell you I will not drink again from the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes."

19 And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me."

20 In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you."

This passage may be familiar to some people as the institution of the sacrament of Communion. It takes place during the meal which Jesus and his disciples were eating to celebrate the Jewish festival of Passover. Passover was instituted by God in commemoration of his sparing the Hebrews from the plague of the death of the firstborn during their captivity in Egypt, as described in Exodus 12. Many Christians view the direction in verse nineteen, "do this in remembrance of me," as a commandment for them also.

It is included here to show the connection between Jesus's physical human death and the spiritual

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payment for our sin which took place. There has been much discussion about why God chose Jesus's sacrificial death – why that was necessary – as the means to redeem us from sin, but the prophetic testimony and Jesus's own testimony confirm that to be the case. One example from the prophet Isaiah we read at the beginning of this work. In Isaiah 53:5, Isaiah says of the Messiah: "But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed." These words foretell Jesus's physical suffering as payment for our sin. Another example from Jesus's own words we saw earlier in John 3:14-15 where he states, "14 Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, 15 that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him." The statement about the Son of Man being lifted up refers to the manner of his death.

His death was necessary for the forgiveness of sin, which is in turn necessary for eternal life. Anyone who is contemplating putting their faith in Jesus should understand what he suffered for our sake. For your sake. The God in whom Christians put their faith demonstrates compassion, humility, and such a great love for us that he was willing for Jesus to die for us.

John 14:1-11, 15-17, 21-26

1 "Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. 2 My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? 3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. 4 You know the way to the place where I am going."

5 Thomas said to him, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?"

6 Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. 7 If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him."

8 Philip said, "Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us."

9 Jesus answered: "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? 10 Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you I do not speak on my own authority. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. 11 Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the works themselves.

15 "If you love me, keep my commands. 16 And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever— 17 the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.

23 Jesus replied, "Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and

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we will come to them and make our home with them. 24 Anyone who does not love me will not obey my teaching. These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me.

25 "All this I have spoken while still with you. 26 But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.

In the verse 1-11 excerpt, Jesus says, "You believe in God; believe also in me." In the midst of the situation the import of these words may not have registered with the disciples. Jesus is explicitly equating belief in God with belief in Jesus. "You put your faith in God; also put your faith in me." For the believer, putting your faith in Jesus is also putting your faith in God.

Jesus promised to return and to take believers to be with him. This is a powerful promise. It demonstrates that when we put our faith in Jesus it is not a one-sided relationship. Jesus cares about us and wants us to be with him.

In response to Thomas's concern about knowing the way to where Jesus is going, Jesus tells him, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the father except through me." These words have become a stumbling block for some people, because they state that Jesus is the only way to have a relationship with God. They reflect what some see as an "exclusivity" which is offensive to people who believe that all religions are equally valid and equally effective in connecting with God or other gods.

The Christian view is that Jesus was shown through prophecy, his testimony, and miraculous signs to be the Anointed One sent from God, appointed to save the world from sin through repentance and faith in his name. We saw in John 8:54 Jesus say to the Pharisees, "My Father, whom you claim as your God..." In verse 10, Jesus says, "The words I say to you I do not speak on my own authority. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work." This can leave no doubt who it is that Jesus is claiming as his father, or that his statement "No one comes to the Father except through me" he attributed to God speaking through him.

Each person must evaluate the testimony of Scripture regarding Jesus as the Messiah, and experience whether that testimony brings them to a belief in Jesus. Philip said to Jesus, "Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us." Jesus's response, "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time?" is revealing because it had to be asked. Jesus's identity with the Father is so great that, as Jesus went on to say, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father."

He then said, "Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the works themselves." This is reminiscent of what Jesus told the Pharisees about believing him based on the works that he was doing. By saying this, Jesus was recalling for his disciples all the signs that he had shown them: changing the nature of physical things, healings, feeding multitudes of people, giving sight to the blind, raising people from the dead. Even if they had trouble understanding the spiritual relationship between Jesus and the Father, he was bringing them back to the testimony of their eyes and ears to remind them that no

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one could do what he had been doing without God.

In the excerpt beginning with verses 15-17 and then continuing with verse 23, Jesus stated an important principle: "if you love me, keep my commands." It is so important that he restated it in verse 23 saying, "Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me."

The gospel message is not about a cosmic vending machine which dispenses salvation. It is about a relationship between the believer and God. God shows his love for us through forgiveness and we show our love for him through obedience. Jesus makes this very plain by stating, "if you love me you will obey my commands." We saw John the Baptist's instruction to those he baptized: "produce fruit in keeping with repentance." Through following Jesus's commands, we will produce that fruit. Throughout his ministry, Jesus emphasized the importance of the principle, "love your neighbor as yourself." The attitudes of mercy, forgiveness, and humility which Jesus taught and demonstrated will be present when we love one another.

In verses 16-17 Jesus reveals something else of great importance. He says, "And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—the Spirit of truth." He continues in verses 26 and 27, "All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you." This is pretty amazing.

