

Commentary on the Gospel of Mark
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A Commentary on the Book of Mark

Daily Insights into the book of Mark
As presented on the Internet blog,

“The Bible As I See It”

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Baptism and John The Baptist

(Mark 1:1-8)

The Gospel of Mark is shorter than the other three gospels. It seems to me that it is in many ways included as witness to many of the events in the other three gospels, although it does have some quite different insights of it's own. While Matthew seemed to focus on the fulfilment of prophecies to show who Jesus was, Mark seems to have presented a more general account of the times and events surrounding Jesus appearance and work on the earth. His account is more condensed and has focussed more on the principal teachings and events of Christianity beginning with baptism and John the Baptist in these first few scriptures.

John the Baptist came as prophesied to prepare the way of the Lord. He was the messenger sent before the Messiah to prepare a people ready to receive the words of Jesus and the New Covenant. We see in this section that John came preaching a baptism of repentance telling the people to be baptised in water for the forgiveness of their sins. (Verse 4) At the end of this section John also spoke of his baptism in this way saying, "I have baptised you with water; but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit." (Verse 9)

He speaks of two baptisms, one of water and one being a baptism of the Holy Spirit. Jesus also spoke of two baptisms as well for he said in John 3:5, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." Being baptised is the process by which a Christian is born again. As Jesus clearly shows here, we must be born again of water and of the spirit.

Now in fact this process of being born again of water is baptism, but it is not the baptism that John preached. John taught a baptism for the repentance from sins, but being born again is not merely repentance but the complete removal of sin. Paul showed this difference when speaking to a group of disciples at Ephesus. He said, "And he said, "Into what then were you baptised?" They said, "Into John's baptism." And Paul said, "John baptised with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus." On hearing this, they were baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus." (Acts 19:3-5)

Thus we see that Paul makes this distinction between the baptism of John the Baptist and the baptism where people are baptised into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Both are water baptisms, but the second baptism is the important one. John the Baptist prepared the way by introducing the process of baptism and teaching about repentance and forgiveness, and in Jesus this baptism was expanded to have a much greater meaning.

The distinction between the two baptisms is that John the Baptist taught repentance and forgiveness of sin through baptism. But the baptism into Jesus removes sin for we symbolically die and are resurrected with Jesus in his baptism. And as we are symbolically resurrected as we are lifted out of the water we are reborn as new

creations, no longer under the power of sin but in a new life ready to walk in the ways of the Lord. Following this baptism for rebirth into Jesus Christ we are prepared to receive and be baptised with the Holy Spirit so that the work of transformation that occurs under the New Covenant can commence.

It is in the baptism into Jesus Christ that we must come as Paul showed the Ephesians for we are not looking for forgiveness of sin but the complete removal of sin from our lives. In this way we are made ready to come into the presence of God and be prepared for his kingdom. Forgiveness of sin was already attainable under the law for the people were required to offer sacrifices for the forgiveness of sin. But perfection and removal of sin could not be achieved until Christ came and died for our sins. This is then the true purpose of Christian baptism, the release from sin and the law so that we are transformed into the image of Christ and walk with him in the new life of the Spirit.

The Baptism of Jesus

(Mark 1:9-11)

The baptism of Jesus was a significant event. It marked the beginning of his ministry as it was from that point on that he began to preach the good news of the gospel. But there are other significant matters pertaining to the baptism of Jesus that we need to understand as well.

John the Baptist was preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. However in Jesus case there was no sin. Thus he did not really need to be baptised. If this was so then why did he do it? We see the answer in the Matthew version of the baptism of Jesus. "John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptised by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for thus it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness." Then he consented." (Matthew 4:14-15)

Jesus did not need to be baptised for he was without sin. However he went through baptism as an example for all who were to follow him later on. It is through baptism in water that Jesus showed we fulfil the requirements of righteousness. Baptism is essential if we are to be enabled to reach a place of righteousness in him, for in baptism we are baptised into Jesus Christ and put on his righteousness. This occurs through faith, as baptism is a faith-based teaching. In it we believe through faith that we have died and been raised again with Jesus so that we are born again as new creations.

Also in the baptism of Jesus we see that he provided an example that we ought follow. If Jesus had not been baptised then people could have claimed it was not necessary to be baptised. But in the example of Jesus we see that no man can claim that they need not be baptised. And yet some do not baptise still today. How then is it possible to fulfil all the requirements of righteousness as Jesus pointed out to John the Baptist? If you are not baptised you cannot even begin to fulfil the requirements of righteousness.

We see further that these requirements are what will bring us into the kingdom of God. Jesus said to Nicodemus that being born again of water and the Spirit was necessary to be able to enter the kingdom of God. "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." (John 3:5) Baptism is the rebirth in water and receiving the Holy Spirit is being born of the Spirit. Jesus fulfilled both of these requirements at the time he was baptised for as he came up out of the water the Holy Spirit descended on him in the form of a dove. (Verse 10) And as the result of these two events we see God the Father speak audibly saying, "Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased." (Verse 11)

When we obey the Father and follow the example of the Son by being baptised and receiving the Holy Spirit and believing in Jesus Christ, we too will please the Father. In the end it is our hope that we will receive entry into his kingdom for eternity with the words, "Well done good and faithful servant." (Matthew 25:21)

Jesus in the Wilderness

(Mark 1:12-13)

After his baptism, Jesus was taken out into the wilderness for forty days where he fasted and was tempted by Satan. Mark's account says very little about this event, but it is significant and one from which we can learn much.

First we must understand that Jesus was tempted in the same ways that all the rest of mankind are tempted. In the other accounts we see that he was tempted with the misuse of the power of the Spirit, fanaticism and with the riches and glory of this world. (Matthew 4:1-11) Satan tempts all of mankind in these same and other ways. Jesus too was tempted at other times with other temptations for the writer of Hebrews says, "For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin." (Hebrews 4:15) Jesus was tempted in all the ways that we are tempted and because he has gone through those things he is able to intercede for us before God and sympathise with us for he suffered the same things but did not succumb to sin.

Temptations will and must come. We too will experience our own times of being in the wilderness. We will feel as if we are all alone and separated from the Lord Jesus as Christ was alone in the wilderness. Satan will throw all manner of temptations at us and Jesus said, "Temptations to sin are sure to come; but woe to him by whom they come!" (Luke 17:1)

But we also take comfort in the words that show us, "No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it." (1 Corinthians 10:13) We see here that the temptations will come as Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, but the promise of the Lord is that he will not allow us to be tempted beyond our ability to stand against the temptation. Sometimes we doubt this to be the case. Sometimes we may say to the

Lord that it is too hard, but He knows us better than we do and he has promised we will not be stretched beyond our limits.

We must go through temptations for the purpose of testing and maturing in the word. But with the temptations will be provided the way of escape to endure and go through the temptation. Look at Jesus' example when he was tempted in the wilderness in the Matthew 4:1-11 example. His method of enduring and escaping was through using his knowledge of the scripture to combat the temptations of Satan. Satan twisted scripture to throw up temptations to the Lord, but in each case Jesus refuted this tempter and put him in his place by the correct application of the words of God.

We too must gain a solid understanding of the words of God in the scriptures, for it is by this method we too can overcome temptation and grow in the Lord. The scripture gives us comfort in the times of temptation for it promises the same outcomes as Jesus experienced in the wilderness. We see that after Jesus had suffered the temptations, angels came and ministered to him to restore, establish and strengthen him. The same promise is to us when we suffer temptation from the devil. "Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experience of suffering is required of your brotherhood throughout the world. And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, establish, and strengthen you." (1 Peter 5:9-10)

But what if we fail? Still we can take comfort in the scriptures for we can know that, "...if we are faithless, he remains faithful--for he cannot deny himself." (2 Timothy 2:13) Jesus is faithful and he knows we are going through tough times. We will fall down as Peter fell and denied the Lord three times on the eve of the Lord's death. But as he instructed Peter to repent and turn again to strengthen the brethren, so too we need to repent and return to the Lord if we fall down.

When we do fall, and it will happen, we must take the advice and comfort offered by James. "Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you men of double mind." (James 4:7-8) Draw near to God and he will draw near to you. And as you and God become closer, there is no room for the devil and he will flee from the presence of God. Although we may fail and fall from time to time though, we must also take the rest of James' advice, which is to repent and purify our hearts. Our call to be with God is not so we can continue to fall and fail, we must learn from our errors and be strengthened so that when the temptations arise again we can resist them using the words and power of God as Jesus showed in his wilderness experience.

Repent and Believe in the Gospel

(Mark 1:14-15)

Jesus commenced his ministry after returning from the wilderness where he was tempted by the devil. He commenced his work with these critical words, repent and believe in the gospel, which is the good news. Jesus brought the good news to mankind that there was coming a way for man to come into the kingdom of God and that way was through him.

All three of the major ministries of that time were based on this same message. John the Baptist, Jesus and then the apostles commenced their works saying repent and believe. The minor differences were that Jesus told the people to believe in the good news of the gospel of salvation, whereas John said to believe in the one who was to follow him and the apostles taught their followers to believe in Jesus. Despite these small difference the message was the same for in all cases the good news of the gospel came through faith in Jesus Christ.

Prior to Jesus ministry access to the kingdom of God was not open to all mankind. There was no way to come into the presence of God because sin stood in the way. But in the gospel of Jesus Christ we received grace and the release from the bondage of sin and the law, which enabled man to come into the presence of God through Jesus Christ. This is attainable only through faith in Jesus Christ. It is by baptism into the death and resurrection of Christ and believing that we have been set free from sin and the law through his death and reborn as new creations in his resurrection that we shall be saved.

Through Jesus Christ man can be released from all of the problems that keep him bound. Sin presses heavily on man and causes guilt, but in Christ Jesus our sin is taken away and with it our guilt. When we are freed from these things we can stand before God with a clear conscience. But initially these things are achieved by faith alone.

The good news does not end with faith alone though. It is through faith that we receive these promises and by faith we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit whose job it is to work the transformation of our spirit so that we learn to walk in harmony with Christ. And by faith we enter the kingdom of God now so that we will be able to stand in his presence when he returns in glory and majesty to rule.

The key to these things is first repentance and faith, that is, to believe in Jesus Christ and the power of his death and resurrection. As we progress in Christ we go through a cycle. First we are converts, then when we receive the anointing of the Holy Spirit we become Christians, then as we learn and grow we become disciples and finally when we reach maturity we are followers of Christ who walk as he walked. This progression does not happen overnight but occurs as the Spirit works in our lives to teach, strengthen and change us from our fleshly natures into the image of Christ.

In Jesus God is preparing a people to live with him. Through the gospel of Christ we are learning how to live in a relationship with God and each other so that we can go into eternity with him. Let us then allow the good news of the gospel through the faith we have in Jesus have a full effect upon our lives.

Call of the First Disciples

(Mark 1:16-20)

After Jesus had returned from his forty days in the wilderness he commenced his ministry. While walking by the Sea of Galilee he saw fishermen, including Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John. To them he said, "Follow me and I will make you fishers of men." (Verse 17) They would certainly have been fascinated by this approach for being fishermen they understood what fishing was about. They daily cast nets into the sea to see what they might catch, and the catch was often a surprise.

The disciples were ready for this for it shows in the John 1:35-42 version of this event that they had already been followers of John the Baptist. The primary ministry of John was to prepare the way of the Lord, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is Jesus, and these fishermen had been prepared by John to follow Jesus.

But the words of Jesus have a deeper significance for he used the words, "Follow me." To be a follower of the Lord is a higher call than to be just a disciple. In my last post I showed there were four stages a person goes through when they come to the Lord. These are, in order: convert, Christian, disciple and follower. A convert is someone who has just heard the word but done little more than to believe and accept the introductory teachings of the Lord. A Christian is an anointed one, that is, someone who has received the anointing of the Holy Spirit. A disciple is someone going through the journey of learning about the Lord and his teachings, and applying them to their life. Whether the role of disciple precedes that of a Christian or the other way round is a moot point. It may depend on the individual and how the Lord has led them. But the role of follower is surely the highest level a person can attain in their Christian walk. A follower is someone who has reached a high level of maturity and follows in the Lords footsteps. They walk as Christ walked and thus are followers.

Perhaps the best example of a follower could be seen in the 144,000 referred to in the book of Revelation. It says of these people redeemed from the earth that they, "...follow him wherever he goes." (Revelation 14:4) They walk literally in the ways of the Lord and act as he acts. This is why I say that the role of a follower is much higher than the others.

When Jesus called the disciples at the Sea of Galilee they immediately left what they were doing and followed him. It was to become a hallmark and example for all Christians. James and John for example were working with their father, and yet left him to follow after Jesus. Their example shows that they were ready to do this, but even more they were prepared to leave everything behind them for the sake of following the Lord. Clearly they knew from the preaching of John that this Jesus was the Son of God and that his message was greater than John's and they wanted to know more. The apostle Paul expressed a similar motivation saying, "I counted all things as loss for the surpassing worth of knowing the Lord Jesus." (Philippians 3:8)

This is how we are to come to Christ too. Knowing Jesus and being known by him far outweighs any other things we may do or have in this world. Our prime focus and

number one priority is to follow Jesus and learn his ways. The reward is great for he has set eternal life before us and the opportunity of living in God's Kingdom as children of God if we will follow the Lord.

The Authority of Jesus

(Mark 1:21-28)

When Jesus had called the disciples he went from Galilee into Capernaum and taught the people. On a Sabbath as he stood and taught in the synagogue the people were astonished for he taught them as one who had authority. In this section of Mark we see the beginning of the authority of Jesus.

The people noted that Jesus did not teach them like the scribes taught, but taught with authority. The scribes had a position of authority and yet the people discerned a different style of teaching coming from Jesus compared to the scribes. This is interesting for it shows a significant change. The Greek word translated here as "authority" has the sense of: power, force, mastery, competence and strength. This was how Jesus taught the people, as one who was master and competent to teach these things.

By contrast the scribes did not teach with power and authority. They taught the people by giving them the words but no explanation. They provided information but did not give answers. In another place Jesus speaks of the teachings of the scribes and Pharisees saying, "They bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with their finger." (Matthew 23:4) Jesus also branded the lawyers in this same way in the Luke 11:45 version of this event. The way they taught the people was to put them into bondage whereas Jesus taught them how to be free. The scribes and Pharisees were the keepers of the law and charged with teaching the people. Jesus said for the people to listen to what they said, but not to do as they did for they were hypocrites. (Matthew 23:1-3)

When you consider today the way lawyers operate you can understand this teaching and why Jesus spoke of them as he did. Lawyers do not provide answers; they give opinions. If you go to a lawyer over some matter of law they will offer a range of opinions saying a matter may go one way or another. But if you want a decision in the matter you need to go before a judge or a magistrate to get a decision. The lawyer will provide arguments to justify a course of action, but there will be opposing lawyers who will offer an alternative course of action, but neither group of lawyers will offer an answer.

In the same way the scribes, lawyers and Pharisees of Jesus time were not offering the people answers. They had the law, which was quite clear, but they confused it and made it complex by adding their own traditions and interpretations. Look at what Jesus said about their teachings in Mark 7:7-13;

7 in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.'

8 You leave the commandment of God, and hold fast the tradition of men."
9 And he said to them, "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God, in order to keep your tradition!
10 For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'He who speaks evil of father or mother, let him surely die';
11 but you say, 'If a man tells his father or his mother, What you would have gained from me is Corban' (that is, given to God) --
12 then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother,
13 thus making void the word of God through your tradition which you hand on. And many such things you do."

They mixed their man-made traditions with the word of God and negated the law through their false teaching. Is it any wonder the people were confused and that in Jesus they saw someone who taught with authority for his teachings were truth.

We also see evidence of his power and authority in this same section. A man with an unclean spirit was in the synagogue and the demons in the man recognised Jesus and his power and authority. They spoke to Jesus saying, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." (Verse 24) Jesus rebuked the demons telling them to be silent and to come out of the man, which they did. This was clear evidence of the authority of Jesus for the people questioned and wondered about his teaching, as they had never seen anyone do the things he did before.

Jesus said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." (Matthew 28:20) So we can confidently go to him and find the truth if we are prepared to look. He has promised that if we seek his truth we will find it for he will show it to us.

Healing the Sick

(Mark 1:29-34)

After Jesus had left the synagogue he went to the home of Simon Peter and his brother Andrew. There he was told that Peter's mother-in-law was sick with a fever. Jesus went to her and healed her and the sickness left her and she arose and served them.

There are a couple of interesting things in this first section of this scripture. First we see that Peter (also known as Cephas) was married. Elsewhere we also find evidence of this as Paul stated, "Do we not have the right to be accompanied by a wife, as the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas?" (1 Corinthians 9:5) Over the years there have been churches and cults that have promoted celibacy, especially amongst the ministers. And yet we see that many of the apostles and elders of the early church were married and they had been specifically selected for their roles in the church by the Lord himself. Thus the whole idea of a need for celibacy in the ministry falls apart.

Then we see the compassion of the Lord in healing Peter's mother-in-law. After this many sick and demon possessed people were brought to him and he healed them all. This is an important event. Apart from the compassion he showed the people, these healings testified to the words and the works of the Lord. One of the key reasons for the healings the Lord did and many of the other signs and wonders were for confirming the words of the gospel. This was also shown at the end of Mark when he sent out the disciples to spread the gospel. Mark wrote, "And they went forth and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that attended it." (Mark 16:20)

Jesus said that even if they were struggling to believe, they should believe in the works he was doing. "Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father in me; or else believe me for the sake of the works themselves." (John 14:11) The works bore testimony to the words of the gospel and the truth he was teaching. Even the people among the Jews recognised that they should listen to him, for some said that he must be demon possessed, but others responded saying, "Others said, "These are not the sayings of one who has a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?" (John 10:21) They recognised no ordinary person, and especially one who is demon possessed could do the works he did. Thus they recognised that his words should be listened to for the works and signs he did confirmed the message.

This is the most important aspect of the signs and wonders that the Lord did. There are some in the church today who seek signs and wonders, but they miss the point as to what they are all about. The miraculous healings and other signs that Jesus, and later the apostles did, were not done simply for sake of the works themselves. They were not done for the purpose of promotion but to testify to and confirm the words of the truth.

Desiring the miraculous gifts is not a bad thing but it must be aligned to the truth. I do not believe the Lord through the Holy Spirit will give out the authority to do miracles to any person, minister or church that is not teaching the truth. The key is to first seek and find the truth and then the Lord will operate the gifts in accordance with the needs to spread the gospel. There is I believe a time coming when these gifts will be highly visible, but that time is not yet. Until then miracles will be done and are done on the basis of prayer and requests of the Lord for he has not left us desolate. But the widespread use of the power and authority to do the types of miracles and gifts we saw when the Lord and the apostles operated their ministry has not yet been given to the church or ministers today.

Spreading the Gospel

(Mark 1:35-45)

Jesus began spreading the gospel at this time as he went from town to town. As he preached he healed the people who were sick and cast out many demons.

In this section we see that he arose early, well before dawn and left the town where he was to move on to the next town. This was necessary if he was to spread the gospel to other places for his fame was rapidly spreading and he would be mobbed and prevented from going on.

He healed a leper at this time (Verse 40-41) and charged him to go and make the offerings for the cleansing of his disease as was required under the Mosaic Law. He also told the leper not to tell people how he had been healed. But the leper went and in his joy at being healed spoke freely of what and how he had been healed. As a result Jesus fame grew to an extent that he could not even enter a town for fear of being mobbed. Instead the people came out to him in the country from all over.

So what can we take from this as a lesson? Again we see evidence of the fact that these miraculous healings were being done in conjunction with spreading the gospel. And this is how the miracles for the most part were being performed. As I said in the previous post, the signs and wonders were provided to support and confirm the ministry of the truth. (Mark 16:20) They did not hold special healing meetings as we often see advertised by some churches today. Instead as the message was being proclaimed the people were healed at the same time to confirm the truth of the gospel.

We also see in the words of the leper in this scripture that recognition of the authority Jesus had over sickness, disease and demons. The leper said to Jesus, "If you will, you can make me clean," (Verse 40) and Jesus took pity on him and healed the man. The basis of this man's healing was faith. He believed that the Lord had the power and authority to do this healing and so received it. Indeed all of the blessings we receive from the Lord are based upon faith. Just from a simple logic point of view, no person will receive anything from the Lord if they do not believe and have faith that the Lord can and will give it.

You don't need a lot of faith to receive the gifts and blessings of God. Jesus said to the disciples when they were unable to cast out a demon from a man it was, "Because of your little faith. For truly, I say to you, if you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible to you." (Matthew 17:20) It is interesting that in this version he mentions that the disciples could not heal this particular man because of their "little faith." In other versions it says it was because of "unbelief", that is, their lack of faith, which is quite different from little faith. To have a little faith is not the same as a lack of or no faith, and this I believe is what Jesus was saying. The Greek word this comes from suggests it should be better rendered as lack of rather than a little. When you consider the next part of that same scripture where Jesus says if you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, which is clearly a very, very little amount of faith, you can move mountains.

So let us have faith that what we ask of the Lord we will receive if it is in his will. Have no doubts but hold fast to the faith that you have in Christ Jesus.

Your Sins are Forgiven

(Mark 2:1-12)

These words are a tremendous comfort to Christians. When Jesus says these words to us through his gospel it lifts a great weight from our shoulders. Even more than this, under the New Covenant Jesus says not only are our sins forgiven, but also they are completely taken away.

In this section we see Jesus is in a house with so many people in and around that no one could approach. There was a man who was paralysed and carried to Jesus on a pallet. They could not even get close to Jesus, so the men carrying him removed part of the roof and lowered him by the four corners of the pallet to where Jesus was teaching. When Jesus saw the extent they had gone to and their faith that Jesus could heal the paralytic he said, "My son, your sins are forgiven." (Verse 5) He would have been comforted in these words, but there was still more to come.

There were scribes around him who questioned in their hearts over this statement saying to themselves, "It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (Verse 7) But they were wrong on both counts for they failed to recognise that Jesus is the Son of God and that he had the authority to forgive sins. Jesus aware of their thoughts then proceeded to prove to them he had both the power and authority to make this statement.

In this world it is impossible that anyone can heal a paralytic just by saying the words, "Be healed." But Jesus as the Son of God and using the power of the Holy Spirit could easily do this. However he was trying to show by this action that his power and authority extended even further than just the healing. This is why he first said to the man, "Your sins are forgiven."

In my recent posts I have shown that one of the main purposes of the miraculous healings was to confirm the truth of the gospel as shown in Mark 16:20. Here too we see Jesus using the power of healing to confirm and prove the truth of his power and words. By making the statement that this man's sins are forgiven through his faith, he then healed him saying, "Rise, take up your pallet and go home." (Verse 11) This was a proof to the scribes that he did indeed have the power on earth to forgive sins. Had the man not been healed they could have argued Jesus was indeed blaspheming, but as his words were confirmed by the healing of the paralytic the scribes could not argue Jesus' ability to forgive sins. He had both the power and authority to do these works.

In this healing he showed he could and would be able to take away the sins of mankind. This is an important point for without the removal of sin we cannot enter the Kingdom of God. No sinner will enter God's Kingdom, but in Jesus our sins can be taken away for he has both the power and authority to do so, which he proved in this healing.

Jesus Came to Call the Sinners

(Mark 2:13-17)

Jesus came to call the sinners and not the righteous. When he called Levi the tax collector in this section of Mark we see he went to his house and ate with the sinners and tax collectors. The scribes at that time looked down on Jesus for being with these people they thought as second-rate citizens. This showed up their prejudices and bias for Jesus showed no partiality.

Prejudice is part of human nature. It is the cause of a great many inhuman and unjust actions in this world. People consider themselves to be better than others and look down upon them. The basis of this prejudice can be many things: skin colour, religion, race, education, sex and even the sporting teams they follow. This should not be so. In many places Jesus condemns prejudice, bias and partiality, as too did the apostles.

As far as the Lord is concerned all mankind is equal. We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God as Paul wrote in Romans 3:23. No man can claim not to have sinned and thus no man can stand in the presence of God in his own right. If this is so, then who can claim to be better or more superior to someone else? Nobody has that right. Jesus alone was the only person to have come to the earth and lived a life without sin.

Now here in Mark we see Jesus say that he came to call the sinners and not the righteous. If he came to spend time only amongst the people of the church, how would the message of the Gospel of truth be spread to the rest of the world? How would the opportunity to be set free from sin ever be proclaimed if only the people of the churches held the message of the Gospel? The message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is a message to the whole world, and to achieve his purpose he had to be with those who needed this message. Who needs the message of the Gospel? Every person that ever lived is now living, or will come in the future.

Can anyone stand in the presence of God? As I have said already, it is because of sin that man cannot stand in the presence of God. But in Jesus we have the ability to enter into a place where we are freed from sin and born again as new creations. In Jesus our sins are taken away and we become righteous through faith. And finally in Jesus we do have the ability to stand before God, not as sinners, but as freed men through the death and resurrection of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

So is there any place for prejudice and bias in this world? None whatsoever. Even when we enter into the death and resurrection of Jesus and are set free from our sins we have no right to think ourselves superior to those who have not done so. For those who are in Jesus, all are equal as he said through Paul in Galatians 3:28, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." And as we progress in Christ we do not rise to a position of superiority but rather we settle to the position of a servant. Jesus showed this saying, "you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brethren. And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in

heaven. Neither be called masters, for you have one master, the Christ. He who is greatest among you shall be your servant." (Matthew 23:8-11)

Do you want to be like Christ? Then aspire to be a servant as he came to serve and not be served. (Luke 22:27) Do not aspire to be the centre of attention, as some preachers in the church today seem to do. Do not aspire to seek the power of this world through Christianity. Aspire rather to serve the Lord and learn the truth of the Gospel in humility and obedience to God. Remember that it is the meek who will inherit the earth, not the mighty and the power we seek is the power to become the children of God as he said, "But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God." (John 1:12-13)

Old and New Wineskins

(Mark 2:18-22)

In this section of scripture the people approach Jesus over fasting. The disciples of John the Baptist and the Pharisees promoted fasting, but Jesus disciples were not fasting. I have already covered the issue of fasting in an earlier post, which you can read here (Ref: Matthew 9:14-17). So in this post I will focus on the following teaching, which was to do with old and new wineskins.

Jesus taught the people that you cannot put new wine into old wineskins as the skins will burst and the wine and skins will be lost. When wine is first made and stored it goes through a fermentation process. Gases are produced which expand and thus the containers must either be able to withstand this pressure or be flexible enough to expand with the gases produced. Old wineskins have already been through this expansion process when they were first filled and so they are no longer as flexible as new skins. Thus new wine is not put into old wineskins so that neither the skins nor the wine will be lost. The new wine needs to also remain in the skins for a period of time to go through the fermentation and maturing process to age it so it develops its flavour. New wine often does not taste as good as old wine for it has not developed (although I take this on advice from others as I do not drink wine or other alcoholic drinks).

Now Jesus uses this analogy of old and new wineskins to speak about the receiving of the old and new covenants. The people are the wineskins and the covenants are the old and new wine. He shows that it is very difficult to teach a person who is steeped in the old covenant the matters pertaining to the new covenant. In fact the two should not be mixed as they do not exist together and a person trying to live under both covenants at the same time will struggle.

The Old Covenant is based upon bondage under law and condemnation for sin. It also required the keeping of many days, feasts and fasting. But the New Covenant is about freedom from law and release from sin and does not require the keeping of feasts, days and fasts as required under the law, which Paul showed saying, "You observe days, and months, and seasons, and years!" (Galatians 4:10) When the New Covenant

came, the Old Covenant is ready to be obsolete as the writer of Hebrews says, "In speaking of a new covenant he treats the first as obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away." (Hebrews 8:13) And also, "...then he added, "Lo, I have come to do thy will." He abolishes the first in order to establish the second." (Hebrews 10:9)

Paul also shows us that to try to live under both covenants is like living in adultery. He said in Romans 7:1-3 that a married woman cannot live with another man while her first husband is alive or she will be committing adultery. But if the husband dies she can remarry anyone she chooses. Then in the next verse he shows us that this is the same for Christians moving from the old to the New Covenant. He says, "Likewise, my brethren, you have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead in order that we may bear fruit for God." (Romans 7:4) So we too are set free from the law through the death of Christ so that we can leave the Old Covenant behind and come and belong to the new risen Christ not under the law of the Old Covenant, but under the teachings of Jesus in obedience to the Father under the New Covenant.

For those brought up under the Old Covenant it is very hard to make this change. Paul himself who had the teachings of the Old Covenant deeply ingrained into him as he was a Pharisee showed he had great difficulty in his walk to God in Jesus Christ. He had to account all things of his former life and the teachings he had been taught as garbage because of the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. (Philippians 3:8)

But as we see in Paul's case, it is possible that a person brought up in the Old Covenant ways can make the change to the New Covenant. Even though old wineskins may burst when filled with new wine, nothing is impossible for the Lord. He can shore up the old wineskins and make them flexible and receptive to the new teachings of the New Covenant, but even so it will be difficult for a person who is steeped in the old teachings.

Lord of the Sabbath

(Mark 2:23-28)

One of the laws under the Old Covenant was the keeping of the Sabbath. On the Sabbath no person in Israel was permitted to work including the preparation of food. It was meant to be a day of rest and a time for the worship of God. In addition no beast of the field was to be employed in labour of any kind so that they too had rest. Here we see as Jesus' disciples pluck and rub grain to prepare as food while they walked through some grain fields on the Sabbath day. The Pharisees who were walking with them took the opportunity to condemn the disciples to Jesus. They said, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" (Verse 24)

This is typical of many people today also. Non-Christians will look at Christians and make assumptions and judgements of them based on what they see them doing. In

some cases they are quite wrong for they do not understand the basis and truth of Christianity, but only have a vague notion of what a Christian is supposed to be. The general perception of what a Christian is or is not is often based upon fallacy, lies, half-truths and ignorance.

Now when the Pharisees chose to condemn the disciples before Jesus they got a response based upon a truth that they should have known, but failed to recognise. Jesus told them of several cases where people broke the Sabbath but were not condemned. Then he made the statement that the Sabbath was made for man and not the other way around. God established the Sabbath under the Ten Commandments so that men (and beasts) would have a day of rest each week.

It was not God's intention that man should work continuously. We know ourselves today that when people overwork they get tired both physically and mentally and become run-down. When this happens their efficiency and effectiveness fall and can lead to poor productivity and lower quality and quantity of outputs. God in his wisdom recognised this fact, after all he created man and knew what his capabilities are, and so he made allowance for man in His law by giving man one day off each week. He also made allowance for man to give him annual leave by establishing the various feasts and special holidays that were encapsulated in the law. All of these things were done not for God's benefit, but for the benefit of man. The Sabbath day rest was provided so that man could recharge and spend the time in worship and learning the ways of God so that he could improve his life both physically and spiritually.

The Pharisees failed to understand this point. They took a legalistic approach to the Sabbath and the law in general. They became inflexible and failed to understand that the law was given to provide man with insight and wisdom. The law was not meant to be a big stick to hit man over the head with when they did something wrong. They did not recognise the need for compassion, justice, mercy and faith, which are encapsulated in God's law, but instead chose to use the law as a means of gaining power and control over the people.

For these reasons Jesus condemned the approach of the Pharisees calling them hypocrites in many places. They failed to rightly use the word of God to teach and train the people. When Jesus showed them the errors of their thinking it became quite clear that he was the Lord of the Sabbath.

Healing on the Sabbath

(Mark 3:1-6)

Jesus continued to show the inflexibility of the Pharisees, especially over matters of their poor interpretation of the law. The Pharisees took an extreme legalistic approach to the law which left no room for compassion. They said that no work was to be done on the Sabbath as the law stated, but took that to extremes as well as excluding healing on the Sabbath which they defined as work.

In this scripture we see a man with a withered hand come to Jesus for healing. The approach that the Pharisees took in another version of this event, was to say that there are six other days of the week and he should come back on one of those days. Such strictness in the adoption of the law has the appearance of great piety, but in fact showed disrespect and disregard for the man who was suffering. However Jesus showed that even the Pharisees would work on the Sabbath if it was necessary. He said that a child is circumcised on the Sabbath so that the law of Moses may not be broken, but this too is work and thus they break one law to keep another. (John 7:23) He also showed that if any of them had a beast that had fallen in a pit they would get it out on the Sabbath so that it would not suffer. Thus in like manner this man with the withered hand who was suffering should be permitted to be healed on the Sabbath to ease his suffering. The approach of the Pharisees was all about outward appearances, not about compassion.

Besides, who was it doing this work? Was it the Pharisees? No, this healing was the work of God. Jesus also had said in relation to the Sabbath that, "My Father is working still, and I am working." (John 5:17) As a result of this the Pharisees sought to have him killed because they believed he not only broke the Sabbath, but in this statement made himself equal to God. Despite the miracle that he performed and the many others both before and after, they would not recognise him as the Son of God.

One of the challenges for Christianity today is around the keeping of the law. In most churches today it is still taught that Christians are bound to keep the law of God, or at least the ten commandments. But Jesus came so that we could be set free from the law and receive life. He set us free from sin and the law in his death, not so that we could sin, but so that we may receive righteousness by faith. It is clear in these sections where he teaches about the Sabbath that there was something greater than the Sabbath and indeed greater than the law at work.

The truth is that if a person is seeking righteousness by faith and finds it, they do not need the law. The law was not laid down for the righteous but for the sinners. (1 Timothy 1:9) It is those who sin who need the instruction and discipline of the law, not those who do right. If a person is doing the right thing, who will condemn them? God does not condemn us for doing what is right and the law does not condemn those who are doing what is right. But what does it mean to be doing what is right? It means to be obedient to God, and his requirement of us was not about law, but about faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus showed us that the works of God were not about the law but about faith. He said, "Then they said to him, "What must we do, to be doing the works of God?" Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." (John 6:28-29) This is the work of God, to have faith and believe in Jesus Christ whom he sent to be the expiation for our sins and to release us from the bondages of sin and the law.

Jesus showed in the healing on the Sabbath that it is always right to do the right thing. Which is more right, to keep the letter of the law of the Sabbath when someone is suffering or to relieve the person who is suffering? Surely it is the latter, because it is based upon love for a fellow man, and this is exactly what Jesus showed. The very essence of the call of God is for us to come into a relationship with him and with each other in a way that is based upon God's love. The letter of the law though, as the

Pharisees interpreted it, was not about relationships built on love but about punishment for failure.

This was not the teaching of Jesus and he showed the difference in the approach sought by God as compared to that taught by man. He said elsewhere, "Sacrifices and offerings thou hast not desired, but a body hast thou prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings thou hast taken no pleasure." (Hebrews 10:5-6) It was not the letter of the law that God was interested in but in the change in the heart of a man, as instructed under the law, so that they would choose to do right. The will of God was that through the law man would learn the difference between right and wrong and use the law to build up rather than condemn. But the Pharisees used it as a means of power holding the people in subjugation through the threat of condemnation and being cast out of the synagogues. Jesus came to put this right and offer us salvation based on faith and not through works of law, for the law cannot make anyone righteous.

Call of the Twelve

(Mark 3:7-19)

Jesus fame had spread to all corners of the land. The people from many regions followed him for they had heard and seen the many things he did. He healed many people and cast out many demons all of which cried out recognising him as being the Son of God. He strictly ordered them not to make him known. How different this is from the way man operates. It is commonly taught amongst men that you need to self-promote and you need to sing your praises so that people will listen. But we see in Jesus case he did the opposite. However it was impossible for him to be hidden, just as he taught, "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid." (Matthew 5:14) Likewise Jesus was the light of the world and he could not be hidden for his light illuminated the world and showed us a better way.

Jesus needed helpers. The sheer volume of people was swamping him. His purpose too was not just to bring a message, but also to appoint messengers to take this message to others and to the ends of the earth. The beginning of this process was the call of the twelve. Twelve of his closest disciples were appointed to preach the message and to have power and authority to cast out demons. Their role was to commence the work of spreading the gospel and they became his apprentices in the work Jesus was performing.

The call of the twelve and the work they carried out was incredibly important. Their work was to set the foundations of the holy city of Jerusalem in the spiritual realm. We see this mentioned in Revelation as the angel shows John the bride of the Lamb and the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. This heavenly Jerusalem was established by God and we see that, "...the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb."

(Revelation 21:14) So we see that the work and the call of the twelve was so important that it formed the foundations of the wall of the heavenly Jerusalem.

Part of the work of the apostles was to establish the fledgling church after the death of Jesus. They were the ones who had to carry the New Covenant to the world. It was their teachings, which they learned from Jesus that established the church and enabled Christians to grow and mature. The Lord recognised the enormity of the work they were to do by showing that the very foundations of the heavenly Jerusalem, which is comes from God, was founded upon the teachings of these men. Such was the importance of their work.

We do not know much about most of these apostles and the work they did. We know some of the works of Peter, James and John, we know a little about Thomas and we know what happened to Judas Iscariot. But as for the rest of the apostles their work has not been recorded and yet they had very specific and foundational roles to fill in the fledgling church. Their work was of equal importance to the works of those we do know something about. Even Paul who is considered by most people as one of the greatest of the apostles was not recognised as one of the foundations of the heavenly Jerusalem.

Paul will have his reward, and we should not consider him any better or worse than the rest. The truth is that all who are in Christ are equal. We cannot compare Paul to the apostles in the same way that we cannot and should not compare ourself to anyone else, including the apostles. We are all different and at different places in our walks with the Lord. He is dealing with us as individuals and working on what each of us needs as individuals, thus we cannot compare. Paul made this point saying, "Not that we venture to class or compare ourselves with some of those who commend themselves. But when they measure themselves by one another, and compare themselves with one another, they are without understanding." (2 Corinthians 10:12) The only point I am making here is that the work and the teachings of the twelve apostles, not the apostles themselves, is the foundation of the heavenly Jerusalem. It is the message not the messengers that are important.

Jesus Teaches the People

(Mark 3:20-21)

On his return home Jesus was so swamped by people as he taught that he could not even eat. People were saying he is beside himself, which today tends to mean that a person is in an emotional state that they are not able to control themselves.

Different translations of the Bible have rendered this verse differently. Some say he was beside himself, some that he was crazy and some that he was out of his mind. I find that the Greek word translated here to be confusing. The word is "exeste" which is a combination of two other Greek words, "ex" and "este." The word "ex" is a preposition usually denoting a point of origin. It can mean "out" or "from" referring to

a point from which something proceeds. The second word "este" depending how it is spelled is either second or third person and means "are" or "is" as in "you/they are," "he/she/it is." When the two words are joined it is typically rendered as "it is right" or being " out in the public."

Somehow from this the translators have rendered this to mean that the people thought Jesus was crazy, beside himself or out of his mind. In my opinion, and I state that it is an opinion only, I struggle with this interpretation of this section. I am not certain what it is really saying here. I can only imagine that as Jesus was ministering he was so taken up in mind and spirit on what he was doing that he never even thought about food and rest. The need was so great among the people for teaching and healing and his compassion towards them was so great that he could not or did not want to stop. Thus they may have thought he was a little crazy as he may have not slept and was like a machine. Once again I say this is just an opinion, but it is based upon other scriptures including, "When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest." (Matthew 9:36-38) In this scripture we see the compassion Jesus had for the people and his longing for more ministers to help in the work of preaching and teaching of his people.

The people responded to Jesus for he spoke the truth to them. The word was backed up with healings and miracles, but the teaching was the key. Many may have come for the miracles and healings, but they respected who Jesus was and recognised his power as coming from God. The Pharisees did not and as we will see in the next section even went so far as to say he was working by the power of Satan. We will review this next time as we look at the unpardonable sin.

The Unpardonable Sin

(Mark 3:22-30)

The Pharisees seeing Jesus cast out demons said that he was doing this by the power of the devil. Jesus used this as an opportunity to teach the people the truth of where his power came from.

Jesus asked the Pharisees, "How can Satan cast out Satan?" He also said to them that a kingdom or a house that is divided against itself cannot stand but will come to an end. In history we see divided kingdoms always fall. Today we see the same in some countries and businesses. When the leadership is divided the whole country or business suffers as they are pulled in two directions and they fall. And if Satan rises up against his own evil kingdom, then his kingdom will not stand.

Jesus then said that you cannot plunder the house of a strong person unless you first bind the strong person. A strong person naturally will defend their property and, being strong, will often prevail in their defence. However if they are bound they will not be

able to put up a defence and then their house can be plundered. Jesus had the power and authority to bind the evil spirits and cast them out. In every case we see that the demons recognised him and feared him for they cried out as he commanded them to come out of the people and be gone.

It is the purpose of Satan to bind man and bring man under his evil power and the power of sin. Jesus offers man freedom from sin and release from the bondages of Satan and of this world. Through Jesus we have the strength of a stronger one to bind the realm of Satan and thus plunder his kingdom.

Satan's kingdom will fall, but not because he is divided against himself. It will fall because there is a stronger one who has overcome the kingdom of Satan, and that stronger one is Jesus Christ.

After Jesus had thus shown that it was not by the power of Satan that he cast out demons, he showed the evil of their statement. Jesus said that all sins would be forgiven mankind, even if they were to utter blasphemies. However he said that anyone who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven. Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is the unforgivable sin and anyone doing so will be guilty of an eternal sin.

Why is this so? A man could blaspheme Jesus or God and be forgiven but to blaspheme the Holy Spirit is an unpardonable sin. When we consider who the Holy Spirit is we can perhaps understand why the Lord took such a harsh stand on this matter. The Holy Spirit dwells within man on this earth for the purpose of transforming man into the image of Christ.

The Holy Spirit has possibly the worst of jobs because he is living in the kingdom of Satan and subjected to all the sin, evil and unholiness of this world. He is living with the filth of man to try and change man. Within each person he will have to put up with the failures each person makes and the setbacks that occur as they try to walk in the ways of God. He will have to put up our weaknesses, failures, faults, disobedience and faithlessness as he performs his task.

For the Holy Spirit who has been sent by God to do this task it must be a rotten job. To have to put up with the evil of this world day in and day out when he could be in the heavenly places with God and Jesus, it must be a terribly difficult task and cause one who is holy great anguish. It is my opinion, and only an opinion, that it is for this reason that blasphemy of the Holy Spirit is the only sin that will not be forgiven. To have to put up with the filth of this world and then to be called evil is too great a burden and thus unforgivable.

Family of God

(Mark 3:31-35)

Who are the family of God? Who are those that the Lord sees as his own family? In this section of Mark Jesus tells us who his real family is and for us we gain understanding as to how we can become part of the family of God.

There are two important things to note in this section. First we see that Jesus had a physical family while he was on the earth. At the start of this scripture we see that, "...his mother and brothers came; and standing outside they sent to him and called him." (Verse 31) Jesus was the son of Mary and supposedly the son of Joseph, although we know that he was born of God and the son of the Most High. After he had been born Mary and Joseph had other children. We know the names of at least four brother and we know also that he had at least two sisters and possibly more. This is shown in the following scripture when the people of his hometown spoke of him. "Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And are not all his sisters with us?" (Matthew 13:55-56) So in a physical sense Jesus had a family on the earth.

But in this section of scripture we see that he shows he also has a spiritual family. He used this occasion when his mother and brothers came to seek him and call him to show there were both a physical family and a family of God. When the crowd told him his mother and brothers were calling him the word says, "And he replied, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And looking around on those who sat about him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother." (Mark 3:33-35)

Jesus said that it is those who do the will of God are his spiritual family. The will of God as we have seen in my recent posts is to believe in Jesus Christ. It is the will of God that we learn and follow Jesus, that we shun sin and the wicked ways of this world and come to him in faith to seek the ways of righteousness that only come from God.

Was Jesus saying that our earthly family was of no account? Absolutely not. For that would be in opposition to so many other parts of the word of God. First there is one of the Ten Commandments that says, "Honour your father and your mother that your days may be long in the land." (Exodus 20:12) Paul also wrote, "If any one does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his own family, he has disowned the faith and is worse than an unbeliever." (1 Timothy 5:8)

But sometimes our earthly families do not build us up but tear us down. Sometimes our physical families may oppose our stand for God and try to take us away from following Jesus. Jesus explains this saying, "For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man's foes will be those of his own household." (Matthew 10:35-36) He is not saying to fight amongst your family, but rather that to follow Jesus will separate you from those who do not follow him and sometimes this may cause separation in families.

The focus of this is shown in the next few verses where he shows we must make the Lord our first priority and not even let our loved ones get between the Lord and us. "He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me." (Matthew 10:37) This is just as

he did with Abraham when he tested him by having him offer up his only son Isaac, which at the last minute he gave him a reprieve. We must first seek the kingdom of God and follow Jesus. This is priority number one. Everything else is a distant second to this priority for if we lose our salvation, we lose everything.

When we do the will of God we are the family of God. We become the brothers or sisters of Jesus Christ and of each other as we enter his family in the Spirit. And it is to this spiritual family that he has promised to give the inheritance of eternal life with God.

A Sower Went Out To Sow

(Mark 4:1-9)

A large crowd had gathered around Jesus by the sea and he began to teach them. He taught them about the parable of the sower beginning with the words, "A sower went out to sow..." This is an interesting parable in many ways and there is much we can learn about people and their walk with the Lord from this lesson. He gives the meaning of the parable to the twelve disciples shortly, so I will leave that for another post. In this post I will discuss some other things I have seen in this message.

How many people will come to the Lord? No-one knows the exact number but from this parable we see that not all people will be saved. Many will receive the word of God but for various reasons they will either not listen or it will be taken away from them. This is to be expected for here in this teaching the Lord has told us so.

Who will listen and who will not listen has not been given for us to know. This message tells us that there will be some who appear to be on fire after hearing the word but the fire dies and they fade away. It is only the Lord who knows the heart of a person and who will take the word to heart.