The word "advocate" can be a verb or a noun. The sense in this case is as a noun; in verse 26 John uses the article "the." The Collins English Dictionary says that "advocate" used as a noun is a person who upholds or defends a cause, a supporter; a person who intercedes on behalf of another; a person who pleads a client's cause in a court of law. The subject of this defense and intercession and pleading is the believer. Some Bible translations use the word "Helper" or "Comforter" instead of "Advocate." The point being that the Holy Spirit has been given for our benefit.

Jesus says that the Father will send the Holy Spirit "in my name." This means that the Holy Spirit has the authority to do anything that Jesus would do in the furtherance of Jesus's interests. He is empowered and responsible to act on behalf of Jesus. And what will he do to help us? Jesus says that he will, "teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you."

So think about this: as you go through your day, wanting to produce good fruit but not really thinking about it, the Holy Spirit will be there with you, perhaps to allow you to notice an opportunity to show God's love through an act of grace or kindness.

This chapter, John Chapter 14, and the following two chapters have much more to say about the Person and role of the Holy Spirit. Read those chapters for a better understanding of the Holy Spirit. See Appendix B

Chapter Seventeen

Jesus's Crucifixion and Death

Scene: Jerusalem, ca. AD 29-30

On the morning following the night of the Passover meal, early enough that it was still dark, Judas led a crowd armed with swords and clubs, sent by the high priests, to the garden where Jesus and the other disciples were talking and resting. Jesus was arrested and taken to the house of the Jewish High Priest, where he underwent questioning by the Jewish religious council. Because he acknowledged that he was the Messiah, he was found guilty of blasphemy, and sentenced to death. At this time, he was blindfolded and beaten by the High Priest's guards, and possibly also by the religious leaders themselves.

Their plan to have Jesus killed while appearing to avoid responsibility for it was to take him to the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, and accuse Jesus of advocating non-payment of taxes and of being a threat to Caesar in addition to the charge of blasphemy. This would give the Romans jurisdiction and make Jesus subject to Roman law, which included the death penalty. Early in the morning, the High Priest and the religious leaders took Jesus to Pilate, made those accusations, and demanded that Jesus be crucified.

Pilate did not take the charges seriously, so the religious leaders told him that Jesus was a rabble-rouser who was stirring up the people and inciting rebellion by claiming to be a king. The religious leaders got the crowd excited about having a crucifixion and encouraged them to shout, "crucify him, crucify him." Pilate offered to release a murderer named Barabbas, but the Jewish religious leaders continued to incite the crowd. One of Pilate's primary concerns, also shared by the Roman government, was to maintain the civil peace and to appease the people. Because of this, he agreed to Jesus's crucifixion.

Mark 15:15-24

15 Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.

16 The soldiers led Jesus away into the palace (that is, the Praetorium) and called together the whole company of soldiers. 17 They put a purple robe on him, then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on him. 18 And they began to call out to him, "Hail, king of the Jews!" 19 Again and again they struck him on the head with a staff and spit on him. Falling on their knees, they paid homage to him. 20 And when they had mocked him, they took off the purple robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him out to crucify him.

21 A certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus, was passing by on his way in from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross. 22 They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means "the place of the skull"). 23 Then they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it. 24 And they crucified him. Dividing up his clothes, they cast lots to see what each would get.

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Verse 15 says that Pilate, "had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified." Mark passes over the flogging in a few words, but a Roman flogging was a very severe punishment. The tool used was a multi-stranded whip called a flagellum. The individual strands were tipped with pieces of lead so that they would dig into the flesh. It was not uncommon for people to die as a result of a Roman flogging.

Once in the control of the soldiers, Jesus is again beaten and humiliated. Roman crucifixion was so common in that time there was no need to describe it. The hands and feet of the victim were nailed to the cross bar and upright of a T-shaped wooden structure planted in the ground, where they were forced to remain until they died.

Someone might wonder what this has to do with the gospel message. It is this which allows the gospel message to save us. Somehow the penalty of death for sin had to be paid, and God paid it himself through the death of Jesus, who was without sin. While this was happening in the world, something was also happening in the spiritual realm and the penalty for our sins was paid in the kingdom of heaven. When we repent and believe in Jesus, he can freely forgive us because he has already paid the penalty for our sin through his death. We are redeemed in that way.

John 19:28-42

28 Later, knowing that everything had now been finished, and so that Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, "I am thirsty." 29 A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus' lips. 30 When he had received the drink, Jesus said, "It is finished." With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

31 Now it was the day of Preparation, and the next day was to be a special Sabbath. Because the Jewish leaders did not want the bodies left on the crosses during the Sabbath, they asked Pilate to have the legs broken and the bodies taken down. 32 The soldiers therefore came and broke the legs of the first man who had been crucified with Jesus, and then those of the other. 33 But when they came to Jesus and found that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. 34 Instead, one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water. 35 The man who saw it has given testimony, and his testimony is true. He knows that he tells the truth, and he testifies so that you also may believe. 36 These things happened so that the scripture would be fulfilled: "Not one of his bones will be broken," 37 and, as another scripture says, "They will look on the one they have pierced."