The process of sowing the word of God can be hit and miss. If we consider the way that seed was sown in the Lord's day, it was thrown out by hand and not all of the seed fell in fallow ground. Even the seed that did fall in fallow ground did not always produce a hundredfold. It is the same with those who come to the Lord.

What is most important for each of us is to first accept the word of the Lord and take it to heart so that we may bear fruit. When or if we have the opportunity to sow the seed of God's word to others, recognise that not all who hear the word will accept it. This is the essence of this teaching. Some will hear and accept, others will not. Those who do will produce the fruits of righteousness and bear fruit in their lives. Those who do not will be lost.

Understand the Parable of the Sower

(Mark 4:10-20)

Understanding the parable of the sower is important for it shows the path of many who hear the word of God. Not everyone who hears the word will listen, take it to heart and allow the word to make a difference in their life. Let us look at the categories the Lord has given us to understand the parable of the sower.

The first group where the seed falls on the path and is snatched away by the birds are those people who have the word taken away from them as they hear it. They may hear the word among other non-believers and bend to peer pressure, they may choose to believe the lies of this world that say there is no God, they may have been conditioned by those without faith earlier, they may just choose not to accept it or it may be that their hearts have been hardened against the Lord and they refuse to accept his word. Whatever the cause the word does not get a chance to take root in their lives as it is taken away immediately. At this point they are without hope. However this does not mean they will stay this way. The Lord can work miracles with people and turn them around as he did with the apostle Paul who violently opposed the Lord but later became one of the greatest of the apostles.

The second group are those who receive the word like seed sown on rocky ground. There is a little soil there but not enough to sustain growth to maturity for the seed. Likewise these people immediately receive the word, but they have no depth of understanding and the word cannot take root in their life. So when opposition arises on account of the word, or when they are being tested on their faith they cannot stand the heat of the test or the opposition and they fade away. There is no question that those who choose to take the Lord's path will be persecuted and suffer trials. Peter said as much in 1 Peter 4:12 saying, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal which comes upon you to prove you, as though something strange were happening to you." Paul also wrote in 2 Timothy 3:12-13, "Indeed all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil men and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceivers and deceived." And this brings us to the third group.

The third group are those who receive the words of the Lord but then it is strangled out of their lives like good grains are strangled by weeds. These people hear the word but it has no priority in their life. They constantly put other things before their relationship with the Lord and everything gets in the way of their walk with Christ. Eventually they find no place for Jesus in their lives. It could be work, family commitments, the desire to have a good time, other things that arise on days when they could meet with other Christians, invitations to parties, picnics, gatherings or whatever. The noise and hubbub of life gets in their way and they lose sight of the Lord. Their problem is one of priorities. They have not identified Christ as the first priority in the life and are not prepared to make the sacrifices necessary for their walk with Christ.

Finally the fourth group are those who hear and understand and take the words of the Lord to heart. The word takes root and grows within them to bring them to maturity in Christ. They learn the ways of the Lord and how to stand in the face of direct or indirect opposition. They learn how to face the heat of persecution and the diversions of this world and make a stand for Christ. They do this because they understand that what they may lose or give up now is of no comparison to what they will gain in the

future. Besides they have learned that even if there is suffering and persecution now, they have learned how to remain at peace within themselves by applying the teachings of Christ to their lives. They trust the Lord and he delivers them from all persecutions and problems.

I do not believe those in the first three groups are without hope. When a person hears the word of the Lord it may not immediately take root, but it may take time to germinate within them. There is evidence of one such as this who had been given up as lost in the life of Onesimus in the letter of Paul to Philemon. Onesimus had been considered lost and had done some terrible thing to Philemon who was his brother. But Onesimus had found the Lord and Paul was pleading on his behalf with Philemon to take him back as a brother both in the flesh, but even more in the spirit. This is truly an example of one who having been considered lost was then found. It is also not unlike the prodigal son who was considered lost but repented and was found.

There is always hope. If we have loved ones and are unsure where they stand, and even if they seem opposed to the Lord, we can always pray for them that perhaps the Lord may reveal himself to them so that they will be found as Onesimus and the prodigal son were found. Never give up on anyone for only the Lord knows the heart of a person and whether they can or will turn to him for salvation.

Shine Your Light Before You

(Mark 4:21-25)

Jesus made the point to his disciples saying, "Is a lamp brought in to be put under a bushel, or under a bed and not on a stand?" (Mark 4:21) His point here is that you should shine your light before you. People should be able to see from your speech and behaviour that you stand for what is good and right and true. They should recognise in the ways of your life that you are a Christian.



The truth of Christianity is not in words alone but in how we live our lives. It is about following the ways of Christ and learning to live as he lived. We see in other places when he speaks of false prophets that you will know them by their fruits. Well the same test applies for those who are in Jesus Christ. You will know them too by their fruits. You will know them by their good deeds and their assistance for those in need and their help to the helpless and so on.

Salvation does not rest on works of law but on faith in Jesus Christ. However as James 2:18 shows us, our works of love toward our brethren and neighbours shows our faith.

Jesus showed that there is nothing that is hidden which will not be revealed. All things, whether good or evil, will come to light in the light of the Lord. There are no secrets that will not be revealed. Thus it is important that what we do in secret matches what we do in public.

Our lives must be a mirror of our belief in Jesus Christ whether in public or in secret for all will be revealed. No one can live a life of sin and depravity in secret and think it will not be revealed. All things will be revealed in due course for a lie cannot go unnoticed or unpunished.

Consider for a moment a person who is living a lie. Their life depends on their ability to keep the lie going. And to keep a lie going requires further lies until they are trapped in a web of lies that is like a house of cards. When one of the lies is exposed, and they will be exposed, the whole house comes tumbling down and they suffer ruin. As Jesus said in this section, "For there is nothing hid, except to be made manifest; nor is anything secret, except to come to light." (Verse 22)

But a person who lives according to the truth does not fall for there is no precipice of lies to fall from. When we live according to the truth there is nothing to fear. As Jesus said, "The truth will make you free" (John 8:32) and in his truth there is always freedom. Christ came that we may be free and so let us live our lives in the freedom of Jesus Christ. Free to do what is good and right and true.

Growth in the Kingdom of God

(Mark 4:26-29)

Jesus tells us in this section what growth in the kingdom of God is like. He says it is like someone sowing a seed which then germinates, sprouts and grows until it reaches maturity and is harvested. How this occurs nobody knows for the process of growth and life of a seed or plant is done by the hand of God.

It is the same for a person who comes into the kingdom of God. First they hear the word of God and a seed is planted in their mind. For many this is a recognition that there is something missing in their life or that there is something more that their life could be. Look at the rich young man who came to Jesus as described in Matthew 19:16-22. Although he had the wealth of this world and he kept the law of God, he recognised there was something still lacking from his life. Jesus told him that if he were to be perfect he must put no faith in his wealth, sell what he had and give alms to the poor and come follow Jesus. The rich young man could not do this and went away sorrowful for his wealth was more important to him at that time in his life.

Then like a seed in the ground, the seed of the word of God takes root in a person's life. It germinates and begins to grow in the person. It will change a person's life if it is allowed to continue to grow until the person reaches maturity in the Lord.

We see that as a seed grows into a plant it bears fruit. Likewise when the seed of the word of God grows in a person it too bears fruit. This spiritual fruit is seen in Galatians 5:22-23, "...the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control." As we grow and mature in Christ, these attitudes grow within us so that we can stand in the face of opposition and fight

the spiritual war that rages around us. We will no longer be the slaves of the passions and desires of human nature, but in Jesus Christ we learn how to overcome evil, sin and desire to live lives in the freedom that comes from God.

How this happens is a mystery, just as how a seed puts forth shoots, a blade, a plant and bears fruit is still a mystery. Sure we understand the mechanics of plant growth. We know that to grow a plant needs minerals, nutrients, water and sunlight, but what causes the changes to take place remains a mystery. It is the same with people. The work of transformation that occurs within a person when they come to the Lord is the work of the Holy Spirit as we see in 2 Corinthians 3:18, "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit." What the Spirit does and how he causes the changes to take place are a mystery for they are the work of God. But as we see the changes in a plant, so too we see the changes in a person as they grow in the Lord. And this is not the doing of the person but is the work of God.

And in due course we shall come to the harvest just as the seed or fruit is harvested by a farmer. When that time comes we shall enter into the Kingdom of God to live with him into eternity.

Kingdom of God is like a Mustard Seed

(Mark 4:30-32)

Jesus asked the people what can we compare the kingdom of God to. He said the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed for it starts out small but grows into a great shrub or tree that the birds of the air can nest in. This imagery is interesting and the parable tells us much about this analogy Jesus used with the people.

There are two key points to be made here. First the mustard seed is the smallest of seeds but grows into one of the largest shrubs. In this we see the dramatic transformation from something that begins small but expands into something big. If we look at this in the light of the church, it began small with just Jesus and a handful of disciples, but has grown to the point where Christianity is proclaimed and Jesus is believed upon throughout the world.



The second point is that this tree grows so large that birds of the air come and nest or take shelter in its branches. The tree is a place of shelter and protection from the elements and from predators. The kingdom of God is the same. When we come to Christ we find a place of rest where the Lord cares for

our spiritual needs. When we are among brethren we receive teaching and assistance to learn and grow in the Lord so we can walk in his ways.

I believe there is both a personal as well as a community aspect to this parable. I covered this in some detail in a previous discussion, which can be viewed in my commentary on Matthew in the section covering chapter 13.

The kingdom of God from a personal perspective is very much like a seed. In my last couple of posts I have looked at the parable of the sower and sowing seeds. When the seed of the word is sown into us, it germinates, sprouts and begins to grow in a spiritual sense. We water and feed the seed through study, teaching and prayer and it grows. As we learn and as the Holy Spirit works within us we are transformed into the image of Christ. And throughout this process we come into the presence and the kingdom of God.

We learn so that we can be stable in the Lord. We learn through the Spirit to discern the difference between truth and error. There is much that is taught in the name of Christ that has little or nothing to do with Christianity. These things do not exist in God's kingdom for it is pure and unblemished by lies and errors. The challenge for us is to learn the difference, which we can do by a solid study of the word and by prayer to the Lord for insight, knowledge and wisdom as David and the prophets sought the Lord for understanding.

He will provide for us in these ways as he promised saying, "Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you." (Matthew 7:7) And when he provides we see the fulfilment of this parable for the tree of life that grows within is like the mustard seed. It provides us with protection and shelter so that we can weather the storms of life and opposition from the enemy to find peace and rest in the Lord Jesus Christ and the kingdom of God.

Jesus Calms the Storm

(Mark 4:33-41)

When he had finished preaching to a group of people Jesus said to the disciples that they should get into boats and cross to the other side of the sea. While doing so they were caught up in a great storm of wind and the waves beat against the boat so that it was taking on water. The disciples were afraid of perishing, but Jesus was asleep on the cushion in the back of the boat. So the disciples woke him and said, "Do you not care if we perish?" But he rebuked the wind and Jesus calmed the storm saying, "Peace! Be still!" And he said to the disciples, "Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?"

This is an interesting story and a great lesson for all of us when we are caught up in the storms and tempests of this life. The disciples must have forgotten for a moment who they were with. Jesus is the Son of God and has authority over all things. They

had been chosen by him to do a work and a ministry. When you put two and two together it was clear they were not going to perish, but there was a lesson here both for them and us.

Jesus said to them, “Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?” (Verse 40) This is a valid question given the knowledge had of who they were with and their experiences of the power of God. Elsewhere Jesus said you don’t need much faith to do wondrous things for if you have faith the size of a grain of mustard seed you can move mountains. (Matthew 17:20) Had they lost their faith because of this storm? I doubt it, but they certainly had forgotten it as they were being swamped by the waves and battered by the wind.

We are often in this same situation figuratively speaking. When we go through troubles and difficulties in our life how many times do we suffer fear and concern over the outcomes of a matter? How often do we lose sight of Jesus because we are too focussed on the storm around us? But when we put the situation into the Lord’s hands, then he says as he did in this message, “Peace! Be still!” and the storms abate.

There is a matter of trust in this story too. Did the disciples trust the Lord when they were in anguish or were they more concerned about their own skins? We may well have faith in Jesus and the power of God, but if we are lacking in trust we do not act on our faith. Too many times we could imagine things like I have to fix this issue, or maybe God wants me to do this, or not even the Lord could forgive me of my past and that’s why I’m suffering this way. It is because we do not trust ourselves to a loving and faithful God that we can fall into these traps. God is good and Jesus will help us if we trust in him and are obedient to his word. We must always remember his promise, “I will never fail you nor forsake you.” (Hebrews 13:5) and also, “I am with you always, to the close of the age.” (Matthew 28:20) When we remember and act on these promises of the Lord we receive whatever we ask him through faith and he will deliver us from all our trials, tribulations and sin in our lives.

Jesus Casts Out The Legion

(Mark 5:1-20)

When Jesus came to the region of the Gerasenes he encountered a man possessed by demons. The man was what we would consider today to be mentally ill and was violently psychotic. But the demons recognised Jesus and said to him, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I adjure you by God, do not torment me.” (Verse 7) Jesus said to the demon, “What is your name?” He replied, “My name is Legion; for we are many.” (Verse 9) They sought to be cast into a nearby herd of swine, but when they went the swine fled and drowned themselves in the sea.

What we see here is the name the demon gave was not just a name, but a description. He called himself “Legion” and then said that there were many demons in this man. A legion in the time of Jesus was a military term and it represented a great number of soldiers. A Legion was essentially a complete army in the Roman times and

comprised anywhere up to about six thousand men. It included troops, cooks, medical staff, armourers, and so on. Basically everything that was necessary to enable an army to function and go to war.

Now here we see this demon call itself “Legion, for we are many.” So we can presume that there were so many demons in this man that they were equivalent to a legion of an army, that is, up to six thousand demons. These demons had taken complete control of the man and tormented him day and night. He was a prisoner of this legion and they tossed him to and fro causing all kinds of injuries to him. Jesus came to this man to release him from this bondage and to set him free.

Demon possession is a terrible thing. Demons can also oppress without possessing a man too. We see that the Apostle Paul was occasionally oppressed by a demon as he wrote, “And to keep me from being too elated by the abundance of revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to harass me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I besought the Lord about this, that it should leave me; but he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” (2 Corinthians 12:7-9) The word “messenger” used in this translation comes from the Greek word “agollos” which literally translates as “angel.” The demons were the angels of Satan cast down upon the earth with Satan when he rebelled against God.

So even Christians can be oppressed by the demons. To obtain release from this when or if it occurs, we must do as Paul did and beseech the Lord that the demon should be gone from our life. In Paul’s case the Lord left the demon so that Paul should not become proud, however we see numerous other instances of where the Lord sent the demons packing never to return. Such was the case when Jesus casts out the legion from this man in the country of the Gerasenes. Another who was released from demon possession in Jesus’ time was Mary Magdalene from whom he cast out seven demons. (Mark 16:9)

It is evident in all these things that Jesus had power over both the physical and the spiritual realms. He had power and authority to heal both the physically and spiritually sick people. His power is with us still today to heal those who are physically and spiritually sick. We need only to come to him and call on him to receive the blessings of his freedom and release from all forms of bondage.

If I Touch the Hem of His Garment

(Mark 5:21-34)

Jesus had been implored by Jairus, a ruler in the synagogue, to come to his house and heal his sick daughter who was at the point of death. While making this journey an amazing event occurred which shows the power of faith and the perception of the Lord.

A great crowd was following him and he was pressed on every side. He would perhaps have been jostled, pushed and carried along by the great throng of people. But amongst this throng was a woman who had a flow of blood and had suffered much under physicians that were unable to heal or give her relief. When she heard of Jesus she said to herself, "If I touch even his garments I shall be made well." (Verse 28)

This woman was desperate for a healing. The bible says she suffered for many years under these physicians but to no effect. But she saw and recognised in Jesus there was the power to be healed. She saw that in Jesus she could receive what no man on earth had been able to give her: release from her infirmity. This is an act of faith.

But we also see that she did not want to be seen. She wanted to hide by saying to herself, "If I only touch his garment I will be healed." She did not want to come up to Jesus and ask him directly but she got this idea in her head that you could touch him and receive what you want. Despite her faith there is a problem in this attitude, and it was shown in the reaction of Jesus. The woman had a picture of Jesus in her mind as if he were a magic charm like a genie in a lamp...rub the lamp and get your wish. This was a wrong way to think and Jesus rectified this.

The woman came to him and touched his garments and immediately perceived that she had been healed. But although the crowd were jostling around him, Jesus also perceived that power had gone forth and turned around to the crowd saying, "who touched my garments?" The disciples said to him there were so many people pressing about him, why did he say, "Who touched me?" But Jesus persisted and the woman seeing she could not hide fell before him and told him the truth of the matter.

Jesus then said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well." He showed that the power of God was not some kind of magic, but far from it. The power of God was based in faith and it was not through some trick she had been healed, but by faith in God and his power to heal.

When we look at the Lord, especially when we consider the miracles that were done in the Lord's day as well as miracles that occur today, we too must remember these are not tricks. They are the power of God and they are based on faith. All that we receive from the Lord is based on faith and the grace of God. As the woman was freed from a lifetime of infirmity, so too we have been set free from sin and death in Christ Jesus. But we must remember we have this standing in God only through our faith in Jesus Christ.

Not Dead, Only Sleeping

(Mark 5:35-43)

While Jesus was coming to the house of Jairus to heal his daughter, messengers came to tell them not to bother for the girl had died. This must have been dreadful news to Jairus for he was out on a limb coming to Jesus in the first place.

Jairus was a ruler in the synagogue. It is evident from many scriptures that the rulers of the synagogue generally opposed Jesus, to the point where they said if anyone should declare him the Christ they were to be cast out of the synagogue. (John 9:22) Thus for Jairus to come to Jesus shows how desperate he was to have his child healed, as would anyone in the same situation. The rulers also knew that Jesus had to be from God, for Nicodemus said as much to Jesus when he came to him by night. (John 3:2)

So Jairus was prepared to suffer the condemnation of the rulers and possibly to be thrown out of the synagogue for the sake of his daughter. He was prepared to give up all for this child. Then when the messengers came to say that she had died, he undoubtedly would have thought that it was all over. But what did Jesus say to him? "Do not fear, only believe." (Verse 36) Again Jesus is saying, keep the faith. Believe and anything will be possible. The desire of Jairus' heart that his daughter be healed was based upon faith. He had sufficient faith to come to Jesus in the first place, and now when all seemed lost Jesus said, don't stop believing now...hold fast to your faith.

We too need to remember these words as well. Too often we feel like it is the end of the world and we don't give sufficient credit to the Lord for his blessings. God is faithful and we will receive what we need when we too keep the faith.

We then see Jesus continue on to Jairus' house and he makes this statement, "The child is not dead but sleeping." (Verse 39) The people in those days knew when someone was dead or not, and they knew the child was dead, so they just laughed at him. But Jesus put them all outside and going into the child's room with only her mother, father and those who were with him he raised the child from the dead. He strictly charged them not to make this known and told them to give the girl something to eat.

The likelihood of this not being known was next to zero. All these people outside were weeping for the child who had died and when she walked out of the room with her parents, they would have immediately known what had happened. Still Jesus made the point of not making a big deal of the matter...but it could never be hidden.

All things are possible through faith, even the raising of the dead. In this and the teachings earlier in this chapter we see that faith underpins all of the blessings of God and as the writer of Hebrews wrote, "And without faith it is impossible to please him. For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him." (Hebrews 11:6) Everything in the Lord depends on faith. There are many other things to learn and understand, but faith is one of the key foundations to everything.

Why faith? Because it is the great equaliser. Not everyone can be strong, not everyone can be rich, not everyone has great talent, ability, knowledge or many other things. But every person has the capacity to believe. This is why it depends on faith because then the way to God's kingdom is open to every person on the planet. All they need to do is to have faith in Jesus Christ.

Prophet Without Honour

(Mark 6:1-6)

After a period of time Jesus came back to the country and towns where he had grown up. He taught them in the synagogues and the the people were amazed at him. But their amazement was not because of his message, but because they had known him from childhood and did not understand the change that had come over him.

They questioned in astonishment saying, “Where did this man get all this? WHAT is the wisdom given to him? What mighty works are wrought by his hands!” (Verse 2)

Because they had known him since childhood and he grew up amongst them, they did not understand these things. They could see the amazing things that he was doing, but could not perceive that this was the work of God. They were looking at Jesus as if he were still, “The kid next door.” They did not see him as the Son of God. They looked at him from a physical rather than a spiritual perspective for they said, “Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?” (Verse 3)

As an aside we see here mentioned the earthly family from which Jesus came. His brothers are named and it is shown he had sisters as well.

But the people did not perceive the spiritual aspect of the works he was doing and so they took offence. It was as if they were saying, “Jesus? He’s just a carpenter so what would he know about matters of the Church!” Too often even today people are misjudged by appearances. Too often we see people ignored because they do not have the trappings of a professional or a specialist. Too often we see people give precedence to those taught by man but ignore those taught by God.

Nowhere is this more evident than among those who know us, as happened to Jesus. His comment rings true when he said, “A prophet is not without honor, except in his own country, and among his own kin, and in his own house.” (Verse 4) Amongst his own people and kin he was just the kid next door and not really special, but to the rest of the world he was something special and his message was remarkable.

So too let us look at the content of what people say and not judge them by what they may appear. Even Jesus said that perfect praise can come out of the mouths of babes. (Matthew 21:16) In Jesus case it was the content or the message that was critical and we need to learn to listen to and weigh up the messages we hear from others, irrespective of who they may be. We too may receive great pearls from the most unlikely sources...even the kid next door.

Jesus Sends Out The Twelve

(Mark 6:7-13)

As Jesus went among the villages teaching he began to give more ministry responsibility to the twelve disciples. When Jesus sends out the twelve he gives them some quite specific instructions. They were to have the authority to cast out demons and to anoint the sick with oil for healing.

These signs were given for the purpose of confirmation of the words they were to speak as they spread the gospel among the people. They began their preaching here in the same way that John the Baptist and Jesus Christ began their respective ministries. They preached repentance.

Repentance is one of the key foundations of Christianity. Under repentance Christians are to turn from their sinful ways, renounce evil in this world and seek to make themselves right with God. Repentance is a preparatory process as people come to God. It prepares a person to receive the gifts and the call of God and is a first step in turning around a life.

Repentance as a first step requires a person to recognise they have sinned and are in need of a saviour. The only one capable of saving man from sin is Jesus Christ, for that authority has been given to him alone. (Luke 5:24) Repentance also acts as a first step of obedience. When we repent and come to the Lord confessing our sin, we recognise the power of God through Jesus Christ to grant us release from sin. This is a first mark of the obedience we are to show in our new life in Christ.

When Jesus sends out the twelve he tells them not to take money, food or a bag (eg. luggage) but to accept the hospitality of whoever offers it. Nor were they to go from house to house when they entered a town. Whoever opened their home to the disciples would be the one with whom they were to stay while in that town or place. This is a blessing to the person with whom they were staying for the way that we all can serve the Lord is to serve his people.