38 Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jewish leaders. With Pilate's permission, he came and took the body away. 39 He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds. 40 Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs. 41 At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb, in which no one had ever been laid. 42 Because it was the Jewish day of Preparation and since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

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The reason for breaking the legs of the victim was to hasten death, because they could no longer use their legs to support their body, which would lead to suffocation. But because Jesus was already dead, it was not necessary.

Jesus died on the cross. This was confirmed by a spear-thrust to the side, which released a flow of "blood and water." Such a separation would have occurred following death as the blood separated into red cells and plasma. His body was released to people who followed him and was placed in a nearby tomb (which would have been a chamber carved into a rock face and covered with a stone). This happened late in the day on Friday and the Sabbath would have begun at sunset on that day, so anything to do with handling Jesus's body had to be completed before sunset. And nothing more could be done until nightfall the following day (Saturday) when the Sabbath would end.

Chapter Eighteen

Jesus's Resurrection

Scene: Jerusalem, ca. AD 29-30

The Sunday following the crucifixion.

Luke 24:1-12

1 On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women 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 wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. 5 In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? 6 He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: 7 ‘The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.’ ” 8 Then they remembered his words.

9 When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others. 10 It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles. 11 But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense. 12 Peter, however, got up and ran to the tomb. Bending over, he saw the strips of linen lying by themselves, and he went away, wondering to himself what had happened.

Luke 24:36-49

36 While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.”

37 They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. 38 He said to them, “Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? 39 Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.”

40 When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet. 41 And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, “Do you have anything here to eat?” 42 They gave him a piece of broiled fish, 43 and he took it and ate it in their presence.

44 He said to them, “This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.”

45 Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. 46 He told them, “This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, 47 and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. 48 You are witnesses of these things. 49 I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”

John 20:24-31

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24 Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. 25 So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!"

But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe."

26 A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" 27 Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

28 Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

29 Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

These three passages provide a look at what happened following Jesus's resurrection. The evidence for Jesus's resurrection is very robust; in fact, it is one of the best attested historical events, yet it has been a stumbling block for many. That may also be true about the resurrection of Lazarus. Or Jairus's's daughter. Or the young man at Nain. Or the healing of the man blind from birth. Or the paralytic. Or any other of the miraculous works attributed to Jesus. If Jesus's resurrection is based on a lie, then what in the scriptural record can be believed? If you would like to learn more on that subject, put "evidence for the resurrection of Jesus" in your favorite internet search engine.

A significant aspect of Jesus's resurrection is that he did not need anyone outside the tomb saying, "Jesus, come out." He did not need anyone telling him to "arise." Remember what he told the Pharisees at Jerusalem about his power over his life: "I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again." He accomplished this himself.

The Luke 24:1-12 passage begins, "On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb." This would have been on Sunday morning following the end of the Passover at nightfall on Saturday. The women encountered angels who reminded them that Jesus had predicted these events. They returned to the other apostles and told them what they had seen but the apostles did not believe them because what they said seemed beyond belief. We are told that Peter ran to the tomb and also found it empty, but he did not understand what had happened.

Luke 24:36 begins with Jesus's sudden appearance among the apostles and the women. The day of the resurrection, two of the disciples were on their way to a town called Emmaus, and they encountered Jesus on the way. They returned to Jerusalem to tell the Eleven and the others with them what they had seen.

It was at this moment that Luke tells us they were startled and frightened. However, Jesus brought them back to the evidence of their eyes and ears. He said, "Look at my hands and my

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feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have." His hands and feet would have still borne the holes from the nails. He asked for and ate a piece of fish to prove his physical nature.

He told them that, "Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." He is saying a lot here: first, that the Law of Moses the Prophets and the Psalms spoke about him prophetically. The "Law of Moses" comprised the first five books of the Old Testament, the Prophets referred to the sixteen writing prophets in the Old Testament, and the Psalms to the 150 entries in the Book of Psalms. This, again, shows congruity between the Old and New Testaments.

Second, he declared that these prophecies "must" be fulfilled. They must be fulfilled because the words are from God and they cannot fail. That is not to say that every part of those texts has the weight of prophecy. It requires discernment on a spiritual level to correctly understand what is written prophetically. Verse 45 says, "Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures."

Reading the Bible is not like reading the newspaper or a novel. It is not something that can be scanned and then assumed to be understood. At the same time, it can be understood by those with very little learning and by those with very great learning. Here, Jesus helped them to understand the Scriptures as he understood them.

He then told them, "The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem."

This is what we heard during John the Baptist's preaching and from the earliest parts of Jesus's teaching: repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And it will be preached in his – that is, the Messiah Jesus's – name. When Jesus said that God would send the Holy Spirit "in my name" it meant that the Spirit would always be acting with Jesus's authority and working for his interests. In this case, "in his name" is invoking Jesus's reputation and authority. Everything that comes to mind or to our sensibilities when we think of or hear or remember his name. The good news of repentance for the forgiveness of sin would be told as though it were Jesus telling it. He is proclaiming the message and also claiming to be the one who allows forgiveness to take place. This message is not taking place through some mysterious unknown mechanism. It is not being bestowed by the one sharing it. It is not based on the merit of the one hearing it. It is God offering us forgiveness through belief in his Son, Jesus the Messiah, when we repent.