They were not to take anything with them for the Lord would provide through his people. It was both a test and a blessing when they did receive what was needed as they travelled and preached the gospel.

But they would also receive opposition as some towns would not receive them. Jesus instructed them to leave, and on leaving to even shake off the dust from their feet as testimony against that place. In essence Jesus said not to bang your head against a brick wall. If the people didn't want to hear the word, don't try to shove it down their throat. Instead go somewhere else where the people would be more receptive. There are many towns and cities in the world who needed the word, so why struggle where the word is unwanted.

This is still a good lesson for us today. Offer the word to those around you as the opportunity arises, but if they reject it, don't push it any further, just move on. Who knows, perhaps the seed you planted will come to fruit at a later time and the Lord will have his servant in the right place for that person when his time is right, as he said, "If any one serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there shall my servant be also; if any one serves me, the Father will honor him." (John 12:26)

John the Baptist Beheaded

(Mark 6:14-29)

Herod imprisoned John the Baptist. His wife had a grudge against John and had him beheaded when an opportunity arose. I have covered this previously at this link (freegiftfromgod.com/blog/2011/01/beheading-of-john-the-baptist/) so will look at a different aspect of John the Baptist's life this time.

The life and times of John the Baptist was a time of transition. Jesus alluded to this when he said, "The law and the prophets were until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached, and every one enters it violently." (Luke 16:16) In the short period that the ministry of John commenced and up until the death of Jesus, the world was going through a transition.

John's role as was prophesied of him was to prepare the way for the Lord. He commenced his ministry preaching a baptism in water for repentance and the forgiveness of sin. He prepared the people for the coming of the Lord who then took that ministry as a beginning and transitioned people into the New Covenant.

It was necessary that John came for he also bore witness to Jesus, and under the Old Covenant law, a matter was established on the basis of two or more witnesses. It was at this time that Jesus in the scripture quoted above drew a definite line in the sand. He said that the era of the Old Covenant, which is the law and the prophets, ended at John. From John the Baptist onwards then began the preaching of the good news of the kingdom of God.

We see that although John had a powerful ministry, unlike many other religious leaders over the centuries, at his death his ministry ceased. It was not carried on by his followers for John himself taught them that he was only there for a time to prepare the way. He taught them not to follow himself, but to follow the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus Christ. Thus all the followers of John transitioned across to Christ once he appeared and John bore witness to him. We see this evidenced when Paul found a group of John's disciples at Ephesus. (Acts 19:1-7) On hearing of Jesus they took the teachings of the New Covenant to heart and became Christians.

John the Baptist was truly a change agent and there has never been anyone else like him in history. As Jesus said of John the Baptist, "Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has risen no one greater than John the Baptist." (Matthew 11:11)

Jesus Takes the Disciples to Rest

(Mark 6:30-32)

Jesus had recently sent the disciples out to commence preaching the word of God, healing the sick and casting out demons among the people in the surrounding villages. On their return they were telling him of all the things they had done and taught.

But they were rushed and harried as the people were constantly milling about and seeking the Lord's help and that of the disciples too. They had no time to rest and no leisure time, even to spare a few minutes to eat. Jesus aware of this, and to prevent them burning out, took the disciples aside saying, "Come away by yourselves to a lonely place, and rest for a while." (Verse 31)

There is a valuable lesson for all of us in these few words. It is a well-established fact that if we work continually we get worn down. Nobody does their best work when all they do is work. The old saying, "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy," is true. We need rest. We need time to recuperate and refresh both body and mind. We need to get away into the wilderness, literally or figuratively, and do something different to our work from time to time to recharge our batteries.

The Lord was showing this to the disciples. Even those who work for God are permitted to take a break. It is no sin to have a holiday or a rest from the Lord's work from time to time, especially when things get hectic. If we are to do our best work, whether for the Lord or for man, we need to have a break.

And this is not a new principle as it is the basis of one of the Ten Commandments. It was stated that man was to work six days and then rest on the Sabbath. (Exodus 20:8-11) The day of rest was to be put aside under the law for learning the teachings and worship of God. But as Jesus showed us, the Sabbath was made for man not man for the Sabbath. (Mark 2:27) The Sabbath was given so that man would have a day of rest to recharge. There was to be no physical work done on the Sabbath so that weary bones and muscles could rejuvenate. The principle of rest on the Sabbath for the purpose of being refreshed was shown by God to Moses saying, "...in six days God made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested, and was refreshed." (Exodus 31:17)

The Lord showed that by resting this one day each week would give us refreshment of body and spirit. He says elsewhere that the overall output, or productivity as we would call it today, would be improved by taking a day of rest, so that they would produce as much or more than if they had worked seven days.

We should remember these principles. The Lord does not expect us to work all of the time. He took the disciples apart so they could rest and recuperate. We too need rest so that we can function properly and do the work we have to do, and by taking a rest we will do it better.

Jesus Feeds the Five Thousand

(Mark 6:33-44)

For how many centuries have men tried to create or transform matter? Alchemists in the middle and dark ages attempted to turn base metals into gold...unsuccessfully. This has proven impossible for man, but consider the case of Jesus who took just five

loaves and two fish and created a feast to satisfy five thousand men, not counting any women and children. And not only did he do it once, he did it twice!

We tend to miss the point sometimes that what Jesus did was to transform or create matter from nothing. He multiplied those few loaves and fishes to feed the five thousand. The only way this could be done was to create matter from nothing. For us this is impossible, but for the God of Creation this would not prove too difficult a task, considering that he had already made the whole universe from nothing.

There is a second point we should remember too. The people in this section of scripture had been with Jesus for a while and were in a lonely place, late in the day. (Verse 35) Jesus told the disciples to give them something to eat for he did not want to send them away hungry. Naturally the disciples were at a loss as to how they could possibly feed such a multitude, but to God nothing is impossible. What we see then is that Jesus provides for his people. Even when there was little or nothing, he created abundance from nothing. He took the few morsels of food available and created a feast.

God will not leave his people in want. King David wrote of God saying, "I have been young, and now am old; yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken or his children begging bread." (Psalm 37:25) This is a great promise the Lord has given to his children. We will not suffer want if we are faithful to the Lord. He proved it in the miracles where he fed the multitudes as well as many other places. And we can help the Lord in this work too when we share our surpluses with his people.

Paul also wrote of this principle saying, "...as a matter of equality your abundance at the present time should supply their want, so that their abundance may supply your want, that there may be equality. As it is written, "He who gathered much had nothing over, and he who gathered little had no lack." (2 Corinthians 8:14-15) Jesus will provide for his people and we may be the servants of his generosity. Let us be prepared to share with each other when we have the capacity and capability. We do not need to go into lack ourselves, as Paul shows, the abundance will be enough to meet the needs of all. But we do need to be prepared to offer what we can, knowing that when or if required, God can literally create matter to meet our needs out of thin air.

Need any more proof? Consider Elijah the prophet who was in the wilderness and God ordained that the ravens would bring him food, which they did. (1 Kings 17:1-8) And then there is the case of the widow with whom Elijah lodged during the great drought at that time. All she had was a jar with a little meal in it and a flask of oil, and yet for many days the vessels always had meal and oil in them as the Lord continued to replace what was left. Again creating matter from thin air.

Believe that he can and will do so with his people today. There is nothing impossible to the Lord our God and no promise that he will not fulfil. We should be encouraged by these teachings knowing that he has set it into his purpose for his people that we will be protected and not suffer want.

Walking On Water

(Mark 6:45-52)

After Jesus had fed the five thousand he dismissed the crowds and sent the disciples to cross the sea in the boat while he went up alone on the mountain to pray. When evening had come the boat was out at sea but was doing it hard. There was a strong wind against them and they were barely making any headway.

Jesus saw their difficulty and in about the fourth watch of the night, which would have been between midnight and 2:00 am, he came walking out to them on the sea. Jesus intended to pass them by, but they saw him coming and were greatly terrified thinking it was a ghost. But Jesus called to them not to be afraid, and he came into the boat with them. The seas were immediately calmed as the wind ceased and they made headway towards to opposite shore.

The disciples did not understand the miracle of the loaves when he fed the five thousand and they did not understand about Jesus walking on the water either. They did not understand that God, who could convert nothing into bread and fish to feed the five thousand, could also change the structure of water molecules enabling Jesus to walk on it, or change the molecular structure of Jesus so that he became light enough to stand on water. They did not understand the power of God over all things of this physical realm and that nothing is impossible to God.

We also get a good lesson out of this message too. For we see Jesus told the disciples they had nothing to fear. Likewise with the Lord we have nothing to fear either. Also when Jesus got into the boat all the storm and turbulence of the water ceased. In the same way when we invite Jesus into our life in times of troubles, the storms are calmed as he takes control of the situation. Finally we should understand that there is nothing outside the control of the Lord. The entire physical and spiritual realms are subject to him, so we need fear nothing nor be concerned about anything. We need only to remember his words, "I will never fail you nor forsake you." (Hebrews 13:5)

The Power of Jesus to Heal

(Mark 6:53-56)

Jesus returned across the sea to the region of Gennes'arat. As soon as the people recognised him they ran about the neighbourhood and brought all of their sick to him for healing. They laid the sick in the market places and besought that they might just touch the fringe of his garment and as many as touched it were healed.

The Lord did not turn anyone away who sought his help. Whether it was sickness, demon possession or need of teaching, he gave of himself to all manner of people. He did this work at no charge to the people and they were all healed or helped so that their needs were met. He did not ask them for money, tithes, gifts or offerings of any kind, but as many as asked him for a healing were healed, any time day or night.

The love of God and the Lord Jesus Christ for men can be clearly seen in the attitude of the Lord Jesus. Whilst he was harsh with the teachers of the day who were not teaching the word of God truthfully, he was gentle, patient and forbearing with the people. As it is written of him, “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” (Matthew 9:36)

Today he has not left us helpless. Today he has provided for us when we are harassed. Unlike the days when Jesus walked the earth, we now have the New Covenant in full force, which did not come into effect until after Jesus was put to death. He has given us the teachings of the New Covenant in the New Testament and will freely give the Holy Spirit to any who ask him as he showed saying, “...how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” (Luke 11:13)

It is the work of the Holy Spirit to be our teacher, guide, comforter, protector and counsellor. The Holy Spirit has access to the full knowledge and power of God to do the work of transformation in each person so that they can be reformed in the image of Jesus Christ. Jesus has not left us harassed and helpless like those who were about him. He has provided all strength and power so that we may grow and learn his ways. He has given us power as John wrote, “But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God” (John 1:12)

Does he still do miraculous healings? Absolutely! When we come to him in accordance with his words and obedient to the gospel, his power can be released. I myself can bear witness to this miraculous power of the Lord as you may see in my personal testimonies at my website. But in my mind the most miraculous thing of all is his call and the work of transformation in each of us. The other miracles may come and go, but it is through his power to change us into his likeness that we will abide with him forever.

Traditions of the Elders

(Mark 7:1-13)

The Pharisees had established a great many traditions, which they taught the people to observe. It had the effect of making them appear somehow more pious or righteous than the common man. But we see that Jesus upbraided them over their traditions for they revered their traditions more than the word of God. What is more, they allowed their traditions to get in the way of, and in some cases replace the word and teachings of God.

In this section the Pharisees were horrified that the disciples of Jesus did not wash their hands before eating, according to the traditions of the elders. But Jesus responded asking why the Pharisees chose to reject the commandments of God for the sake of their traditions. He pointed out that one of the Ten Commandments was to honour your father and mother. But the tradition of the Pharisees said that if anything

a person was to give to his parents would be given to God instead, then they permitted a person to break the law of God for the sake of their tradition. They cause a person not to do anything for their parents by instead offering all to God.

Who benefited from this tradition? Did God ask for people to ignore their duty to family, and parents in particular, so that he could be gratified? Did God ask for people to give their sustenance, wealth and excess to him rather than support their families? Absolutely not! There was certainly a law in the Old Covenant about giving a tithe of a person's increase, but what the Pharisees were seeking was over and above the tithe required under the law.

It is the tradition of men that leads people not to, but away from God. It is following man's tradition that causes them not to find God. Today is no different. The traditions in the church are so deeply ingrained that it must be a nightmare for anyone coming into a church to sift the truth from the traditions. The feasts of Easter and Christmas have no biblical basis. The traditions of giving Easter eggs, and hot cross buns have no basis in scripture. The tradition of not eating red meat on Good Friday has no scriptural basis. In fact there is a law in the Bible that says people should eat only those things from the rivers or the sea that have both fins and scales. (Leviticus 11:9-12) And yet we see people eating shellfish like prawns, shrimp and so on on Good Friday where they are in effect breaking one of the laws of God for the sake of a tradition.

Tithing is another tradition that has been brought into the modern church that some churches push as truth when it is not. Space does not permit me to cover all the aspects of tithing here, but I have done an extensive study on this which you can read in my eBook on Tithing Today at my website.

There are many traditions in the modern church that do not stand up under scrutiny and comparison to the truth of the Gospel. I encourage every person to look at what is being taught in his or her own church and check it against the word to see if it is indeed truth or a tradition that is a lie. It is incumbent upon us all to seek the full truth for it is only through a knowledge of the truth that we can stand and conquer Satan in this age, and be transformed to be able to stand before God in the next age.

What Defiles a Man

(Mark 7:14-23)

What is the key to living a life of truth and purity in Christ? Is it following the traditions of the church? No. Jesus in this section showed that purity in Christianity was not an outward thing but a matter of the heart.

Jesus had just upbraided the Pharisees for following their traditions rather than following the word of God. In fact they gave such importance to their traditions that they completely negated the word of God, which was leading people astray. Jesus showed the error of their ways and then went on to correct them.

The argument came up over the washing of hands before eating. This was a tradition the Pharisees were teaching and were annoyed because the disciples of Jesus were not following their tradition. In closing down their argument, Jesus said to all the people that, "Hear me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a man which by going into him can defile him; but the things which come out of a man are what defile him." (Verses 14-15)

A person is not defiled by eating without washing their hands, at least not in the sight of God. A person is defiled when they behave poorly towards their fellow man. Real defilement is a matter of behaviour not food.

When someone behaves badly towards another they are showing a lack of respect and of love for that person. The basis of both the old and new covenants is love. So when a person acts in opposition to love, they are defiled for they are not acting in accordance with the nature and the will of God.

To eat with unwashed hands could make you sick physically, but it will neither commend nor cause your rejection before God. He does not care whether we wash our hands to eat or not. The old saying that "Cleanliness is next to godliness," is completely wrong.

What will cause you to be defiled is anger, wrath, malice, evil behaviour, fornication, licentiousness, adultery, murder, deceit and so on. These are the true blots and blemishes on the character of man.

In Jesus we have the opportunity to overcome the nature of man. We can have the victory over the flesh by learning and applying the words of the truth. The path we are to follow is not the traditions of man, but the truth of the gospel of Christ. Seek his ways and you will find a path where there is no defilement.

Crumbs from the Masters Table

(Mark 7:24-30)

Is the gospel only for a few? Should the church be a closed or secret society? Is there discrimination in the churches so that some people get the word and others don't? If you read this section of scripture in isolation you could be led astray to think such things, but it is not true.

A woman came to Jesus who was not a Jew but was a Greek and a Syrophenician by birth. Her daughter was possessed by a demon and she begged the Lord to cast it out. But Jesus said to her, "Let the children first be fed, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." (Verse 27)

This sounds rather harsh and could be taken out of context to uphold those questions at the start of this post. But Jesus was not being harsh. His purpose for coming to the

world was, as he said “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” (Matthew 15:24) The ministry that was to be given to the Gentiles, for this woman was a Gentile, came later. The New Covenant opened the door for the whole world to be able to come to God, whether Jew or Gentile. But at the time Jesus walked the earth, there was no New Covenant for it did not come into being until after he had died.

Thus in the interim Jesus was bound under the Old Covenant and there were strict laws and conditions under it in relation to dealing with the Gentiles.

But this woman was a woman of faith. Her response to Jesus was not to get upset or to think him harsh and unkind. She understood the relationship the Jews had with the Gentiles. So her response was aligned to that understanding, for she also recognised the power of the Lord to heal. Thus she said, “Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.” (Verse 28)

Jesus then saw that she was a woman of faith and worthy to receive the healing she asked for. She was effectively saying that although she was not a Jew, she understood and recognised that God was with the Jews and that she took whatever was available to seek the Lord’s way. Jesus says in the Matthew version of this story, “O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.” And her daughter was healed instantly.” (Matthew 15:28)

It is through faith that we receive the promises of God. The New Covenant is based upon faith and it is the children of faith who are the true descendants of Abraham and the true children of Israel. Even though a person may not be a physical descendant of Abraham, when they exhibit faith in God as this woman did, they are accepted and receive the promises of the Lord.

Thus, she received the healing for her daughter and found her resting and the demon gone from the child when she went home.

All who come to the Lord in faith will receive the promises of God. His promises are founded on faith, and without faith it is impossible to please the Lord. As such we must continue to Look to the Lord and learn whatever we can to increase our knowledge and strengthen our faith.

The Deaf Shall Hear

(Mark 7:31-37)

Why did Jesus come to the earth? What was the purpose of the appearing of the Son of God on this earth for mankind? Well there were a number of reasons for his appearing, the main one of which was to give man salvation through his death and resurrection and the introduction of the New Covenant. But there were other reasons, and one of those is alluded to here in this short section of scripture.

The people brought a man to Jesus who was deaf and as a consequence had a significant speech impediment. They asked if Jesus would heal him. So Jesus took him aside and did as they asked and he opened the ears of the man so that he could hear and removed the speech impediment.

Now there were many miracles performed by Jesus, but this is an interesting one. When John the Baptist sent his disciples to Jesus to enquire whether he was the one who was to come, Jesus replied, “And Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is he who takes no offense at me.” (Matthew 11:4-6)

This was both an answer to their question and also shows a practical application of the fulfilment of prophecy. In Matthew 13 Jesus said,

13 This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.

14 With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah which says: ‘You shall indeed hear but never understand, and you shall indeed see but never perceive.

15 For this people’s heart has grown dull, and their ears are heavy of hearing, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should perceive with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and turn for me to heal them.’

The people who were not able to hear or not prepared to hear would not be able to understand what he was talking about. To them the parables would be just an interesting story and many of the words of Jesus fell on deaf ears. Although they could hear and see, they did not understand or perceive what he spoke about.

But then we see him speaking to his disciples in Matthew 13 saying,

16 But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear.

17 Truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.

To those who receive his words and seek his ways, the parables are opened up and they are given spiritual insight. The words take on a meaning far beyond the simple stories that were being told. They became knowledge of the truth of the kingdom of God and were powerful representations of these truths.

Thus when we see Jesus open the ears of this deaf man, we see an analogy to the way he opens the ears of those who come to him. When we come to the Lord and open ourselves to him and his words, our ears are opened to understand, and our eyes are opened to perceive. Perception and understanding are of the spirit, whereas sight and hearing are of the flesh. He gives us the power through the leading and guidance of the Holy Spirit to perceive and understand what he is saying and to recognise the power of his truths.

To the rest of the world, the knowledge of the kingdom of God is like foolishness. They do not understand the power that is in the death and resurrection of Jesus, for these simple things we preach like faith, grace and walking in the Spirit will lead us to

eternal life. It is these things that we hear when the Lord opens our ears, just as the man heard the words of Jesus when he opened his ears all those years ago.

Feeding the Four Thousand

(Mark 8:1-10)

Does Jesus ever leave his people lacking in anything? Will he provide for their needs? Absolutely! Every time. There is nothing that he cannot and will not do for his people.

People will generally care for those that they love, whether that is their family, friends, husbands, wives or children. They will do their best to provide what they can if someone they love is in dire need. But sometimes we cannot do much to assist.

However the Lord shows his love for us in that he ALWAYS provides for those he loves; for those who live according to the will of God. Here in this section we see that Jesus had compassion on the crowd. They had been following him and with him for three days with nothing to eat. He could have dismissed them and sent them away, but he said to the disciples to give them something to eat for he was concerned the people might faint from hunger on the way home.

The disciples had a few loaves of bread but said, "How can one feed these men with bread here in the desert?" (Verse 4) Now given that the Lord had earlier fed the five thousand with a few loaves and fishes, you would have thought the disciples would recognise that Jesus could do anything and feeding the four thousand should not have been an issue. But this was a lesson they still had not yet fully learned.

They had seven loaves of bread and found also a few small fish. So again Jesus took the food, blessed and broke it, and there was sufficient to feed the four thousand people plus to gather up seven baskets of leftovers.

This was the second time he had performed this miracle of creating food from thin air. What we gain from this is the knowledge that even today the Lord will and can provide our needs, no matter how impossible they seem, when we put the matter into his hands.

From a personal perspective I have seen the blessing of the Lord in miraculous ways both in my own life and that of those I know. He has always provided for his people, and his hand is not short either. He does not provide the second best to his people but always the very best.

We can take away from this teaching confidence and comfort in the knowledge that the Lord loves us so much that there is nothing he will not provide. We may not get all of our wants, especially if they are not what we need, but we will always have enough of what we need. As King David wrote, and I have quoted in the past, "I have been young, and now am old; yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken or his children begging bread." (Psalm 37:25)

The feeding of the four thousand is clear evidence of this blessing of the Lord. He gives liberally and plentifully to his people and they will not ever suffer want. As King David said, the people of the Lord who are righteous will never be forsaken and we can take great comfort and be reassured about that when we strike tough times. when the world worries about recession and the fall of the dollar, those who are the people of God can rely on the bounty and love of a faithful Lord and God who has said, "I will never fail you nor forsake you." Hence we can confidently say, "The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid; what can man do to me?" (Hebrews 13:5-6)

Jews Seek A Sign

(Mark 8:11-13)

The Pharisees came to Jesus seeking a sign from him to test him. They wanted proof that he was the Son of God, the Messiah who was to come, but they did not believe and would not believe even if he gave them that sign they sought.

Jesus had already done many signs and wonders in the presence of the people. The Pharisees were aware of this and he had even healed the daughter of one of the leaders of the synagogue. What other signs did they need of who Jesus was? But their request for a sign was not unusual and it was part of the psyche of the Jews.

Paul wrote of the Jews that, "For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom." (1 Corinthians 1:22) It is interesting the way Paul worded this statement. He said they DEMANDED signs, and this is what they were doing with Jesus. The Greeks were seeking wisdom. They were looking for knowledge, and this is evident from the great early Greek thinkers, philosophers, mathematicians and writers. But the Jews demanded a sign for their history was littered with the evidence of God's presence through the signs that God had performed. Moses parting the Red Sea and at the burning bush, Gideon laying out the fleece, the many signs as the people spent forty years in the wilderness after leaving Egypt, Elijah and the woman whose jar of meal and cruse of oil never failed during the drought, Elijah with the priests of Ba'al calling down fire from heaven and many other signs of God's power.

Throughout Jewish history God had sent signs and they demanded them as evidence of the presence of God. Thus we see the Pharisees demanding a sign from Jesus. But Jesus was not going to succumb to their wishes just to prove a point. There had been many signs and their lack of faith showed that one more would make not a dot of difference. Instead we see him say in other places that the only sign they would receive would be the sign of Jonah. As Jonah spent three days and nights in the belly of the great fish, he would spend three days and nights in the grave and then be resurrected.