Jesus's statement, "I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high," refers to the sending of the Holy Spirit which he mentioned earlier.

At John 20:24 we meet again the one who came to be known as Doubting Thomas, (Thomas and Didymus both mean "Twin"). He vowed that he would not believe that Jesus had risen from the dead until he was able to touch the wounds in Jesus's hands and in his side. We can feel sympathy with that. We have observed multiple times in these passages the power of

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experiencing through one's senses, mainly our eyes and our ears, and Jesus's use of that power as he revealed his power through miraculous signs.

Thomas encountered Jesus, who invited him to touch his hands and his side. Thomas was then convinced and said, "My Lord and my God!", to which Jesus replied with the theme verse of this work, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

This promise is for all those who have believed since the last eyewitnesses died out. It is also for those who do not yet believe, but will read or hear until they do believe. Why are they blessed? Because they will come to know Jesus as Savior and receive forgiveness for sin and be able to receive eternal life. Even a non-believer would acknowledge that for someone who believed in the reality of God and these things, that would be of paramount importance. Literally, nothing is more important. This emphasis is not in a "We've got to save the world!" way, but for the sake of each individual person who receives the gospel message.

All Christians should be prepared to tell someone the good news. Some believers feel a special urgency to share the good news so that as many as possible may be saved. That urgency has become a cliché and a matter for parody, but the reason for the urgency is concern for the welfare of the hearer.

The last two verses of this passage are a comment from John the gospel writer. He tells us, "Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." In one sentence he tells the purpose of the gospel message in general, and the specific intent behind his writing.

This was why Jesus was sent to earth, to preach repentance for the forgiveness of sin in his name, and to sacrifice himself for us. And the translators of whatever version of the Bible you may have read were striving to convey as best they could what was written in the Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic texts, because this material does not just represent a group of historical documents. It communicates a message which can have a profound effect on one's life beginning immediately. The various benefits are too many to list, but would include the knowledge that you have eternal life and that it has already begun.

Chapter Nineteen

The Ascension and the Coming of the Holy Spirit

Scene: Jerusalem, ca. AD 29-30

The passage below begins the Book of Acts, also known as The Acts of the Apostles. It was written by Luke, who also wrote the Gospel of Luke, which he here refers to as "my former book." At the beginning of his Gospel account Luke says:

"1 Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, 2 just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. 3 With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, 4 so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught."

Luke says that he "carefully investigated everything," and that he interviewed people who were eyewitnesses to the events. It seems likely that he also had access to written documents, like Mark's gospel, because Luke's chronology and events described align with Mark's account. At places in the Book of Acts, Luke stops using the pronouns "he" and "they" and begins using instead "we" and "us." This has led most Bible scholars to understand that Luke was present during those events.

Acts 1:1-10

1 In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach 2 until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. 3 After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God. 4 On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. 5 For John baptized with a water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

6 Then they gathered around him and asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

7 He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. 8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

9 After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

10 They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. 11 "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven."

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At the end of his Gospel, Luke says that Jesus was "taken up into heaven." Now as he begins his second book, Luke adds more detail about that final scene. He reminds us that Jesus had told his disciples to remain in Jerusalem until they received power from the Holy Spirit.

When the disciples questioned Jesus about the timing of future events, he told them, "it is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority." This applies generally as well as to the disciples. There are some things which God has not revealed. They are not for us to know. But God has revealed much to us through Scripture, which is all worthy of study.

As Jesus was taken up into heaven, the disciples were looking up, probably with their hands up shading their eyes, maybe trying to decide if they could still see him or not, when two men dressed in white appeared and said, "What are you looking at?" This is a great picture as the disciples, who had been so intent on the sky, suddenly become aware of the two men and their question.

The men do not make the disciples answer the question, but they inform them that Jesus will return "in the same way you have seen him go into heaven." This helps us to understand the two prophetic pictures we see of Messiah – he is going to come twice. In his first arrival he came as a suffering Savior. In his second arrival he will come as a conquering King. It is the timing of this very return which receives a lot of study and speculation.

The Holy Spirit comes at Pentecost in Jerusalem

Acts 2:1-14, 22-24, 29-33, 36-41

1 When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. 2 Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. 3 They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. 4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

5 Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. 6 When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. 7 Utterly amazed, they asked: "Aren't all these who are speaking Galileans? 8 Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? 9 Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome 11 (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!" 12 Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, "What does this mean?"

13 Some, however, made fun of them and said, "They have had too much wine."

14 Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: "Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say.

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22 “Fellow Israelites, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. 23 This man was handed over to you by God’s deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. 24 But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.

29 “Fellow Israelites, I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day. 30 But he was a prophet and knew that God had promised him on oath that he would place one of his descendants on his throne. 31 Seeing what was to come, he spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, that he was not abandoned to the realm of the dead, nor did his body see decay. 32 God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of it. 33 Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear.

36 “Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah.”

37 When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?”

38 Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39 The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”

40 With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” 41 Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.

Pentecost was the Greek name for the Jewish holiday the Feast of Harvest. The timing of the Feast of Harvest depended on the date of an earlier holiday, the Feast of First Fruits. The Feast of Harvest took place fifty days after the Feast of First Fruits and came to be referred to as the Greek word for "fiftieth", Pentecost. It was the holiday which had drawn people from so many different locations. Some Christians place a special emphasis on Pentecost in commemoration of God sending the Holy Spirit on that holiday.

The "they" who were all together would have included at least the twelve apostles and likely a few others. (Another of the disciples was chosen to replace Judas, who committed suicide after betraying Jesus, which brought the number back to twelve.) They heard the wind and saw the tongues of fire, and they were filled with the Holy Spirit. They were on fire with the desire to proclaim the wonders of God. At that point they probably couldn't sit still, and they stood up and went out into the street. Here was a group of at least a dozen people all loudly proclaiming the greatness and wonders of God. A crowd gathered because of the commotion, and they were amazed because they each were hearing the praises in their own languages. Luke tells us in verse

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4 that this happened because the Holy Spirit gave them the ability to speak in other tongues or languages. This ability must have been specially adapted to the people present in the city, so that they could all hear the praises in their own languages.

At the point when the people had overcome some of their wonder and were beginning to ask what was happening, Peter addressed the crowd. He told them that what they were witnessing was the fulfillment of a prophecy spoken by the prophet Joel, and then continued in verse 22 to explain that Jesus had been raised from the dead and was the prophetically foretold Messiah. He concluded, "God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah." Struck with remorse, the people said, "What shall we do?" Peter replied: "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." This is the essence of Christian doctrine and the foundation of Christian faith and belief. It confirms Jesus as the authority and the power behind the gospel message, and acknowledges the person of the Holy Spirit whom Jesus said the Father would send in his name.

What about the command to "be baptized"? Is baptism necessary for salvation? Is repentance without baptism inadequate for us to be forgiven? Baptism in the form of ritual washing was practiced by the Jews prior to the time of John the Baptist. There is evidence that the Essene community at Qumran practiced a baptism of repentance. It was in this community that the Dead Sea scrolls, some of the oldest surviving manuscripts of scripture, were found.

It is important to have an outward sign of an inward change, and the practice of baptism can be viewed that way. There is, however, overwhelming agreement among Bible scholars that baptism is not necessary for salvation. Many Christians believe that being baptized is a matter of obedience and that it should be observed if possible. In the same way that the covenant of circumcision was received after Abraham had faith, baptism occurs as an outward sign of an inward change which has already taken place. It is not necessary for your salvation. It is not something that you need to worry about. Once you put your faith in Jesus, you are sealed in him. If you feel that you have come to believe in Jesus, don't hold back because of any concerns about baptism. See Appendix A

The result of Peter's speech was that about three thousand people came to faith. They must have been very receptive to the gospel message. They had the preparation of John's preaching, and while the people from distant places may not have known about Jesus, certainly the people living in Jerusalem were very much aware of him and his miraculous signs. This is how the church grows – testimony leading to faith. There were around 2.3 billion Christians in the world as of 2015, it being the largest religious group.

Chapter Twenty

The Beginning of the Church

Scene: Jerusalem, ca. AD 29-30

Peter declares Jesus as the Messiah to the Sadducees and religious leaders.

While entering the temple area, Peter and John had healed a man who was lame from birth. This attracted a crowd who wanted to see what had happened. Peter addressed the crowd and told them that he had witnessed the risen Messiah and that it was by faith in Jesus that the healing had taken place. Peter and John were then accosted by the priests, the captain of the temple guard, and the Sadducees. The Sadducees were a group of Jewish religious scholars who did not believe in an afterlife, and because of that were particularly opposed to the idea that Jesus had been raised from the dead.

Acts 4:1-12

1 The priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to Peter and John while they were speaking to the people. 2 They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people, proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. 3 They seized Peter and John and, because it was evening, they put them in jail until the next day. 4 But many who heard the message believed; so the number of men who believed grew to about five thousand.

5 The next day the rulers, the elders and the teachers of the law met in Jerusalem. 6 Annas the high priest was there, and so were Caiaphas, John, Alexander and others of the high priest's family. 7 They had Peter and John brought before them and began to question them: "By what power or what name did you do this?"

8 Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: "Rulers and elders of the people! 9 If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a man who was lame and are being asked how he was healed, 10 then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. 11 Jesus is

“ ‘the stone you builders rejected,
which has become the cornerstone.’

12 Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.”

When questioned, Peter was "filled with the Holy Spirit" and testified powerfully about Jesus's resurrection and his person as the Christ, which is the Messiah.

Luke names Caiaphas as one of the people witnessing this interrogation. Caiaphas was the high priest who condemned Jesus and took him to Pilate. One wonders what he is thinking now.