Resurrection is the sign and proof that Jesus is the one chosen by God to bring in the New Covenant. Death was unable to hold him for he had not sinned and therefore should not have paid the penalty for sin. It is through his death though that our

penalties have also been paid when we come to him and enter into his death through baptism.

And this is our sign too. It is in baptism and by faith that we accept the death of Jesus as our own and are likewise resurrected as new creations in Christ. It is by baptism that we are truly, born again of water to be prepared to receive the Holy Spirit so we can be transformed into the image of Jesus.

We come to him to be relieved of sin and set free from law through this greater sign he did for our behalf. The Pharisees failed to see the wonder of this sign and missed out, but those who followed him and came to him accepting the sign he gave us in his death and resurrection have the opportunity of becoming the true Children of God.

Beware the Leaven of the Pharisees

(Mark 8:14-21)

When Jesus gives us a warning we should listen. When he warned the disciples to beware the leaven of the Pharisees and Herod, they misunderstood. Thinking Jesus was talking about bread, they began discussing the fact that they had brought none with them. Jesus then pulled them up to get their thinking right.

If we look at what the Lord said, it becomes obvious that he was not talking about bread. He was talking about the nature of bread, and more specifically, the nature of leaven or yeast used to make bread.

Leaven or yeast is used to make bread rise. It ferments and generates gas that adds body and air to the bread so that it become light and soft. It works slowly and anyone who has made bread knows that you must add your yeast and mix it in, then wait for some time to allow the yeast to work through the mix and rise.

Now it is this action that Jesus was comparing the Pharisees and Herodians to. The Herodians were essentially a political party and followers of Herod. They looked to him for hope and protection from the Roman conquerors and we see that they considered Herod a god as was shown in Acts 12:21-23. God however struck him down for his arrogance and pride for he did not give glory to God.

But the Herodians and the Pharisees were leading and teaching the people at this time. Like yeast, they were hidden amongst the people and working slowly to influence them against Christianity. They were spreading their poisonous teachings among the people using their power and privilege to turn the people away from the Lord, and were seeking by deception and stealth how to get rid of Jesus.

Jesus knew this only too well. That is why he warned the disciples to beware of them. The Pharisees and Herodians with their false teachings were dangerous. They were insidious and under-handed and designed to undermine the power and authority of the

Christ. They did this to prop up their own positions and power, which they did not want to lose.

Jesus and his disciples represented a point of opposition for both the Pharisees and the Herodians. The Pharisees saw him as taking away their religious power for he was the Messiah and they wanted to deflect the people from him. And the Herodians opposed him politically for the Messiah was to be king, which meant that the kingship of Herod was exposed and would fall. In their self-interests they banded together against the common enemy of Jesus and his disciples for they did not want the status quo to change as they would lose their places of privilege.

False teaching today will do the same to us. Christians today have a need to understand the truth just as the disciples needed to understand Jesus was not talking about bread in this situation. The leaven of the Pharisees, which is about power and privilege over the people is not a lot different to the way some church leaders exalt themselves over those people in their flock. Rather than leading the people to a greater understanding of Christ and how to walk in his ways, they are concerned with the things of this world. Money, tithes, building big churches as a monument to their own glory rather than the glory of God.

God does not want your money. God does not want a fancy church hall. God is not looking for you to be rich in the things of this world. God wants you. As you are, regardless of your flaws, faults or weaknesses. He is prepared to overlook all of those things for the sake of your salvation. You cannot buy it or get it any other way than by coming to him through Jesus Christ.

So don't let the fancy churches amaze or dazzle you. Don't let the promise of riches in this world lead you into their clutches. Look at Jesus. After all, he came as a carpenter and his first disciples were fishermen. He came to serve, not be served and that is the attitude we all need to develop today.

Healing the Blind Man

(Mark 8:22-26)

How clearly do we see the things around us? How well do we perceive what it is that we see? Jesus came to open the eyes of the blind, and not just the physically blind, but the spiritually blind too. When we look at the miracles he did it is worth considering how else they may apply, as in this case.

When Jesus came to Bethsaida the people brought a blind man to him and begged for Jesus to heal him. (Verse 22) Jesus took the man away from the people and out of the village where he spat on the man's eyes and laid his hands upon him. He then asked the man what he could see. (Verse 23) The man responded saying he could see men but they looked like trees walking. (Verse 24)

Now we will pause here for this is an interesting analogy. The man may have been blind from birth or he may have become blind later in life. We do not know which was the case here, but we could presume it was the latter for he would not have known what either men or trees looked like if he was blind from birth. However he saw something which he believed to be men but they looked like trees.

What the man was saying was that he could see, but did not see clearly. He could not perceive what it was he was looking at as his vision was still distorted. He lacked clarity in his sight and had he been left in that state would probably not have been much better off then when he was blind.

In fact it is sometimes worse to perceive a thing falsely than to not perceive it at all. When we only see in part, and what we are looking at is not clear, we may make assumptions that lead us to wrong conclusions. But the Lord does not want us to be left in the dark (blind) nor does he want us to follow half truths (impaired vision). He wants us to see clearly so we can walk uprightly and walk in the truth.

Going back to the blind man we then see Jesus again laid his hands on the man's eyes and the man looked intently and his sight was restored fully.

As Jesus restored this man's physical sight to full clarity, so too he will provide clarity to our insight. We must go to him as the blind man went to him when we need clarity of vision. When you are lacking in knowledge or wisdom or any other thing, pray to the Lord for insight as James instructed, "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives to all men generously and without reproaching, and it will be given him." (James 1:5) And like this man if it does not come the first time, press on with the Lord for he will give you the necessary insight when the time is right.

Who Is Jesus?

(Mark 8:27-30)

Who is Jesus? Many have asked that question and many give different answers. Jesus put the question to his disciples in this section of scripture and the answer is quite telling.

Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do men say that I am?" (Verse 27) The disciples responded that many thought Jesus to be John the Baptist, or Elijah or one of the old prophets who had risen from the dead. The people thought this way because of the power Jesus had. They recognised that the power he had was not of this earth, but was spiritual and thus he must have been the risen spirit of one of the old prophets.

Now it is amazing that they thought this way. The whole of the nation of Israel from the beginning after Moses led them from Egypt had been awaiting the Messiah. They knew he was coming for it had been foretold in the scriptures through the words of many of the prophets. The priests were searching the scriptures at the time of Jesus'

birth to identify where the Messiah was to be born and recognised he was to come from Bethlehem, the city of David the King.

But when he appeared they did not recognise him for who he was. Why? Because the revelation of Jesus Christ comes from God, not from man.

Jesus then asked the disciples who they thought Jesus was. Peter answered saying, "You are the Christ." (Verse 29) In the Matthew version of this event Jesus says to Peter, "And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven." (Matthew 16:17) In this saying we see that Peter had been shown who Jesus was not by man but by God.

The revelation of Jesus Christ comes from God. No-one can come to Jesus unless he is called by the Father, as Jesus says, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him." (John 6:44)

When we are called to come to Christ we are called by God to come to him. This is a very humbling piece of information when you stop to consider it for a moment. The Creator of all things has taken the time out to come to you personally and ask you to get to know his son, Jesus Christ. This is a personal invitation from God Almighty to you. Furthermore, in knowing Jesus and being known by God, he will give you the inheritance of his kingdom and eternal life as well. Not a bad deal for just saying, "Yes. I accept your invitation."

How can people ignore the God of all creation and say, "Not interested." Yet they do. People do not recognise who Jesus is because it has not been shown to them. There are plenty of people who have read the Bible and yet think of Jesus as just a good man that lived a long time ago and started up a religion. Not many are willing to accept him as the Son of God, the Christ, the Messiah, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith (Hebrews 12:2), and a saviour for all mankind.

Yet those who do accept him receive the promises of God. They receive the blessings of the Lord both in this life and the promised life to come. To Jesus then we need to say thank you in the recognition as Peter stated, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

Get Behind Me Satan

(Mark 8:31-33)

Satan is the great deceiver of mankind. He is subtle and cunning like a fox. His desire is to destroy mankind and especially those who seek the Lord. Here we see the battle lines drawn up. Christians on the side of God but Satan on the side of men.

There is a good message in this section of scripture. Jesus was telling his disciples plainly what was to come. He was explaining that he was to suffer and be killed by the hands of the elders, chief priests and the scribes.

But Peter took him aside and began to rebuke Jesus. Peter said to him, “God forbid, Lord! This shall never happen to you.” (Matthew 16:22) But we see the response of Jesus and his words are interesting.

Peter knew Jesus was the Christ. He also had seen the manifestations of Jesus’ power over several years. He knew that no man would be able to stand against Jesus and prevail. So he said, “This will never happen to you.” Jesus could have taken action and prevented his death by using the whole power of God. But then how would we have been saved? How would he have provided salvation for all of mankind if he had chosen to keep his life and not die for our salvation and our sin?

No. What we see here is Satan deceptive and deceitful as ever using Peter against Jesus to sway his decision. Satan is the great deceiver and the father of lies. His influence was such that he was even permitted to use one who was closer to Jesus than any other to attempt to tempt Jesus into stepping away from his purpose.

If this could happen to Jesus, it can happen to us also. Satan can use those who are closest to us to tempt us and try to gain the advantage over us. Sometimes we may fall into the trap, but fortunately for us Jesus did not fall. He stood against Satan and recognised that the attack was not from Peter but from the evil one. He put Satan in his place and did not rebuke Peter but showed the source of this attack.

Jesus said that sometimes those closest to us would be our enemies. He said, “...a man’s foes will be those of his own household.” (Matthew 10:36) So just as Jesus recognised the attack of Satan through Peter, we too need to be aware that those closest to us, especially if they are not looking to the Lord, may be used to attack or tempt us into evil as Satan tried to tempt Jesus into evil.

So take warning from this scripture and know that this can happen. But like Jesus, if it does happen, and if you are caught out, put the blame where it belongs...on the head of the deceiver. Pray for the person who was used as Satan’s instrument and don’t hold a grudge. As they say, don’t shoot the messenger; it is the work of Satan to tear you down. But Jesus has already conquered and through him we will find the victory.

What Does It Profit to Gain the World and Forfeit Your Life?

(Mark 8:34-38)

What does it profit to gain the whole world and lose your life? Jesus posed this question to his disciples and the people along with another. What can a man give in return for his life?

Too often today we see people make the wrong decisions and forfeit their life for the wrong reasons. This world is driven by greed and the desire for money.

Profit is the driving force behind most decisions that are made for the sake of making money. The welfare of people comes a distant second or third for business after the all-consuming greed for making money.

This lust for money has also found its way into the modern church. There are many in the church preaching a wealth ministry where it is supposedly God's plan for his people to be wealthy. This is a false teaching that has no basis in scripture.

While there is great value to be had with godliness, as Paul wrote to Timothy (1 Timothy 4:8), nowhere in scripture does it promote that the people of God should seek after wealth.

Money is of this world, not of God. Jesus showed this when they brought him a coin to pay the tax to Caesar saying, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." (Mark 12:17) He showed that money belonged to this world for it belongs to Caesar, not God.

Money is shown to be a hindrance, especially the lust for money, "For the love of money is the root of all evils; it is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced their hearts with many pangs." (1 Timothy 6:10) So if the love of money causes some to wander away from the faith, why do some pastors and teachers today think it is God's will that people should be wealthy? Why do they think that people should surround themselves with wealth, material possessions and riches, when all of these things are of this world, and will fail?

It is the devil who controls the wealth of this world. He offered all the kingdoms of the world to Jesus when he was in the wilderness saying, "And the devil took him up, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time, and said to him, "To you I will give all this authority and their glory; for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will." (Luke 4:5-6) So if it is the devil who controls the wealth of this world, why do some preachers consider that to be wealthy is a promise of God?

What does it profit to gain the whole world and lose your life? It profits nothing. The only true profit is to seek God and his kingdom. Jesus said not to worry about what we will eat, drink or wear. He said not to worry about the things of this world for he knows we need to eat, be clothed and sheltered and he has promised to provide for our needs. But of much greater importance is to, "...seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well." (Matthew 6:33)

Our priorities as Christians are not to be focussed on the riches, wealth and material possessions of this world. Our priority lies with focussing on the things of the Spirit and seeking God's kingdom. That is where our true profit is to be found. That is where we will find our life rather than any and all gain that might be had in this world, which is doomed to destruction.

The Christian Value Proposition

(Mark 8:34-38 continued)

Yesterday I wrote about what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his life. Overnight I felt there was more that needed to be said, especially in relation to the second question Jesus posed. He said, “What can a man give in return for his life?” (Verse 37) Jesus actually answered that question in this section, and has also answered it elsewhere, so I would like to address this question further.

Before doing so we need to understand what he is talking about when speaking of profit. I touched on this yesterday, but overnight had more information and insight given to me by the Lord.

When man talks about profit he is talking about something of value. In this world every person spends their time whether they know it or not, seeking value. When we work we are seeking value, wages so we can buy things we need. When we buy something we are exchanging one thing of value, our work effort converted into money, for something else of value, the goods or services being purchased.

Money is only the medium of exchange. The real value in the transaction is in the work we perform and the time we put into working, in exchange for goods and services to satisfy our needs; food, shelter, clothing, entertainment or whatever.

In everything we do in life we are looking for a value proposition that is acceptable to us and the other party we are dealing with. Basically there are three types of value proposition. When we are satisfied with the exchange of value we have a “fair value” transaction. If we think we have paid too much for something we feel “ripped off.” On the other hand if we believe the value of the goods or services is greater than what we have paid, we believe we have a “bargain.”

Now when Jesus asked, “What can a man give in return for his life?” I have often thought of this as sort of a rhetorical question. As I considered this overnight I realised it isn't. What the Lord asks of man to give in return for his life IS his life! That is, if we are to receive eternal life the Lord is seeking us to forsake the things of this life that would lead us astray and away from the Lord.

In a nutshell, the Lord is seeking our obedience to the word of life so that we can receive life eternal. He says as much in this same section. Verse 35 says, “For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it.” That is, whoever would seek the things of this life, wealth, riches, power, material possessions and so on, will lose the opportunity of eternal life. All the trappings of this world are of this world and not of God.

However the second half of this scripture says that anyone who will forgo all the trappings of this life and the world as we know it for the sake of Jesus Christ and the gospel will receive his eternal life. Is this consistent with other scriptures? Yes it is. For we see in the following scriptures from Matthew 13:44-46 this same sentiment expressed.

44 “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

45 “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls,
46 who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it.

In both these parables the two men discovered something of great value that they desperately wanted to possess. In order to gain this thing of great value they went and sold everything they had so they could own it. The value of the treasure and the pearl were so enormous that they outshone the value of everything else they possessed and everything else was completely insignificant by comparison.

That is what entry to the kingdom of God is like. The opportunity of eternal life so exceeds anything on this earth that the value of it makes anything else seem worthless. So in answer to the question Jesus posed saying, “What can a man give in return for his life?” the answer is that we must be prepared to give up everything in this world and of this life to receive the far more valuable treasure of eternal life.

Coming back to the value proposition, is this a “rip-off,” or a “fair value trade” or is it a “bargain”? The truth is that there is one other value proposition that is better again and the gospel of Jesus fits into that category. The only thing better than a “bargain” is to also get a “bonus.” What we are trading our life in this world for is a life into eternity. By any measure that is a great bargain. We are trading a life of typically sixty to eighty years in a world full of sin, trouble, pressure, stress, suffering and anxiety for a life into eternity without any of those things. That has to be the greatest bargain of all time.

But it gets better because there is a bonus as well. By following the teachings of Jesus in the Gospel of the truth we also get a better standard of life here and now. We get a great treasure in this world, not in a monetary sense, but in the things that really matter in this world. In Jesus we have peace, security, joy, love, happiness and the knowledge that any and every problem we may come up against we can hand over to Jesus for he cares about us. Now that’s what I call a bonus!

People chase money, wealth and power in the hope of have peace, happiness and security, but money and possessions can never provide these things. Money and possessions can be lost, stolen and destroyed as we have seen in the recent financial crises around the world. Money cannot be relied upon, but God can. If we want happiness, peace and security then we need to come to Jesus for these things do not exist in a reliable form anywhere else.

It seems the church has fallen for the same trap as the world. Those ministers who preach a wealth ministry are basically telling their flock that they cannot find happiness and security in God. They are replacing the God of Creation and Jesus Christ with the false god of this world, money. There is no security in money as the value of currency is at the whim of the markets. Some years ago I travelled around the USA when the Australian dollar was worth around fifty US cents. Today the Aus dollar is worth around US\$1-06 because of the financial crisis. This dramatic shift

was caused by the greed of a few financiers who have brought the global economy to the brink of bankruptcy for their own gain.

Should you then rely on money as a saviour? Can you rely on the dollar for security when it can be so quickly devalued? No. And neither should it be preached as the will of God for us to be rich. These wealth ministers have fallen into the trap of the church at La-odice'a written about in Revelation.

15 "I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were cold or hot!

16 So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth.

17 For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing; not knowing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.

18 Therefore I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, that you may be rich, and white garments to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, that you may see.

Thinking they are rich they have missed the truth. The gold they need to buy from God is the knowledge of the truth so they can be truly rich, not in monetary terms, but in spiritual terms.

We must seek his kingdom first and then we will be in a position to receive the greatest bargain of all time and the bonus that goes with it. Eternal life in God's kingdom and a life of peace, happiness and security now. That is the real value proposition of Christianity that is on offer to all of mankind. Who in their right mind would pass up on such a bargain? Nobody, but many still will and do for they are blinded by the trinkets of the here and now rather than the greater value that is on offer in the future.

The Transfiguration

(Mark 9:1-8)

Where does the Christian stand in relation to the two covenants? As Christians are we meant to be under both the Old and the New Covenant? The transfiguration scripture provides us with part of the answer to these two questions.

Many years ago while still at school I asked a religious education teacher what the difference was between the Old and the New Covenant. This man was a minister from one of the local congregations and so I thought he should have been able to answer this question. He responded saying that the New Covenant was basically just an extension of the Old Covenant.

This is typical of the line of thinking amongst many churches and Christians still today. They tend to believe that while we recognise Jesus and the New Covenant we are still fully under the laws of the Old Covenant. The one proviso is that we no

longer have to offer the sin sacrifices since Jesus has died for our sins. I may not have this completely accurate but many churches teach this or variations of this line of teaching.

When I became an adult and studied this matter I found the minister was wrong. The Bible tells us that the two covenants are quite different. It tells us also that not only should we not be under both covenants at the same time, but to do so is akin to practising a kind of spiritual adultery.

Time for some scriptures to show these distinctions.

In Hebrews 8:8-9 it is written, “The days will come, says the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah; **not** like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; for they did not continue in my covenant, and so I paid no heed to them, says the Lord.” (My emphasis) Note the word “not” in this scripture. We are being told that the New Covenant is NOT like the Old Covenant. It is quite different.

The writer in Hebrews 8:13 continues saying, “In speaking of a new covenant he treats the first as obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.” With the introduction of the New Covenant, the Old Covenant has become obsolete. The Old Covenant is ready to vanish away for the New Covenant vastly surpasses it in both power and effect.

We see also in Hebrews 10:9 that in Jesus, “...He abolishes the first in order to establish the second.” The first (Old) covenant has been abolished with the introduction of the New Covenant, which was ratified or brought into existence at the death of Jesus.

Now someone will quote to me Matthew 5:17-18 which says, “Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them. For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.” And you are correct, the law and prophets have not been abolished, but through Jesus a person can step out of the Old Covenant and into the New Covenant. For those who have not entered the New Covenant through Jesus, who by the way said, “I am the door; if any one enters by me, he will be saved,” (John 10:9) for those who have not entered the law and prophets are in full force and effect. It is only through Jesus that we can enter the New Covenant and thus be released from the bondage to law, sin and death that exists under the Old Covenant. He further shows this where Paul wrote in Ephesians 2:15 that in Jesus God was, “...abolishing in his flesh the law of commandments and ordinances.”

Now Paul also wrote in Romans chapters 6 and 7 Paul shows that as a woman is set free from the law of marriage at the death of her husband, we too likewise are set free from the laws of the Old Covenant through the death of Jesus Christ. When we enter into the death of Jesus by baptism, symbolically we die with Christ and are resurrected as new creations, no longer under the power of sin, no longer under the Law of Moses, but recreated as new creations to serve God through Christ Jesus.

So going back to the beginning, what has the transfiguration got to do with all of this? Well when Jesus went up the mountain with Peter, James and John, he was transfigured and Moses and Elijah appeared speaking with him. The three disciples were naturally terrified by this and Peter, not knowing what to say, said, “Master, it is well that we are here; let us make three booths, one for you and one for Moses and one for Eli’jah.” (Mark 9:5)

What Peter was doing was to treat all three of them, that is, Jesus, Moses and Elijah, as equals. He was treating them as if they were the same, a bit like the minister I mentioned earlier who believed that the New Covenant was just an extension of the Old Covenant.

But God the Father stepped in to show Peter his error. God spoke from heaven saying, “This is my beloved Son; listen to him.” (Mark 9:7) And as they looked around they saw that only Jesus alone was with them.

Moses represents the law in this event and Elijah represents the prophets. Jesus as the Son of God is the founder and maker of the New Covenant. When the Father spoke to the disciples he did not say “Listen to all three of them,” but he told them to listen to Jesus. In this I believe God is saying that our salvation does not come through a combination of the law, prophets and the New Covenant, but through Jesus only. It is Jesus who gives us life. The law offers only condemnation for it shows sin to be sin, but in Jesus we have freedom from sin.

The transfiguration is a powerful message on getting our priorities right. There is value in studying the law and the prophets for there is great wisdom in those words. After all, they too are the words of God. But we have life only through Jesus Christ. We receive salvation from sin and the hope of eternal life only through Jesus. Thus as God the Father tells us himself, in speaking of Jesus we must, “Listen to him,” and not get entangled in the works of law that will prevent us reaching maturity in Christ. We must serve the Lord under the New Covenant for to try and mix the Old and the New is like mixing oil and water...the do not go together. The Old Covenant brings bondage but the New Covenant offers freedom.

John the Baptist – Elijah Who is to Come

(Mark 9:9-13)

Over the years I have often read the scriptures that talk of John the Baptist as being the “Elijah who is to come.” But in all that time I have never stopped to consider why he was called by that name. So I have spent a little time looking at the ministry of Elijah and comparing him to John the Baptist.

The key words used by Jesus were that the Elijah who is to come was to “...restore all things.” (Verse 12) Also in Matthew 11:7-15 Jesus talks of John as being the one who fulfilled the prophecy of Malachi, “Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, who

shall prepare they way before thee.” Even before John was born an angel appeared to his father saying, “...and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Eli’jah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.” (Luke 1:17)

The ministry of John the Baptist was to prepare the people for the coming of the Lord. He did this by preaching repentance and the need to turn away from evil and sin. He also upbraided the religious leaders of the day, as did Jesus, calling them a “brood of vipers” and warning them to repent also. (Matthew 3:7) John was also at odds with Herod the tetrarch who had been reproved by John for taking his brother’s wife and all the evil he had done. His wife also bore a grudge against John and it was eventually through her that John was beheaded.