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Peter then says, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved." Some people have objected to this verse, and by extension to Christianity in general. They feel that by failing to acknowledge other faiths Christians are exhibiting a feeling of pride or conceit, an exclusivity which insists on being "right," and therefore they do not want to be associated with Christianity.

If everyone had a fatal disease which could be cured only by one medicine, and various groups proposed other remedies, the ones who had the effective medicine would want that to be known. This analogy breaks down because, paradoxically, you only find out the consequences of the fatal disease after you die, but it does speak to why Christians – or any religious group – would maintain that their beliefs are correct. They believe them!

There is one God, creator of the universe. He revealed himself to the Hebrew patriarchs. He spoke to prophets regarding his plan for humanity, and the prophets recorded his words. In fulfillment of prophecy and God's plan, Jesus was born in the world and preached repentance for the forgiveness of sin. Jesus made it very clear that he was from God and that he was sent by God and that the very words he spoke were from God. He demonstrated his authority through numerous healings and other miraculous signs. After being killed through crucifixion he rose from the dead and appeared to many people. He claimed to be the only way to the Father. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Peter said, "there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved." Through repentance in the name of Jesus, people will receive forgiveness for sin and eternal life with Jesus.

That is what Christians believe. It is not based on a fantasy or a conspiracy among spurious authors writing fabricated accounts. Thanks to the Hebrew tradition, it is an extremely well-documented, historically-detailed, and clearly prophetic—and available—testimony. The fulfillment of biblical prophecy is confirmation of its divine origin; the statistical probability of the fulfillments all happening by coincidence is impossibly small.

The circumstances of Jesus's life, and the gospel message itself, are also well documented. Anyone is free to say, "I don't believe that." And maybe it is not their responsibility to investigate the claims of Christianity before dismissing them. But to someone who is serious about understanding what Christianity is, and how one becomes a Christian, don't pay attention to broad-brushed criticisms. People often speak with authority about things of which they know very little. Having read this study, you probably already know more about the basic beliefs of Christianity than most people. You can be confident in using your own mind and your own heart to evaluate them. If you believe in God but have not yet come to believe in Jesus, ask God to help you in your understanding of these ideas. See Appendix A

A few years after the events with Peter and John that we read above, a Jew named Saul came from Tarsus, which was located in present-day Turkey, to Jerusalem. He was very zealous for the Law and was very hostile to people following The Way, as the early church was called. He tried to have them imprisoned, and was on his way from Jerusalem to Damascus to imprison any believers that he found there, when Jesus encountered him on the road.

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Scene: Road from Jerusalem to Damascus, ca. AD 34

Acts 9:1-22

1 Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest 2 and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. 3 As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. 4 He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

5 "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. 6 "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

7 The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. 8 Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. 9 For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

10 In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, "Ananias!"

"Yes, Lord," he answered.

11 The Lord told him, "Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. 12 In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight."

13 "Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. 14 And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name."

15 But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. 16 I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."

17 Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." 18 Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, 19 and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. 20 At once he began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God. 21 All those who heard him were astonished and asked,

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“Isn’t he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn’t he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?” 22 Yet Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah.

When he sent Ananias to restore Saul's sight, Jesus told him that Saul "is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel." Saul was blinded during the encounter with Jesus, and his sight was restored both physically and spiritually. Saul's training in the Jewish law would have made him very familiar with the Law and the Prophets. He used this knowledge to prove that Jesus was the Messiah.

Saul made at least four journeys from Jerusalem along the northern coast of the Mediterranean Sea, establishing churches or visiting churches established on previous trips. During the first of those journeys he began to be referred to as Paul instead of Saul. He also wrote letters to the churches he established, to encourage them and to teach them. Some of those letters are included in the New Testament portion of the Bible. One of the letters was written to the church at Rome, which included both Jewish converts to Christianity as well as Gentile converts. He wanted them to better understand the gospel, and in the third chapter of his letter to the Romans he provided an excellent summation of the gospel message, which is quoted in the passage below.

Scene: Corinth, ca. AD 56-57

Romans 3:20-26

20 Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God’s sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin.

21 But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. 22 This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. 25 God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished— 26 he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

In verse 20, "No one will be declared righteous in God’s sight by the works of the law." We are declared righteous by God, we don't become righteous through our own acts. We have seen already the concept that no one has perfectly obeyed God's law. No one will attain a right relationship with God by following a set of rules, because we cannot perfectly follow the rules. We become conscious of our sin through the law because when we observe the law we realize that we have not obeyed the law, and that once something is identified as being prohibited we find that we want to do it. This reveals our tendency to sin. Both the Book of Romans and the Book of Hebrews helps to clarify that, although God did establish law, salvation is apart from following any set of rules.

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Verse 21 states "But now," meaning the end of the prophetic period that began with Moses and ended with John the Baptist, and the beginning of the period of the Messiah offering repentance for the forgiveness of sin. Many of the prophecies made before John looked forward to Jesus coming as the Messiah. Those were fulfilled during the life of John, as he told his listeners about the one coming after him, "the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie," and was able to say, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

This is "apart from the law" – it is not based on following a set of rules for behavior, whether it be the Jewish Law or a set of rules established by non-Jews.

The "righteousness of God," (righteousness being in a right relationship with God) depends on God not on us. It is God who establishes the conditions needed to be in a right relationship with him. Our righteousness is something which God declares, not as a result of what we have done, but because of his love and mercy.

This "has been made known" through the preaching of John the Baptist and by the testimony of Jesus the Messiah, affirmed by many miraculous signs.

The phrase "to which the Law and the Prophets testify" affirms Jesus's many statements that the Old Testament Scriptures speak of him prophetically.

"This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe." (Verse 22) This is the crux of the gospel message. When we believe in Jesus, God credits it to us as, or considers it as, righteousness. God blessed Abram when he believed God by crediting it to him as righteousness. Now through Messiah Jesus everyone can be declared righteous by believing in Jesus. It doesn't matter if you are wealthy or poor, or if you are educated or not educated, or if you are part of the ruling class or someone being subjugated, or if you are male or female, or part of an ethnicity or particular geographic origin. It doesn't matter! All that matters is your faith in Jesus.

"There is no difference between Jew and Gentile." Paul mentions this because of the presence of both Jewish and Gentile believers in the church at Rome. Even though they were supposed to be united in the faith, their customs were different which caused friction, often because the Jews believed that because Jesus had been a Jew, the Gentiles were required to follow the Jewish religious customs. This phrase also tells us that Christians should not divide over cultural or traditional matters. Unfortunately, that unity has not been present over the life of the Church.

Verse 23 states, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." This is the result of the Fall, when we became aware of the difference between right and wrong. In Genesis 3, the serpent told Eve, "For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." What he did not tell her was that, unlike God, she would not be able to refrain from doing wrong, thereby passing a death sentence on herself and on her descendants.

Verse 24 states, "and all are justified freely by his grace." Justified could be thought of as

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someone who had an accusation made against them, but whose actions were judged to be correct. This could have a legal connotation as well. We have been declared innocent. We are justified freely because there is no charge or cost for this new condition. We are not required to give a certain amount, or to perform a certain pilgrimage, or to repeat a mantra. Additionally, because this justification is offered freely, it is not the result of or in exchange for anything that we have done, but it is because of God's loving kindness for us.

The phrase, "through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus," defines redemption in the sense that we were due to receive punishment, but Jesus saved us from that fate. We were being held for a debt and Jesus paid it in our place.

Verse 25 states, "God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood." This is a reference to the Jewish system of animal sacrifice where the blood of the victim was used as a means of purification. The sacrifice of atonement was an annual ceremony and celebration to remove the sins of the community so that God could continue to dwell among them. Paul is saying that, in the same way that animals were sacrificed to atone for the sins of the Jewish people, God allowed Jesus to be sacrificed to pay for, or atone for, the sins of the world. We no longer need to be sprinkled with blood in order to receive the benefit of this sacrifice, "to be received by faith." We receive that benefit when we have faith in Jesus.

"He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished." In this statement, sins committed beforehand refers to those committed before the availability of forgiveness through faith in Jesus.

Verse 26 states that, "he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus." God's justice requires a penalty for sin. Sin has occurred, and a penalty must be paid. God's love for us is such that he allowed his son – his dearly beloved son – to die so that we could be forgiven. Sometimes this is pictured in a courtroom setting: God is the judge who says we must be found guilty based on the evidence. He then comes around to the front of the judicial bench and he pays our penalty himself, in the person of Jesus. This is a good picture, but it does not capture the cost of our sin. As John put it in his gospel, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

Hallelujah!

Conclusion

Through these Scriptures, we have seen:

Jesus in the Beginning, being both with God and being God

Jesus as the means of creation

Predictive prophecy about who the Messiah is, fulfilled in the life of Jesus

Jesus's birth, accompanied by confirmation from angels and the testimony of men and women that Jesus is the Messiah

Jesus's teaching about the kingdom of heaven and the consequences of sin

Jesus's character modeling humility and compassion

Jesus's power and authority confirmed by many miraculous proofs

Jesus's testimony about his identity with the Father

Jesus's testimony that he is the Messiah

Jesus's execution, although guilty of no crime or sin

Jesus raising himself from the dead and appearing to many people

Jesus's statement confirming prophecy that, "This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.

Jesus's ascension, with the promise that he will return

The gospel message, as stated successively by:

John - Repentance for the forgiveness of sin in the name of the One who is to come

Jesus - Repentance for the forgiveness of sin in the name of Messiah Jesus

Peter - Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins

The gospel message is present throughout all Scripture. The person of the Messiah proclaiming repentance for the forgiveness of sin was always the plan.

If you have become convinced that Jesus is the promised Messiah, from God and sent by God, and that he can forgive you for your sin through faith in his name, then the gospel message has done its work. See Appendix A

If you do not believe the gospel message, you should still have a clear understanding of what Christians believe, and how to become a Christian.