John’s ministry was to bring the people back to the Lord in preparation for the coming of Jesus. In many ways there are similarities with Elijah the prophet.

Elijah lived in the days when Ahab was king over Israel. Ahab did evil in the sight of the Lord, more than all the evil kings before him, and he considered it a light thing to walk in sin. He took Jezebel as a wife and together they built idols to Baal and made an Asherah to the false gods and Jezebel killed many of the prophets of the Lord. Ahab did more to provoke the anger of the Lord than all of the kings of Israel before him. (1 Kings 16:29-34)

Elijah was at odds with Ahab and Jezebel just as John was at odds with Herod and Herodian his wife. Like John, Elijah was in the wilderness for a time and during that period was fed by ravens and drank only water from a stream. But the main similarities are in the respective ministries of these two prophets. The most telling scripture in the events surrounding Elijah’s ministry was when he called upon the Lord to bring fire down to light the burnt offering when he challenged the priests of Baal. As Elijah prayed to the Lord he said, “Answer me O Lord, answer me that this people may know that thou, O Lord, art God, and that thou hast turned their hearts back.” (1 Kings 18:37)

In this scripture we see that the purpose of the Lord in Elijah’s ministry was to turn the hearts of the people back to God and away from all the evil brought on them by Ahab, Jezebel and the worship of Baal. Elijah was the instrument used by God to bring his people back to worshipping the Lord. This was in essence the same as the ministry of John the Baptist, for he was called to, “...turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.” (Luke 1:17)

Thus we see the similarities in the ministries of Elijah and John and why it is that John was called the “Elijah who is to come.”

Casting Out a Deaf and Dumb Spirit

(Mark 9:14-29)

A boy had been brought to the disciples of Jesus for healing. This boy was possessed by an evil spirit that had taken control of the boy and was hurting him badly. The spirit caused him to be cast into fire and water, seized him and cast him to the ground foaming at the mouth and grinding his teeth.

The disciples were asked to cast the spirit out of the boy, but they were unable to do so. When the father of the boy saw Jesus he came to him imploring him to help if he was able.

Here we see one of the keys to healing, both in this and all other cases. There is a question of faith in this section of scripture. The man begged Jesus to help him "If you can." (Verse 22)

Jesus responded saying, "If you can! All things are possible to him who believes." (Verse 23) Here is a powerful call to faith for the people of God. What Jesus is saying here is that for those who have faith nothing will be impossible. If a matter is in the will of God and a person has faith, then it will be done for them. There is no "maybe" in Jesus' words but a positive statement that through faith anything can be done.

The father of the boy recognising his unbelief, possibly because the disciples had not been able to heal the boy, cried out, "I believe; help my unbelief!" (Verse 24) This man was desperate and desperately wanted to believe so that his son would be healed. Jesus took compassion on the man and the boy and rebuked the demon from him.

Now faith is a funny thing. You either have it or you don't. The disciples once asked Jesus saying, "Increase our faith!" But Jesus replied, "And the Lord said, 'If you had faith as a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this sycamine tree, 'Be rooted up, and be planted in the sea,' and it would obey you.'" (Luke 17:5-6)

What he showed is that you don't need a lot of faith to be able to do remarkable things. But how do you get faith and then how does it grow? There is no doubt that faith can grow but what is the process by which this happens?

Knowledge is the key, and specifically the knowledge of Jesus Christ. Paul wrote, "So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ." (Romans 10:17) When a person hears the words of the gospel and they internalise it, that is when faith as a grain of mustard seed is born. As a person continues to learn more about Jesus Christ and the kingdom of God, their faith is strengthened. They begin to see the power of God working in their own life and the lives of those around them. That is how faith grows and strengthens over time.

When Jesus healed this boy, faith was born in the father. It is clear from the father's own comments that he had little or no faith prior to this. He brought the boy to the disciples in the hope that the boy might be healed, but their inability to heal the boy would have crushed the father's hope until Jesus arrived.

As for the disciples, after the event they asked Jesus why they were unable to cast out the demon. The Lord said here that, "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but

prayer.” (Verse 29) By this he is saying it required the direct intervention of God to cast out this demon.

Jesus had given the disciples the authority to cast out demons, but it is evident that the disciples own faith was weak. We see this in Jesus first statement when told that the disciples could not cast the demon out. He said, “O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you?” (Verse 19) In other versions of this event we see Jesus say to the disciples that the reason they could not cast the demon out was because of their lack of faith, again emphasising that faith is the key to healing. However he also provided the process by which that can be overcome, and that is through prayer.

When our faith to do something is weak, even when we have the authority to do it as the disciples had been given (Mark 3:15), we can always put the matter into the hands of the Lord through prayer. When we come to God in prayer we are humbling ourselves under his almighty power and putting the issue into to his hands. We are laying our burdens at the feet of the Lord for his intervention and resolution. And this is OK for we are told to, “Cast all your anxieties on him, for he cares about you.” (1 Peter 5:7).

Anytime we are overwhelmed by the issues of the world or have what appear to be insurmountable problems, let us remember this teaching. Have faith and anything is possible to you. And if it seems too daunting, give the problem to the Lord in prayer for his resolution and in good time it will be resolved.

Jesus Speaks of His Death and Resurrection

(Mark 9:30-32)

Jesus had shown on many occasions that he did not want his disciples to be uninformed. In the world today one of the things used by people as power is the withholding of information. But this was not Jesus’ way then and it is not his way now.

In this section of scripture we see Jesus begin to speak to his disciples about his coming death at the hands of the Jews and his subsequent resurrection. At no time did he withhold information from the disciples that they needed to know. He wanted them to understand all things and he kept nothing from them.

Jesus showed this desire to ensure the disciples understood all things, for it was not only his desire but the desire of the Father also. He shows this saying, “He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.” (John 16:14-15) Paul also showed this when speaking to the church at Ephesus saying, “I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance to God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Acts 20:20-21)

So it is the will of God that his people are forewarned and forearmed in all matters pertaining to the truth of the Gospel so that they are not left in the dark. It is commonly understood that one of the greatest causes of fear among man is caused by lack of knowledge. But when knowledge comes, fear is taken away. That is part of the reason why the Lord wants us to be fully informed, and that is why he was teaching his disciples about what was to happen to him in due course.

Had the Jews just dragged Jesus off without him having pre-warned the disciples, they would have been in utter fear and confusion. Doubtless they suffered these things to some extent anyway. But when they came to themselves and considered the matter, they knew this was to happen for the Lord had spent much time telling them about it. Thus they could move forward without questioning why it happened and suffering grief and remorse.

Naturally when Jesus was risen from the dead they were greatly comforted. And because he had told them these things and they came to pass, they were further encouraged knowing that nothing was hidden from God and that the Lord had revealed to them in advance what was going on, and more importantly why these things were to happen.

So too we should take encouragement from the knowledge that Jesus is still showing us all we need to know. It is by the Holy Spirit that knowledge is revealed to us today as we study, pray and seek the Lord. And his guidance and leadership helps us to know the paths to take when we listen and follow his direction. We have no need to fear regardless of what may come against us for the Lord has said he is with us and will protect us. It is his desire to show us his kingdom when we learn about him and come to him seeking his knowledge and his ways.

Who is the Greatest?

(Mark 9:33-37)

In this world people strive to be the best. To be faster, bigger, stronger, more powerful, richer or more famous than others. It is commonly heard that you have to “sing your own praises” or “blow your own trumpet” because no one else will.

In this world there are processes and training to enable a person to self-promote. And self-promotion is seen in the world as a good thing because it enables a person to get their head above the crowd and be seen.

But in the Lord and as a Christian, self-promotion and self-aggrandisement is not the way to go. These things rely upon pride and sometimes arrogance, but in the Lord we are called to humility and obedience to God. Unlike life in this world, God sees us as we are and he knows each one of us individually. So we do not need to promote ourselves to be seen for he knows our hearts and our thoughts.

In this section of scripture the disciples had been discussing and arguing amongst themselves as to whom among them was the greatest. This is worldly thinking and is the way men in this world think. Jesus was about to teach them the correct way a Christian should think.

In the world people strive to be the top dog. In business it might be the CEO, in sport it might be to win the championship, in financial matters it might be to top the Forbes or BRW "Richest 100 People." The epitome of this thinking was personified in the boxer, Muhammad Ali who claimed, "I am the greatest." For many years he was the greatest boxer in the world, but like all people when he had gone past his prime someone better came along and he lost his world number one ranking. Yet even Ali eventually learned the Lord's way for he is quoted as saying, "Service to others is the rent you pay for your room here on earth."

This is the same principle that Jesus was teaching his disciples. Jesus told them, "If any one would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." (Verse 35) To be the greatest in the Lord is to be the servant of all. Christians as they progress in the Lord are called to serve and not to be served. This is the exact opposite of the way this world thinks, for in the world people desire to be masters rather than servants.

Jesus again showed the disciples the type of humility required of a Christian. He took a child in the midst of them and taking the child in his arms he said, "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me." In children there is a humility that gets lost as they grow older. But Jesus said that in having humility like a child we become truly great in the Lord's kingdom. In the end that is all that matters, for this world as we know it will pass away, but God's kingdom is eternal.

He Who Is Not With Us Is Against Us

(Mark 9:38-41)

The Lord taught the disciples an interesting lesson in this section of scripture. The disciples had come across a man casting out demons in the name of Jesus, but the man was not following with Jesus and the disciples. The disciples forbade him from continuing to do this work.

But Jesus said, "Do not forbid him; for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon after to speak evil of me. For he that is not against us is for us." (Verse 39-40)

If anyone is doing a work in the name of the Lord it is a good thing. If they are giving glory to the Lord and to God while doing the work it is a good thing. Clearly Jesus showed that this was acceptable in his sight, for whenever anyone is doing a work for the Lord, the name of the Lord is being honoured and the gospel is being spread.

Does it matter if they are of a different religious following to you or I? Does it matter that they do not follow the Lord in the same way as you or I? Does it make any difference if they are Presbyterian, Methodist, Catholic, Jehovah's Witness, Salvation Army, Pentecostal, Independent or any other denomination, sect or section of the wider church?

Well according to this scripture it made little difference to Jesus. For if they are doing a work in his name and if the work gives glory to God, then it is a good thing.

Too often we see arguments in the media, and more so online, between Christians of different groups who try to prove that they are right and someone else is wrong. Usually this is around points of doctrine and often about matters that in the total scheme of things are of small importance. The intellectual discussion can be stimulating and I am the first to admit that I have fallen for this myself on many occasions.

However, whether I am right or whether they are right is of little consequence. It is whether the work being done is glorifying God that is important. The discussion can be had and sometimes should be had, but they must be done in love and without argument or recrimination. They should be based upon the scripture as the final arbiter of what is right or wrong. And both parties should listen to the other point of view as that is how we learn. If the point of view can be justified in the scripture and if it aligns with the broader context of the scriptures, then it has value and may add to what we know. The key is to listen and weigh up, then accept or reject the information based on the scripture. When in doubt pray about it.

But back to the point of this section of Mark 9, Paul shows us that people will honour the Lord and worship God in different ways. This can be based on their level of understanding at that point in time, and they should not be shut down for what they believe when they are working in honour of the Lord. Paul showed this saying in Romans 14:1-6,

- 1 As for the man who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not for disputes over opinions.
- 2 One believes he may eat anything, while the weak man eats only vegetables.
- 3 Let not him who eats despise him who abstains, and let not him who abstains pass judgment on him who eats; for God has welcomed him.
- 4 Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Master is able to make him stand.
- 5 One man esteems one day as better than another, while another man esteems all days alike. Let every one be fully convinced in his own mind.
- 6 He who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. He also who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God; while he who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God.

It is weakness in the faith, or a lack of maturity in the Lord that may cause someone to believe or behave differently to ourselves. Then again, we may be the weak ones in some aspect of the faith for the Lord has not yet revealed the matter to us.

Whatever the situation, Paul shows us that we are all servants of the same master and the master, Jesus Christ, will uphold each of us for where we stand at a point in time. He does not expect us to be perfect straight away, but to grow and mature until we become perfected in Christ. Nor are we to judge another person for their beliefs for they are accepted as they are. Paul showed this also in 2 Corinthians 8:12 saying, "For if the readiness is there, it is acceptable according to what a man has, not according to what he has not."

So if we see someone doing any kind of work or ministry for the Lord, we should not condemn it because we do not agree with them. Certainly if it is destructive it should be brought up with the person and if it is in opposition to the truth of the gospel that is a different matter. But if it is acceptable, then we should not discount their work on the basis that their faith and worship is different to ours.

If they are doing the work in honour of the Lord, then it is acceptable. If it does not honour the Lord, then he will deal with them and show them their error. Jesus said in vs. 39, "...no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon after to speak evil of me." Jesus will weed out those who are not honouring him when they are doing a work supposedly in his name as he did with the seven sons of Sceva in Acts 19:13-16,

13 Then some of the itinerant Jewish exorcists undertook to pronounce the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying, "I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul preaches."

14 Seven sons of a Jewish high priest named Sceva were doing this.

15 But the evil spirit answered them, "Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are you?"

16 And the man in whom the evil spirit was leaped on them, mastered all of them, and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded.

The Lord will work with those who are working in his name and will cast out those who are behaving falsely. Let us remember though not to condemn someone doing a work in the name of the Lord just because they do not follow with us. As Jesus said, he who is not with us is against us.

Being Serious About Salvation

(Mark 9:42-50)

How serious are you about salvation? How serious should you be? Is it the most important thing in your life? Should it be the most important thing?

To answer these questions read this section of the scripture, for it gives us an indication of how serious we should be about this opportunity the Lord has given each of us. We need to also recall the scripture that says, "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well." (Matthew 6:33)

Jesus said that if we have a problem with any part of our body, we should be serious enough about our salvation that we should cut out the bit that causes us to sin so as to ensure we are saved. That sounds pretty serious to me! It also sounds a bit drastic, but if we have a problem with sin we must be prepared to take drastic measures.

He said if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. If you have a problem with lust that could lead you to sins of adultery or fornication, then you need to consider what drastic measures you could take to overcome that passion of the flesh. Likewise if your hand causes you to sin, say through stealing, or if your foot causes you to sin, say through violence, then what drastic measures should you take to overcome these issues? For many people the causes of sin are not from physical issues but are mental or psychological. Clearly you can't cut your brain out, but there must be some other drastic measure you could take if necessary to overcome the temptation, perhaps to separate yourself from the thing or person that is tempting you.

Sin is the thing that stands between man and God. And sin is the thing that can prevent you from entering God's kingdom. We cannot be complacent about the desires of the flesh that can lead to sin. That is why the Lord says to take drastic measures to overcome these passions.

Now we are fortunate that the Lord has provided a means of escape to overcome all temptation, if we take it and use it. As he said in 1 Corinthians 10:13, "No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it." His method does not require us to maim ourself to overcome passions. He provides a means to overcome the temptations so that we can endure and come through victoriously.

He gives the Holy Spirit to those who ask him and when we apply the ministry of walking in the Spirit we have the power to overcome. The process of walking in the Spirit hands the problem or temptation over to the Lord for him to deal with it. In so doing we are following his guidance to, "Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that in due time he may exalt you." (1 Peter 5:6) When we humble ourselves we put the Lord in charge and he is able to take control of the situation.

Does this work? Absolutely. Provided we have faith and put our trust in God, we can move mountains.

As I said we are fortunate that he has put this ministry in place in the gospel. Unfortunately not everyone knows about it or uses the power of the Holy Spirit to be able to overcome. Are there other ways to fight temptation? Yes there are, but they are less effective for they rely more upon our own strength rather than the Lord, and we should rely on the Lord. If a person follows the processes outlined by Paul in Philippians 4:4-9 and especially verse 8, "Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." Anyone doing this, and the key here is to, "...think about these things," will have a chance to have the victory over sin for this too is a form of walking in the

Spirit. But even doing this we should put the power into the Lord's hands through prayer rather than rely on our own strength.

But what if you can't do these things either? Then if you are serious about salvation you will need to find other drastic measures to overcome sin. For as Jesus said, it is better to enter heaven maimed or lame than to miss out. After all, in God's kingdom our bodies will be restored and all causes of sin taken away. Be prepared to take whatever action is necessary to separate yourself from sin.

All This For Free

Posted on June 23, 2011 by John

(Mark 10:1)

It occurred to me as I read this first verse of Mark how valuable the word of the Lord is. The scripture says, "And he left there and went to the region of Judea and beyond the Jordan, and crowds gathered to him again; and again, as his custom was, he taught them."

Mark seems to be making a point here when he says, "...and again..." and also "...as his custom was..." It was customary for Jesus to teach the people. Whenever the people came to him or a crowd came together, it was Jesus' custom to AGAIN teach them about the kingdom of God.

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This is a simply wonderful teaching. The Lord WANTS us to learn and know all things pertaining to the kingdom of God. He WANTS us to know what it is all about and how the gospel works. He WANTS us to understand the mysteries of the New Covenant so that we can live a better life and receive the promise of his kingdom. And it was HIS CUSTOM to offer his teachings to the people anywhere and everywhere they came to him.

What is even more wonderful is that his price for doing this work was...nothing! Zero, zip, nada, zilch or any other way you want to put it. He gave us this teaching

that will lead us to life for free. There was no cost involved and no price to pay because even on that score, he paid the price for us when he died for our sins on Calvary. How great and wonderful is the love that God has for his people when we stop to consider what he has done for us!

In another place I have stated that you earn death but life is free. And this is true for the Bible shows us, "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 6:23)

Just look at those words for a minute. You earn wages when you do some form of work or provide a service. In this case when you do the "work" of sin you earn the wages of sin...death. But life eternal is given to us as a free gift from God when we believe in his son, the Lord Jesus Christ. How good is that! Life is free but you earn death. I know which one I would prefer.

This is not the way the world today works. The principles of life in this world is, "What's in it for me." But in Christ it is, "What's in it for you." Jesus does not want our stuff. He does not want our money, possessions or anything else. He wants us. And not for his purposes but for ours, so that he can give us eternal life...for free. You cannot buy the truth of the New Covenant because it is not for sale. If you want the truth, ask the Lord as he has said, "Ask and it will be given." (Matthew 7:7)

All of this has been given to us for free. In the world of business, marketers talk about a price vs. quality relationship. By that they say that people perceive that if something has a high price there is an expectation of high quality. Well that may hold true in the world of business and consumerism, but in Christ it is the opposite. He gives to us freely of those things that are the best of quality. What could be better than the offer of eternal life for free?

The Lord wants us to know him and his ways. That is why he taught the people at every opportunity and why he has provided us with the opportunity to read the Bible and learn through the guidance of the Holy Spirit today. Let us take full advantage of this wonderful gift while we are able.

Marriage and Divorce

(Mark 10:2-12)

The Pharisees tried to test Jesus with a question about divorce. Is divorce lawful? Did Jesus say that two people could not divorce? Should people be allowed to divorce? These are very serious matters and Jesus' answer was interesting.

Note his first response to the Pharisees. He said, "What did Moses command you?" (Verse 3) In essence he was asking whether they knew what the law said about this matter. They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce, and to put her away." (Verse 4) So it is evident that they knew what was written in the law.

This law was given because humans are weak. Sometimes people make bad choices in life, including entering into bad marriages. Sometimes one or the other party is unfaithful in the marriage and goes out and commits adultery with another person. In such a case should the marriage continue when it is clear that one person has shown contempt for both the sanctity of marriage and their partner?

This was why Moses allowed people to divorce. To escape from bad marriages. What should a person do if they find they are tied to another person who is abusive, either physically or mentally? Should they have to continue to suffer under such circumstances when it is clearly harmful for them to do so? No. And that is why Moses provided the law of divorce.

Jesus was aware of this which is why he asked the Pharisees first as to whether they knew the law. When they showed they did know it, they had already answered their own question, that is, under the law it is lawful to divorce. And Jesus expounded on that law explaining the underlying reason why it was given. It was given because of man's hardness of heart. It was because of man's hardness of heart that they committed the types of sin that lead to breakdowns in family and marriage.

However, then Jesus shows a higher standard to which the Lord would hope that Christians (at least) would aspire to. His standard was that from the time man and woman were created, they were made to be joined together as one in God. When a man and woman are married and they come together they are one in the sight of God, and as Jesus said, "What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder." (Verse 9)

So when a man and a woman come together in marriage it is not a thing to be taken lightly. Marriage is an act of God and it is the will of God for men and women to marry and have children and so "go forth and multiply" and fill the earth.

Paul explained these principles well in his letter to the Corinthians, particularly as it relates to believers and non-believers.

If two believers are married and they are following the ways of the Lord they should not separate. If they are following the ways of the Lord there should be no cause for them to separate and divorce. For in the Lord they should be in or will come to the place where they are walking in the love of God and have no cause for dispute.

However if issues arise and they decide to separate then it is not a sin. They should try not to get to that point, and try to work matters out, but Paul recognised it may not always be so simple. Thus he said, "To the married I give charge, not I but the Lord, that the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does, let her remain single or else be reconciled to her husband) –and that the husband should not divorce his wife." (1 Corinthians 7:10-11) He did not give couples in the Lord free rein to divorce and remarry or go off with others. He said if they separate, let them remain single or reconcile to their partner. Jesus also made the point that in the sight of God if someone divorces and marries another, they are committing adultery against their original partner. (Verses 11-12)

Now when there are two people married and only one of them is with the Lord, it is a different matter. The one who is not with the Lord may be causing problems for the Christian partner and seek separation. Paul said, "...if the unbelieving partner desires to separate, let it be so; in such a case the brother or sister is not bound. For God has called us to peace." (1 Corinthians 7:15)

The key to this whole matter of divorce is in those last few words. Whether under the law or in Christ, "God has called us to peace." How can you find peace in a bad marriage? You can't. That is why the Lord permitted both under the law of Moses and now for the dissolution of a marriage.

Yes there is a higher standard, and it is the one to which all people should, and probably do, aspire to attain. I am not aware of anyone who enters marriage with the desire to see it fail. But because people are weak, it has been allowed for so that we may not have to suffer but can find peace.

Let the Children Come

(Mark 10:13-16)

Too often as adults we exclude children. The old saying that children should be seen and not heard is still often applied by many people. In public places and in churches they are told to be still, keep quiet and stop being disruptive.

But they are kids! By nature they are boisterous, undisciplined and disruptive. And lets face, you wouldn't want it any other way for when they are playing and laughing and having a good time, they can really cheer your heart.

The people in this section of the scripture were bringing their children to Jesus that he might touch them. The disciples were obviously annoyed for they rebuked the people. You can just imagine their thoughts. After all this is the Son of God...surely he doesn't want to be bothered and annoyed by children.

Not so. Jesus, when he saw what the disciples were doing was indignant and he said to the disciples, "Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them." Jesus had no problem with the children coming to him. And why would he? The children were his children too!