Appendix A – How do I believe in Jesus and receive eternal life?

This is a great question and is reminiscent of what the crowd asked Peter on Pentecost. His answer is perfect: "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins."

We have looked at the idea of repentance. It involves recognizing and acknowledging that we have sinned, and putting our faith in Jesus that he will forgive us. How do we put our faith in Jesus? It is relational, not transactional. How do you fall in love? You have a relationship, and then something changes. You find that the other person's happiness becomes more important. You think about them often. You want to do things which please them. This is not a perfect analogy because our relationship with Jesus is spiritual (although, because we are living in physical bodies, our emotions are always present). But it does illustrate the change in our thinking.

In this book, you have read a lot of testimony stating that Jesus is the Messiah, who was promised prophetically, who was sent by God, born into the world to proclaim repentance for forgiveness of sin by faith in his name, and who was killed, and who then rose from the dead to demonstrate his authority, and who went back into Heaven to be with God the Father.

What is your response to that testimony? Do you believe it? Do you believe that you are a sinner? Do you believe that Jesus is able to forgive your sin and want him to do so? Do you want to receive the Holy Spirit?

If your answer to those questions is "no," then you have encountered some new ideas and perhaps some food for thought at a later date.

If your answer to those questions is "yes," then you have crossed over from death to life and the rejoicing which Jesus described is taking place in Heaven.

What happens now?

There is something affirming about speaking words and taking actions and it would be good if there were an outward demonstration of the inner change which has taken place. Speak to Jesus and tell him about your change in viewpoint. Do it out loud. There is no formula or rote statement necessary. Tell him what is on your heart. Someone may say, "I don't know what to say." Below is a suggestion of what you might say. When you read it, you will likely think "I would say that differently" or "That's not what I would say" and you should use your own words.

Lord Jesus, I know that I have sinned and fallen short of God's standard. I want to follow your way from now on. Thank you for dying for me to pay the penalty for my sins. Please forgive me for my sin and prepare a place for me so that I can be where you are. Please send the Holy Spirit to live with me and to help me follow your commands.

You should become acquainted with other believers, so that you can worship together and learn together and encourage each other and help each other. The easiest way to achieve that is to

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become part of a local church. That is also a good opportunity to talk about baptism and whether that is something you want to do. If you are friends with someone that you know attends a church, ask them what it's like there. They will be happy for your interest. Keep reading the Bible. Keep talking to God and Jesus. You can talk to them about anything. You can also stop talking and listen to them.

Appendix B – How can I read more from the Bible?

If you have a paper Bible, great. If it belonged to your grandparents, you should find a more modern translation. Fortunately, if you have access to the Internet, there are many free sources for online Bibles and Bible study tools. If you type "Bible" or "Bible study tools" into your favorite search engine you will find lots of possibilities.

Although normally printed in one volume, the Bible consists of sixty-six books, written by some forty different authors, over a period of roughly fifteen-hundred years.

It is divided into two main sections: the Old Testament, thirty-seven books which record God's historic relationship with the Hebrew people, and which are the Hebrew Scriptures, and the New Testament, twenty-seven books which record the birth of the Messiah and the establishment of his church.

The original documents which came to be included in the Bible no longer exist. Copies were made of those documents before they were lost, and these have been preserved, or new copies made. Our English Bible consists of translations of copies of those original documents. There are many English translations available, and each has their proponents. Choose a Bible verse or passage and then read the same passage in several translations. This will allow you to get a feel for the text and how well each version expresses the thought. You should consider at least three translations: the New International Version (NIV), the New American Standard Bible (NASB), and the New Living Translation (NLT). Many people have a favorite version and what you choose should be the one you like the most. By using an online Bible website, you have the opportunity to look at multiple translations in addition to, or instead of, the ones suggested.

For convenience, each book of the Bible is divided into chapters and verses. To indicate a particular verse it is referred to by Book, Chapter, and Verse(s). For example, to refer to the sixteenth verse of the third chapter of the Book of John, it would look like this: John 3:16, or the first ten verses of chapter 2 of the Book of Acts would be Acts 2:1-10.

The various tools available within online Bible sites are too many to detail here. If you have questions about a particular verse, entering that verse (for example, John 3:16) in your favorite search engine will often return helpful results, and also help you find tools for later use.

Having just completed a study based on New Testament Scripture, try looking at something in the New Testament. We read passages from each of the four Gospel books in this study. If one of them spoke to you in a way, try reading that one. If not, the Book of Acts is a wonderful story and talks about how the gospel message was spread.

If you want to find a print Bible, go to a store where they sell Bibles and look at several to get an idea of what is available. Ideally, you might want to read some passages from online versions first, to see what they are like. As far as which version you choose, there are many, and each has their proponents. For a first Bible, the NIV Study Bible would be a good suggestion. This Bible uses the New International Version and it includes explanatory notes from Bible scholars below the Bible text on each page, as well as helpful information such as introductions to each Bible

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book, maps, and timelines. There are also Study Bibles available based on other translations.

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