Instead he took the opportunity to teach the people, including his disciples, a lesson. He said, "...for to such belongs the Kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it." (Verse 14-15)

If we are to enter God's Kingdom we must become like children. We must be innocent and open to learn. We must trust in Jesus and have the faith of a child in their parent.

It is as adults that we learn pride and arrogance. It is as adults that we become untrusting and hard of heart. It is as adults that we are faithless, harsh to others and cynical. These are not the attributes of children and so we must learn or re-learn those things from our children.

Don't ever exclude the children. They learn from us and we can learn from them. We can learn to remember what the requirements are for entry into God's Kingdom, as Jesus showed us here.

Conditions to Receive Eternal Life

(Mark 10:17-22)

What must you do to have eternal life? This is an interesting question. I am sure it has gone through the minds of all mankind at some time for death is the one inevitable part of life that no man can escape.

Some people have made a business of eternal life. There are companies that provide services to cryogenically freeze the bodies of dead people in the hope that at some future time science will provide a cure for whatever killed them. They believe that at some point in time they could then be healed and restored to life.

But death is not a matter of the physical being. Death is the separation of the spirit of a man from his physical body. Science might find a cure for all manner of diseases, but they will never learn how to put the spirit of a man back into a body once they have been separated.

Genesis 2:7 tells us that, "...the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground." At that point there was no life in man but he was just a body of flesh. Then the same scripture continues saying God, "...breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being." It was an act of God that gave life to a man, but it was an act of man through sin that took that life away.

Had man not sinned he would not die but would have had eternal life. But Ezekial 18:20 tells us, "The soul that sins shall die." And Paul writes in Romans 3:23, "...since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." It is sin that took away our opportunity to keep eternal life. And it is sin that separates us from God and in this age will continue to cause people to die, which no matter of science will be able to reverse for science does not work in the spiritual realm but the physical.

But the process to receive eternal life is not unknown. Jesus tells us what is required in this section of Mark 10. A man came to him asking, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Verse 17) Jesus proceeded to quote six of the commandments given to Moses under the law. The man replied saying, "'Teacher, all these I have observed from my youth.' And Jesus looking upon him loved him." (Verses 20-21) At this point the man had met the requirements to receive eternal life. These are the words of Jesus and they show that those who keep the laws of God will receive eternal life.

There are some who disagree with this position saying that there is no life under the law. However that is not what Jesus showed here in this section. Those who keep the laws of God will receive eternal life.

However Jesus then goes on to show there is a higher way. It is the road to perfection as he showed in the Matthew version of this same discussion. He said there, "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." (Matthew 19:21)

The key to perfection was not the selling of all your property as he advised this man, but to "come, follow me." For this man, wealth was a problem because it would distract him from following Christ. For many people, striving for wealth is a distraction and we know from other scriptures that it can lead people away from God for, "For the love of money is the root of all evils; it is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith" (1 Timothy 6:10)

Not every person has this same problem. But every person needs to set their priority on following Jesus if they are to find the path to perfection. Following Jesus is a higher path than just following the law. But there is eternal life in following the law as Jesus showed.

So to answer the question, "What must I do to have eternal life?" The answer is...keep the laws of God, and specifically those he outlined here in Mark 10. Some will say it is impossible to keep the laws of God, and they are right. But Jesus specified only six of the laws and these are not hard to keep. They form the basis of morality for most races, religions and cultures and if they are kept will lead to eternal life.

But Jesus provides a better way for his path leads not just to eternal life but to perfection where the law becomes unnecessary. A perfect man does not need the law for they will not break it by nature. That is the path that Jesus has set before us if we are able to follow it.

Wealth Will Not Make You Secure

(Mark 10:23-31)

Why do people seek money? Why are people focussed on wealth creation? Why do people desire so greatly to be rich, to the point that some will seek illegal methods of getting there?

Security is the reason. Money and wealth in this age equals security. People want wealth so that they don't have to worry about money and can do the things they want to do rather than what they have to do. And most people believe they can't do that unless they feel secure.

But what often happens is that those who get great wealth spend all of their time focussed on their wealth. Their main concern is to ensure it is not taken away from them by thieves, scammers, con-men and bad deals. Or that it is protected so it is not lost when the markets crash, the economy goes sour or any of the myriad of things that can take your money away. They hire high priced accountants and lawyers to find ways to minimise taxes and exploit loopholes in the tax systems to maximise their wealth.

Their trust in riches becomes a prison. Instead of securing them from the upheavals of the financial and economic woes of the world, it drives them in fear of losing what they have gained. They fear the loss of everything, for they have a lot to lose and it can be easily lost.

This was the situation the young man was in, who approached Jesus asking “What must I do to have eternal life?” (Mark 10:17) He had great wealth and it was a burden to him for he was looking to his wealth for security rather than to the Lord. The man knew there was more to know, but when he was advised by Jesus to sell all he had, and thus free himself of his money prison, and come follow Jesus to achieve perfection, he found he could not do it.

Jesus continued teaching the disciples how hard it will be for anyone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God. If they focus on wealth as security they cannot focus on Christ as well. It is written that, “You cannot serve God and mammon.” (Matthew 6:24) The attention of the rich will be divided for on the one hand they will be seeking security in the Lord, and on the other trying to shore up their security in wealth from being taken away.

In addition, the Lord’s servant is exactly that. We come to Christ as servants, not to be served, just as Christ came to serve and not be served. But the rich are too used to having things their own way. Their position causes them to be masters rather than servants for in this world money is power and the two go together. Thus again the words of Christ echo saying, “How hard it will be for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!” (Verse 23)

Are all who are rich like this? No. And even though Jesus said it would be hard, he did not say it would be impossible for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. The degree of difficulty will be great for he said, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” (Verse 25) Although this may be impossible for man, it is not for God. God could deconstruct the camel and pass it through the eye of a needle one molecule at a time and reconstruct it on the other side.

There is no security in wealth or riches. The recent global financial crisis is proof of how quickly and easily wealth can be destroyed and lost. Seeking security in the things of this world like wealth and money is like putting your trust in a false god. When the chips are really down there is no support and there is no help.

But in Christ we have a saviour who will help and who will make us secure. The security of the Lord in the provision of his peace, protection and love is unbounded. He has promised that we will not suffer want or loss and so we can take comfort in his

words. Our priority must be to seek first his kingdom and not worry about the things of this world for they are temporary and doomed to pass away.

Jesus Foretells His Death and Resurrection

(Mark 10:32-34)

Jesus was well aware of his purpose on this earth. He came to be the perfect sacrifice so that man could be reconciled to God. He came to die so that we would have the chance to live.

He spoke about this on several occasions with his disciples. His aim by doing this was for them to understand the purpose and will of God. It was part of his teaching and preparing the disciples for the work they were to do as it was their role to spread the word of the risen Christ and the power of his resurrection.

Jesus did not want his people left in the dark. As it was then, so it is today. His will is not to keep his people without understanding. He wants to show his people what he is doing and lead them along the paths of knowledge, truth and righteousness.

When he walked the earth he taught his disciples many things. He brought them to places of understanding through the use of stories, examples, parables and analogies so they would see the point of his lessons. But in relation to his death he was quite plain. He spoke of the treachery that was to come when he was handed over to the chief priests and scribes who would deliver him up to death.

The disciples and those following Jesus were afraid and concerned about him speaking this way. After all he had done, and knowing he was the Son of God, they did not want him to die. But they still did not understand the will of God and did not understand the resurrection and the power that would come through Jesus' resurrection. They did not understand that this was his purpose and that through his death and resurrection we and they would have eternal life.

While he walked the earth he helped many people and even gave life to some. But in his death and the spread of the gospel he has brought life to countless millions from generation to generation. Without his death and resurrection we would not have had the opportunity of life eternal.

It was his custom to give his people understanding of things to come, and that was his purpose in this section of scripture. He was foretelling his death and resurrection so that the people and his disciples would not be taken by surprise. It may have seemed like bad news at the time, but it became not just good news but the greatest news of all time, for in his resurrection and life we too have life.

Making a Request of God

(Mark 10:35-45)

James and John were two brothers and disciples of the Lord. They came to him asking if Jesus would grant them to sit at his right and his left hand in his kingdom. (Verse 37) There was a lesson for them and the rest of the disciples to learn and Jesus used this discussion to show them the problems of pride and the value of humility.

Jesus responded to the two saying that they would suffer as he had suffered and go through same baptism as the Lord. But to grant their request was not for Jesus to give. (Verses 39-40) To sit at the right and left hand of the Son of God were high positions of power, authority and glory. Seeking such places of honour is a mark of pride. It is the way of the world to seek to be in power over other people and this is not the way of the Lord.

What is interesting in this scripture is that Jesus did not say they could not sit at his right or left hand. He said only that, "...it is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared." (Verse 40)

You can ask the Lord for almost anything, but the answer may not always be "Yes." When we ask for anything though we need to examine our own motivations. What or who is the beneficiary of the request? Is it for ourself or others? Will it bring glory to God or not? Will it help or hinder our walk? Is the request motivated by pride and arrogance or humility and love?

When we consider questions such as these it can bring some perspective to our prayers and requests of God so that we ask rightly and then have a greater chance of success in our requests. When we ask rightly we are more likely to be granted the request than if we ask in a self-seeking or arrogant and prideful manner.

Let us consider the request of James and John in the light of the questions posed above. Who benefited? James and John. Was it for themselves? Yes it was. Will it bring glory to God? No it would bring glory to James and John. Would it help or hinder their walk with Christ? It could be neutral, but I would suspect if Jesus had said "Yes" they could have been trapped in pride which definitely would not help their walk. Was the request motivated by pride or humility? Pride would be at the root of a request of this nature.

As we can see, an analysis of this request suggests it is not the kind of thing we should ask of God, and the likelihood of a successful outcome would always be remote.

If we took a modern request that thousands of people in the world make of God asking him that they could win the lottery. Consider such a request in the light of the questions above and you will see it fails in every point as well.

But we see the compassion of the Lord for these two men, as well as the rest of the disciples, needed to learn this lesson. He did not get annoyed or angry with them, nor

with the other disciples who became indignant at the two brothers for making such a request. Instead Jesus taught them the lesson of the Servant-Leader.

In Christ, those who are called to positions of leadership, as the two brothers were, are called to serve and not be served. In the world as a person gets promoted into leadership they rise through the ranks of an organisation and have others serve them. But in Christ as a person is given the responsibility of leadership they do not rise above others, but they move into the positions of service where they are serving others and thus working for the Lord. They may be the leaders of the church, but they are to guide, teach, counsel, preach, minister to and aid the flock. They are not meant to “fleece” the flock and use the flock as their servants, holding them in positions of bondage like a tyrant.

As Jesus himself said in verse 45, “For the Son of man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” He provided the example for us. Jesus came to serve God, we must do the same. It is not for us to seek personal honour or glory, but to seek the glory of the Lord and God. We are working for him and as “employees” or servants of the Lord it is our responsibility not to bring the name of the Lord into disrepute, but to give him glory and honour. Thus we serve as servants for the true Master.

Seek the Lord and Never, Ever Give Up

(Mark 10:46-52)

Bartimaeus was a man blind from birth. He eked out his existence through begging on the streets. The outlook for his life was poor. He was rejected by people, as we will see, and had little to look forward to. But he had one thing that shone out, faith. His faith was great and he received his reward for his faith. And we too can learn a great lesson from Bartimaeus.

As Jesus walked down the road from Jericho with his disciples and a multitude, Bartimaeus was sitting by the roadside. When he heard that it was Jesus coming, he began to cry out, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” (Verse 47)

The people rejected him by rebuking him for calling out and told him to be quiet. Did Bartimaeus listen to the people? No. He cried out all the more. Bartimaeus had clearly heard about Jesus and what he had done in healing others, and this was probably his only opportunity to get close to the Lord. He was not about to let the opportunity pass him by, but was going to use all his energy and effort to get the attention of the Lord. He wanted to be healed of his blindness and this was his chance.

What would have happened if he had listened to the people? If he had been silent as they rebuked him, Jesus would have passed by and the opportunity would be lost forever to receive his sight. But Bartimaeus was made of tough stuff. He wasn't about to give up when the Lord was so close. He was going to do all in his power to gain the Lord's attention so he could ask him to be healed.

What if the Lord had just passed by and ignored him? Well he would have been no better nor worse than he was anyway. But at least he would have known he had done the best he could. But of course the Lord did not pass him by. Jesus stopped in the road and said, "Call him."

Interestingly we see the immediate change in the people. From rebuking him and telling him to be silent one minute, they now said, "Take heart; rise, he is calling you." (Verse 49) And we see the eagerness of Bartimaeus by, "...throwing off his mantle he sprang up and came to Jesus." (Verse 50)

Jesus asked him, "What do you want me to do for you?" And Bartimaeus said, "Master, let me receive my sight." (Verse 51) Jesus responded saying, "Go your way; your faith has made you well." And immediately he received his sight and followed him on the way. (Verse 52)

We need to learn the lesson of Bartimaeus. First, we must call on the Lord. Ask him, seek him and don't be put off by those who might get in the way or tell you to be silent or stop wasting your time. Persistence pays off as Bartimaeus proved. The converse is that you will never receive what you seek if you are not willing to ask for it.

Second, make it your priority and focus. When the opportunity presents itself, focus 100% on getting the best from the opportunity while the window of opportunity is open. Bartimaeus had a small window of opportunity while the Lord was walking past him, and he maximised his opportunity to the best of his ability. He could not see, he could not walk over to the Lord, but he had faith and he could call out...loudly and be heard. He used what he had, and received the blessing of the Lord for his efforts and his faith. We may be in the same situation. We may have certain disabilities that prevent us from doing some things, but they do not prevent us from doing anything. You can always pray to the Lord for his help and your faith will be repaid as Bartimaeus received his sight through his faith.

Third, when the Lord calls you, as he called Bartimaeus, don't just sit there by the side of the road! Throw back your mantle and spring up to the Lord to ask your question or receive what he has to give. When the Lord calls, answer him. Be prepared to listen when the Lord speaks to you so that you can receive the gift he is offering or the guidance and direction you are seeking.

Finally, follow the Lord. Always follow the Lord for he will guide you to greater insight and understanding. Learn his ways and understand his path and then you will be able to follow him as he wants. The lessons of Bartimaeus are valuable for all of us to learn. Most of all, when you are seeking the Lord over any matter, never, ever give up.

Hosanna in the Highest

(Mark 11:1-10)

From the mouths of babes the Lord brought perfect praise. This is what Jesus said in another version of this section of scripture. As he rode on the colt of an ass (which was to fulfil prophecy) the people laid down leafy branches and and their garments when he rode to Jerusalem.

Jesus entry into Jerusalem could not be hidden. He had come ready to die at the hands of the chief priests and scribes as it was written of him in prophecy hundreds of years earlier. He was the king, or rather is the King of Kings, but he was to be rejected finally by those who should have recognised him but did not.

The interesting scripture that caught my eye in this section was verse 10. It reads, "Blessed is the kingdom of our father David that is coming. Hosanna in the highest!"

What is interesting in this scripture is the fact that the people seemed to recognise that the kingdom was not here yet. They said it "is coming" indicating a future kingdom.

That kingdom has now arrived even though we do not see it with our eyes. The kingdom of God is a spiritual kingdom and it will be a physical kingdom at the second coming of Christ. For now though, we have the ability to enter the Kingdom of God through Jesus Christ.

He said, "I am the door." (John 10:7-9) It is through Jesus that we go into the Kingdom of God and we have that entry available to us now.

How do we enter the door that is Christ? When we are baptised into the name of Jesus Christ we are baptised INTO Jesus. We go through a symbolic death and resurrection as we are immersed in the waters of baptism and then lifted up from the waters. Through faith the Lord tells us to recognise this symbolic death as our real death and rebirth as new creations in Jesus Christ. It is by this method that we enter the kingdom of God.

But then there is more for it is not enough to simply go through the door and stand at the threshold. We must be prepared and changed in preparation to meet the Master. We must be clothed in the robes of righteousness that will give us access to the wedding feast he talks of in Matthew 22:1-14. That work then follows on after we enter into the Kingdom of God through the working of the Holy Spirit.

The work of the Holy Spirit is to transform us into the image of Christ. We are given righteousness through faith when we are baptised and set free from sin and the law. But to live with God we must become like God. We must have the nature of God, for God cannot sin and he cannot live in the presence of sin. Thus it is the work of the holy spirit to transform us into the likeness of God as it shows in 2 Corinthians 3:18, "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit."

So when the people were saying Hosanna in the highest and talking of the kingdom of David that is coming, little did they know at that time that it was closer than they

realised. They were expecting Jesus to reign as a king on earth, but his kingdom is a spiritual kingdom. What he has given us is the opportunity to enter that kingdom now and begin the work of transformation that will take us one day into the presence of God.

Now that is something worth shouting about and saying, “Hosanna in the highest!”

The Barren Fig Tree

(Mark 11:11-14)

The teaching about the barren fig tree is an interesting one. Each time I look at it I find things that are more and more interesting in it.

The first time I read this section of scripture I thought the Lord was being harsh and vindictive. He basically cursed the fig tree so that it would die and never produce fruit again. To all intents that seems a very harsh thing to do, but there are lessons we can learn from this when we understand what the Lord is showing us.

First we should understand that the Lord expected there to be fruit on this tree and there was none. This can be likened to Christians who have been with the Lord some time. After a period of time, typically years, the Lord could expect Christians to bear fruit. The fruit of the Spirit should begin to flourish in the lives of those who profess Christ as Saviour and there would be a natural expectation that a Christian should mature and grow as they walk with Christ. I covered this aspect of this scripture in some detail when I looked at it in Matthew 21:18-22

But there are other messages in this scripture too.

This tree was supposed to provide something of value. It had a utility and purpose. It was supposed to have fruit. When it did not have fruit it became worthless and was of no value. If it is of no value, then is it wrong or harsh to destroy the tree? Is it harsh to curse it and have it wither when it has no use? No it is not. Ask any farmer what they do with crops or trees that do not produce what they are supposed to. Ask them what they do with stock and animals that have lost their value. They do not save them for “old times sake.” No, they are removed and replaced with stock that will provide a benefit.

This tree was no different. It was of no benefit so the natural course of things would be to remove it and replace it with something that will provide benefit. The benefit the fig tree gives us is the lesson of growth, maturity and utility.

Furthermore we see that Jesus was no “tree-hugger.” He had no qualms about destroying a tree that was of no use. He certainly did not put it up as being anything special or of any importance other than in its ability to provide food. When it did not or could not do that, it was removed.

Not that I am suggesting the wholesale destruction of the earth's resources is a good thing. Far from it. But I am saying things need to be put into perspective. It is wrong to swing too far either left or right on any matter, including conservation and those things held dear by the green movements around the world. When the earth's resources are destroyed purely for the sake of gain, it is wrong. But likewise when emphasis is put on saving resources to the exclusion of the needs of people, that too is wrong. The challenge is in finding the balance between these two extremes. But I am straying from the essence of the scripture now.

Jesus followed this message later, which I will cover in the next one or two posts about the need to have faith and the power of faith. We can do anything if we have faith. There is tremendous power in faith, and indeed without it nothing can be achieved. Nothing would even be attempted if we did not have faith. Who would commence anything if they did not have a grain of faith that it could be done?

We will come to that in more detail soon. For this section though, there are messages of faith, and the need to grow in the Lord to produce fruit. If we do not produce the fruit of Christ, then we need to beware lest we are uprooted like this fig tree and cast away from the Lord. It is a sobering thought and warning to all Christians.

Driving Out the Merchants and Money Changers from the Temple

(Mark 11:15-19)

Jesus came to the temple in Jerusalem and saw the merchants and moneychangers carrying on their business. He made the point saying, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers." (Verse 17) And with that he drove them all out, overturning the tables of the moneychangers and the seats of those who were selling pigeons.

Now let's fast-forward a couple of thousand years to today. In many churches there is an inordinate amount of focus on selling stuff in the church. There are stands for books, CD's of sermons, music CD's and so on. In addition there are bumper stickers, costume jewellery, bracelets, necklaces, scripture verses, bookmarks with scriptures on them, coffee mugs, pictures and all manner of things that are sold under the banner of "Christian."

Now the Bible says that it is fine for those who work in the Lord's service to earn their living from that work. The scripture says, "Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching; for the scripture says, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain," and, "The laborer deserves his wages." (1 Timothy 5:17-18)

But I cannot see how the marketing of these things above, especially the bracelets, CD's, coffee mugs, jewellery and so on has anything to do with the ministry work of God. Selling these things is no different from the movie or music industry who sell all

this same kind of paraphernalia for profit pure and simple. Films and music may make a lot of money, but the marketing of these toys and trinkets is where the real bucks are, and the marketers know it. The licensing of names and brands is where the real money is.

So has the church sold out to capitalism? Is the dollar the almighty rather than the Almighty God in their minds? Has the love of money and the greed for gain turned them aside from the path of the truth?

My point is this. Jesus drove out the moneychangers from the temple because they had turned it into a marketplace rather than a place of worship. Today there are some in the church who are using Christianity and the name of Jesus to market goods for the purpose of making profit. This is not about making their living, unless making a living means having the fanciest houses, the finest clothes, expensive cars and a lifestyle of the “rich and famous.”

Jesus said, “No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.” (Matthew 6:24) Who are these preachers who have focussed their energies and preaching on wealth creation serving? They have replaced the truth of the gospel with the lie of this world. Money will not buy you security, it will not give you happiness and it will not commend you to God so as to gain entry to his Kingdom.

When I see televangelists who spend more time and energy promoting their latest books or some other trinket, supposedly in the name of Jesus, rather than preaching the word of God, I wonder who they are serving. The marketing is slick and polished and designed to get you to put your hand in your pocket to give them money. The only thing missing is the classic infomercial line, “But wait! There’s more! With this trinket you get six steak knives!”

What does the world see in this? Do they see anything better in the church when they see this kind of marketing than what they see in the world? Do they see Jesus in this kind of thing? No. It is no kind of witness but is a sham and it turns people away from the truth.

But the churches and people doing this, and I must add it is not all churches but just a very high profile few, are blind. They do not see the error of their way and believe they have reached the penultimate of Christianity. Their proof? They believe the Lord has blessed them with wealth. But what does the Bible say of them? They are like the church of Laodicea described in Revelation 3:14-19.

14 “And to the angel of the church in La-odice’a write: ‘The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God’s creation.

15 “I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were cold or hot!

16 So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth.

17 For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing; not knowing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.

18 Therefore I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, that you may be rich, and white garments to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, that you may see.

19 Those whom I love, I reprove and chasten; so be zealous and repent.

They think they are rich, but they are spiritually impoverished. They think they need nothing, not knowing they have nothing. They are pitiable, poor, blind and naked for they are clothed with righteousness. They are neither cold nor hot because they don't want to rock the boat. When you rock the boat in this world, you upset the marketing and you don't make money, which is why they are lukewarm, following the dollar. The message to them is to go and find the truth and to repent of their self-serving ways.

There is a lesson here for all of us. For if the churches that do this kind of thing are seeking your money, then what is the quality of the teaching. Which master do they serve, God or mammon? And more importantly, what truth will you get from those who promote such a ministry?

Have Faith in God

(Mark 11:20-26)

The lesson of the fig tree was covered a few posts ago. We see an additional lesson here when the disciples note that the fig tree is withered and they point it out to Jesus.

The disciples were amazed that the fig tree had withered after Jesus spoke to it. But Jesus' response was, "Have faith in God." (Verse 22) He said to them that if they have faith they could say to a mountain to be cast into the sea and it would be done for them. In essence he was saying that when you ask God anything in prayer and you have faith, it will be done.

How often do we take the Lord literally at his words? How often do we doubt the power of God? It is not uncommon for Christian to doubt, but the lesson we need to learn is that there is no need to doubt. God through Jesus Christ is able to do anything we ask, and more. It is our doubt that limits us in what the Lord can and will do for us. We are the limiting factor, not God.

Consider the "faith" chapter in Hebrews chapter 11. It opens with this line, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." (Heb 11:1) Whatever you hope for you will receive if you have faith and the assurance that the Lord will bring the thing you are hoping for to come to pass. You cannot see the thing you hope for because it has not yet come to pass. That is why faith is so important because it is through faith that we receive the conviction to carry on so that we will receive the things we are hoping for.

Faith is essential is we are to come to God and please him. The writer in Hebrews 11 continues on to say, "...without faith it is impossible to please him. For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him." (Heb 11:6)

That is why faith is so important. Faith is the key to coming to God and to receiving his promises. You must believe to receive. You must believe to be able to enter God's kingdom for the entry is via faith in Jesus Christ. There is no other way than by faith for faith is spiritual not physical.

Does it work? Absolutely! Look at the rest of Hebrews 11 and you will see how faith enabled the prophets and people of God to do many mighty things, "...who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, received promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, that they might rise again to a better life." (Hebrews 11:33-35)

There is much more that can be said on the subject of faith and we will cover those scriptures over time as I continue to work through the New Testament. For now it is enough to say that faith is the key and anything you desire to receive from the Lord is possible if you will believe, pray and ask for it and hold firm your faith.

You Can't Sit on the Fence

(Mark 11:27-33)

This is a classic lesson that Jesus taught the chief priests and scribes and which provides a warning to all of us. The Lord hates fence sitters. Here is a perfect example of the way he dealt with them.

The chief priests and scribes came to Jesus asking by what authority was he doing the things he did and who gave him such authority. It should have been evident to them by what authority he was doing these works for it was certainly obvious to the people. They knew that his authority was from God and they recognised he was working by the authority of God. In fact even the Pharisees knew he was from God, but they refused to admit it. Nicodemus, who was a ruler of the Jews and a Pharisee said, "This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do, unless God is with him." (John 3:2) So they knew full well where Jesus was from.

But in order to find some reason to condemn him they asked him these questions to try and trip him up.

But Jesus was aware of their malice and so he answered them with a question saying, "I will ask you a question; answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things. Was the baptism of John from heaven or from men? Answer me." (Verses 29-

30) The chief priests and scribes were in a quandary as to how they should answer. They mulled the question over but could not come to a decision for any way they answered they would be shown up for their lack of faith. So they took the easy way out...they sat on the fence and said, "We do not know." (Verse 33)

And because they sat on the fence Jesus said, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things." (Verse 33) They had refused to answer his questions so why should Jesus answer theirs? They knew where his power emanated from but they chose to ignore it, and worse, they opposed him. But the issue here was that they sat on the fence.

God hates fence sitters. There is no place in the kingdom of Heaven for fence sitters. In all situations there is a need for a decision one way or another. You can see how much he hates fence sitters and indecision in Revelation 3:15-16 speaking to the church in Laodicea, "I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth."

Jesus also said, "He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters." (Matthew 12:30) If you are not with the Lord you are against him. There is no middle road. There is no way to have a bet both ways. A decision must be made either way and if the choice is not for the Lord, it is against him.

Why does the Lord despise fence sitting in these scriptures? Consider what a fence sitter is like. They are indecisive and cannot come to a decision. They are tossed to and fro depending which way the wind blows. They are attempting to please everyone and so will compromise themselves so as not to upset people. And you don't know where you stand with a fence sitter as you have no idea which way they will turn.

We must learn the lesson he showed the chief priests and scribes in this section. They came to him with a questions, but because they sat on the fence they did not get an answer. If we come to the Lord with a question but are indecisive in our own minds and not fully on board with the Lord, should he answer our requests? Certainly if we are seeking the Lord for an answer we will get it, but if we are not being true to the Lord and are sitting on the fence we will not receive anything from him.

The lesson is to seek out the truth when you are in a place of indecision. Look to the Lord fully to open the door and give you insight. Open your heart and mind to receive his truth. Humble yourself under his hand and don't waver in doubt or apprehension. As it has been written, "For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we preached among you, Silvanus and Timothy and I, was not Yes and No; but in him it is always Yes. For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why we utter the Amen through him, to the glory of God." (2 Corinthians 1:19-20)

In Christ there is no vacillating. There is no humming and herring but there is the definite "Yes" in him. He does not sit on the fence and does not want his people to either. Go to him and find the yes that he has promised.

Parable of the Tenants

(Mark 12:1-12)

This parable was told by Jesus in relation to the chief priests in relation to how they had failed. They were given a responsibility by the Lord and they failed in their responsibility. What is worse they abused their position to try and gain power and position instead of offering service that was required of them in their positions as priests in God's temple. For this they were rejected.

Jesus showed that their situation was like a man who built a vineyard and let it out to tenants. God was the builder, the world, or more specifically the Israel nation was the vineyard and the priests were the tenants. The priests were charged with the responsibility of their office to rule the people according to God's law. They were to teach the people God's law and ensure his ways were followed.

Instead they abused their position for power and personal gain. And this was not just in Jesus' generation, but had been going on for many generations prior to this.

In the parable the man who owned the vineyard sent servants to receive the profits of the business and they beat or killed the servants so that they could keep it all to themselves. This was an abuse of their power. In the same way God sent his servants, prophets and righteous men to teach the people and to try to bring the people back to his ways. But the religious leaders of the days and the evil kings had them beaten and killed so that they would not lose their positions of power.

Then we see the vineyard owner send his son, but the tenants conspired and killed the son thinking that this would be the end and they would have realised their wicked aims. Likewise Jesus, the Son of God, came to the earth to bring the people back to worshipping and honouring the Lord and the chief priests conspired together and had him killed.

Naturally the chief priests were annoyed at Jesus for telling this parable for it showed them up for their evil doing. But it also showed that instead of ridding themselves of this problem man by the name of Jesus, they actually fulfilled the will of God. For it is in the death of Jesus that we receive life. It was in the death and resurrection of Jesus that the Lord God drew mankind back to him. And it was through the death and resurrection of Jesus that he dispossessed the priests and threw down their power so that access to God became available to all of mankind.

They lost the inheritance and it was given to others, just as the evil tenants lost the inheritance they tried to take by force. The inheritance went to Jesus Christ as the Son of God and we have access to the inheritance of the Son through coming to Christ.

Render to Caesar the Things that are Caesar's

(Mark 12:13-17)

The Pharisees and Herodians were sent to Jesus to try and entrap him. The chief priests were looking for a reason to arrest Jesus and hoped that he could be trapped by teaching something opposing the laws of the land.

First they tried to get under Jesus' guard with flattery saying they knew he would speak truth and truly taught the ways of God. Then they asked him whether it was lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not. (Verse 14) Here is a classic trick of the devil and his people. First get close through smooth talk than hit them right between the eyes!

But Jesus was having none of that. He was well aware of their malice and evil intent. So rather than fall into their trap he said, "Why put me to the test? Bring me a coin and let me look at it." (Verse 15) And he said to them, "Whose likeness and inscription is this?" They said to him, "Caesars." So he replied, Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's." (Verses 16-17)

What an insightful answer! What could they say in reply? He had their measure completely and the wisdom of God is greater for there is a message in these words that rings true even more today.

Today we see that some churches preach and practice tithing. But they do not follow the details of tithing as it was laid down in scripture. Nor do they recognise that tithing is not even part of the Christian covenant. Tithing was a requirement of the law given by Moses to the people of Israel for the purpose of keeping the temple and the priests of the tribe of Levi as they had no inheritance in the division of the land.

But today these churches are taking money, which was not what the tithe was all about. The tithe originally was of various kinds of produce, not money. The produce was in essence the gift of God, so the people were tithing what God had given them.

But money as we can see by Jesus statement was not the gift of God but the invention of man. Who created the money in Jesus discussion with the Pharisees and Herodians? Caesar. Jesus thus said in relation to paying taxes that money was the invention of man and that it should be paid to the creator of that money...the government, represented here by Caesar. Nowhere in the Bible are we told to render to God the things that are Caesars, or vice versa.

There is a lot that comes from this scripture, which needs to be said in relation to tithing. If you would like to learn more about the deeper issues of tithing and the ramifications for the Christian church, follow this link (<http://www.freegiftfromgod.com/Tch/TithingToday.pdf>) to a PDF document on my website which discusses this in depth.

Marriage in Heaven

(Mark 12:18-27)

After the Pharisees and Herodians tried to entangle Jesus and failed, the Sadducees came to try and confuse him. The only trouble with their line of argument was that first they did not even believe in what they were questioning Jesus about, and second they didn't know what they were talking about as Jesus quickly showed.

The Sadducees came to Jesus to test him over marriage and resurrection. They said there was a woman who had had seven brothers as husband. As each of them died she became the wife of the next in line until they had all passed away and the woman too finally died. Their question to Jesus was, to which of the brothers would she be wife in the resurrection, as they had all had her as wife.

Jesus very quickly shut down their argument. First he pointed out that they were wrong because they knew neither the scriptures nor the power of God.

Marriage is a bond that exists in the flesh, not in the spirit. The law of marriage ends at the death of either party to the marriage. Paul clearly showed this in Romans 7:1-3 saying, "Do you not know, brethren—for I am speaking to those who know the law—that the law is binding on a person only during his life? Thus a married woman is bound by law to her husband as long as he lives; but if her husband dies she is discharged from the law concerning the husband. Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies she is free from that law, and if she marries another man she is not an adulteress."

So in the resurrection, after a person has died the law is no longer in force concerning marriage. That law ceased to have effect when the person died. So in answer to the first part of the Sadducees question, and showing their lack of knowledge of scripture for this was contained in the law, Jesus showed they did not know what they were talking about. The woman in their example would not belong to any of the brothers for she was freed from the laws of marriage at the death of each of the brothers, and finally when she herself died.

As to the resurrection, the Sadducees did not believe there was a resurrection. Thus their question regarding resurrection was hypocritical to begin with. However Jesus showed too that there indeed is a resurrection for the death of the flesh is not the final death. He spoke of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as living and not dead. Their bodies had separated from the spirit but they were still alive in the spiritual realm, as too are all those who have died in this world. Jesus always spoke of the death of the flesh as being a "sleep." However the final death that will occur at the final judgement is the destruction of the spirit of a man, not just the flesh.

In addition Jesus quoted saying, "I am the God of Abraham..." He was speaking in the present tense for these three patriarchs of Israel were alive then and are still alive today. The resurrection is still to come and all the dead will be raised to a final judgement. At that time the decisions will be made concerning eternal life or eternal damnation based upon how each person has lived their life. Now is the time to make the decision as to how we should live our lives for at the end it will be too late.

Love is the Answer

(Mark 12:28-34)

One of the most penetrating answers given to Jesus was given by a scribe. Too often we generalise about people and don't take account of the fact that not everyone is the same. I am often critical of churches because some of them teach a form of doctrine that does not promote the truth of the New Covenant. But not all do this. Some teach doctrines to keep people in bondage, but not all do this. And some seem more intent on "fleecing the flock" than promoting growth and maturity, but again, not all do this.

In all churches there are ministers truly trying to follow the Lord and his leading. They are teaching the people in their care to the best of their own level of knowledge and experience of the Lord. When I am being critical of some churches and forms of ministry, I should not generalise but wish to point out that it is not the people in the church at fault but the poor quality of the ministry that is at fault. It is the teachers in those churches who do the wrong thing and who teach things that are not consistent with the truth of the covenant that will have to stand to account. Thus it is more important for me that I seek the truth and that I try to present the truth as I see it and know it in these words.

This rather long preamble has much to do with this section of scripture. One of the scribes came to Jesus to ask him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" (Verse 28) That is, which is the most important of the 600-plus commandments. Now this man was a scribe and the generalisation about scribes was that they were opposed to Jesus on many occasions. Likewise we often saw the Pharisees stand opposed to Jesus too. But we also see Nicodemus, who was a ruler and a Pharisee, in John 3 come to Jesus recognising him as the Christ and a believer. He also stood up in Jesus' defence (John 7:50-53) and he provided the costly ointments for Jesus burial too (John 19:39).

So not all of the Pharisees and not all of the scribes were opposed to Jesus and thus the generalisation that they were is wrong.

In this section of Mark 12, after this scribe asks his question Jesus replies, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." (Verses 29-31) Then the scribe responds to Jesus, not in contempt, not in opposition, not trying to prove Jesus wrong, but in full agreement. He said, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that he is one, and there is no other but he; and to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbour as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." (Verse 32-33)

In saying this he showed that he recognised that all of the ordinances of the law, the rituals of the burnt offerings and sacrifices, are nothing compared to the truth of the law, which is love. Love is the most important aspect of the law and it is on love that the law is based. The Pharisees and scribes (but not all of them) wrongfully used the

law as a weapon to punish and strike fear into men's hearts. But Jesus showed the most important aspect of the law was to learn how to live in love. And in living in love we can live in harmony and in relationship with God and our fellow man.

This is the same message in the New Testament. Paul wrote in Romans 13:10, "...love is the fulfilling of the law." It is in love that we live in accordance with God's laws. It is in love that our relationship with God is established through Jesus Christ, and we can learn to love as he loves for he loved us first and gave Jesus his Son as sacrifice to bring us to him. Through love for us Jesus died so that we can be saved from sin. Perhaps the most well-known scripture in the Bible, John 3:16 shows us the love God had for man when he says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

Love is the answer to all of the questions we have in this world. Love is the fulfilling of the law, it is the basis of our relationships with each other and with God and it is the force that keeps us at peace and in harmony with God and each other.

The scribe in Mark 12 knew this too, for he showed his love in his answer to the Lord. When Jesus saw that he answered well his response was not to that of an opponent, but to a friend, for he said, "And when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." (Verse 34)

Love is the thing that will bring us into the kingdom of heaven. Love is the key to life and Jesus saw it and recognised it in this scribe and he told him as much. Love truly is the answer to all things and the love of God will lead us to his eternal light and life.

Son of David, Son of God

(Mark 12:35-40)

As Jesus taught in the temple he asked this question. "How can the scribes say that the Christ is the son of David?" (Verse 35) He continued on showing that, "David himself, inspired by the Holy Spirit, declared, 'The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand, till I put thy enemies under thy feet.' David himself calls him Lord; so how is he his son?" (Verse 36-37)

It's a good point. The scribes and Pharisees were looking for the Christ to come and give the salvation prophesied in the Old Testament. However they were looking for an earthly king. The Son of David they expected to be a king of the lineage of David who was king over all of Israel in this world.

But they did not recognise Jesus as the king they were looking for. As far as they were concerned he was just the son of a carpenter, and from a ministry perspective, something of a thorn in their side. He preached the truth and it was clear to all, including some of the scribes and Pharisees, that he was from God for the signs he performed bore witness to the teachings he gave.

They were looking for a leader and a king to take them out of the oppression of the Roman empire and restore the former glory of the nation of Israel. However Jesus came to bring a new teaching and a New Covenant that would establish the nation of Israel, not in a physical way, but in the spirit. The spiritual Israel would be composed of many peoples, nations and tongues, not based upon bodily descent from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but based upon the faith of those three patriarchs.

It is the children who share the faith of Abraham who are the children of the spiritual Israel. And Jesus is the king of that nation in the kingdom of God.

David the king recognised this coming kingdom, which is why he called the Christ his Lord. It had been revealed to David that the Christ would be descended from his line, but that he would also be the Son of God. The scribes were looking for a physical king, not a spiritual kingdom. They were looking towards the power and glory of a worldly kingdom rather than the glory of God's kingdom in the spirit. As a consequence of their blindness, they missed the Christ when he appeared. Their loss though is our gain for through Jesus we have access to the Spirit and the kingdom of God.

The Lesson of the Widows Mites

(Mark 12:41-44)

Jesus sat in the temple opposite the treasury and watched the people giving gifts. Many rich people put in large sums, but there was a poor widow who contributed just two coins. These coins in total amounted to about one penny. Rather than consider this to be insignificant Jesus teaches us a valuable lesson.

Sometime ago I read a scripture which gave me great comfort in the work I am doing in the name of the Lord. At times I felt I was wasting my time and working for nothing. At other times I was perplexed as to what I should do or what to do next. Sometimes I felt the work was insufficient or not good enough.

Then I read the scripture in 1 Corinthians 15:58 which says, "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain." This was a great comfort to me, to know that the work I am doing for the Lord is not in vain. There is a value in anything you do for the Lord.

And we see in this scripture in Mark 12 that it can be the most insignificant thing, for the Lord sees value where man does not. The people at the treasury on the day the Lord was there possibly may have disregarded the widow's contribution as trivial. But Jesus saw it as the greatest gift of all those people giving for she contributed out of her poverty, but the others from their wealth. The rich could more than afford their gifts, but the poor widow would have struggled, and yet she still gave of her means. And she was accepted by the Lord for what she gave, insignificant as it may have been.

This principle was reinforced by Paul when he wrote, “For if the readiness is there, it is acceptable according to what a man has, not according to what he has not.” (2 Corinthians 8:12) So if you are offering a service to the Lord, no matter how minor you may think it is, you are accepted for what you have, not what you do not have. You do not have to do major or mighty works to be doing the Lord’s work. You do not have to be putting great riches into his treasury as we saw in the scripture in Mark 12. Whatever you do in the name of the Lord is accepted and that work is not in vain.

We must remember too that when the Lord God passed by Elijah in the wilderness, he was not in the great strong wind that rent the mountains and broke rocks to pieces. He was not in the mighty earthquake or raging fire that followed. He was in the still small voice that spoke to Elijah and gave him comfort and instruction. (1 Kings 19:9-18)

God is in the small things. There is a saying in this world that says, “The devil is in the details.” The saying is false and it is wrong. God is in the details. God is in the minutiae and the details of all things. It is the devil who glosses over things so that people will not look for the detail for he lacks detail. It is in the detail that we gain understanding, insight and wisdom.

So don’t ever consider that when you do something small for the Lord it is insignificant. Anything you do for the Lord is not in vain and it is valued, as were the two mites of the widow.

The Hope of Eternity is in Christ

(Mark 13:1-2)

There is nothing in this world that will last forever. This world has been doomed to decay and will pass away. Jesus showed in this scripture that even those bricks and mortar structures that seem so permanent will not last. Paul wrote also, “...for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God.” (Romans 8:20-21)

As the disciples walked with Jesus in the temple, they pointed out all of the marvellous buildings and the wonderful stones from which they were made. But Jesus said to them, “Do you see these great buildings? There will not be left here one stone upon another, that will not be thrown down.” (Verse 2)

Jesus knew full well what was to come and occur in the future, and that was exactly what happened many years later. The temple was destroyed and all the buildings and stones cast away leaving only what we now know as the “Wailing Wall” in Jerusalem.

But in Jesus’ statement there was another message too. He indicates that what was there at the temple site was temporary and would not last forever. So too what the

temple stood for, which was the worship under the law, was not going to last either. Paul showed in Galatians 3:23-27 that we were confined under the law until righteousness by faith was revealed in Jesus. Once faith came, we were no longer confined under the law but now worship God according to the New Covenant, based upon faith in Christ Jesus.

It was shown also that the Old Covenant confinement under the law ended with the death of Jesus as the curtain of the temple was torn from top to bottom indicating the way was open for all mankind to enter the presence of God, not just the priests.

So all of the traditions and institutions of this world are temporary too, along with the buildings, bricks and mortar. The disciples were impressed by the buildings, but Jesus showed them that these were to pass away. However His word was permanent and would last forever. The word of God and the words of Jesus are eternal and they are the teachings of eternal life.

So do not be impressed by the wondrous buildings and churches today. Cathedrals, church buildings and all that go with them are nothing compared to the truth of the New Covenant. Focus your attention and priority rather on what is said in them and find the truth that is in Jesus. For it is in the permanent structure of the spiritual church that we are built into in Christ that is forever. Bricks and mortar crumble and return to dust.

Take Heed That No One Leads You Astray

(Mark 13:3-8)

When the disciples ask Jesus about the signs of the end and his second coming, Jesus commenced his discussion with these words, "Take heed that no-one leads you astray." (Verse 5) This warning was not for the disciples at that time as much as it is for us in this time and this age. We are in the final days of this world as we know it and the time of Jesus' return approaches.

How do we know these are the last days? Jesus said that in the last days leading up to his return, "...And when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places, there will be famines; this is but the beginning of the birth-pangs."

Never at any other time in history have we seen such upheaval in the world as today. There are wars, skirmishes, battles. There are earthquakes and famines. Today it was reported that one of the major aid agencies are seeking donations to support eleven million people in Africa because the drought there has wiped out food crops. Earthquakes are at the most prolific in history and each time there are tsunami warnings.

But the Lord said these are just the beginning of the birth pangs that are leading up to his return. These are signs that the time is at hand. But more important was the initial statement he made, take heed that no-one leads you astray.

There have recently been people predicting the end of the earth, and others predicting the return of the Lord. But no man knows the time or day that these things will occur. To listen to such nonsense is foolishness as it is clear these people have no knowledge of the scriptures. Will it be possible at any time to predict the Lord's return? Yes I believe there are timing indicators that suggest it will be possible to have some inkling, but not the exact day and hour as some claim.

It is evident that there are set periods established in Daniel and Revelation that suggest a countdown period may be possible, but there is still much to occur before that can begin to happen. For example, one of those triggers relates to the removal of the continual burnt offering from the temple. But first the temple must be re-built and then the man of sin has to assume authority and take his seat in the temple. There are many other things that need to happen before the Lord returns, so we must pay attention to the word and not be led astray.

Jesus is telling us to beware. There were false teachers in his day and the days of the disciples, and there are false teachers today. Unless someone can back up their claims from the word of truth, anything they are promoting in the name of the Lord should be treated with caution. Focus on seeking God's kingdom first and in anything that comes up like these things above, seek his insight through prayer. Your eternal life depends on following Jesus, not following a man who takes Jesus' rightful place as the leader of the church.

He tells us to beware of those who will "lead" you astray. Follow Jesus as he is the true "leader" of the church. He is the true shepherd of the sheep and He leads them in and out and they follow him. So beware of imitators and imitations, they are not of God.

Call for Endurance

(Mark 13:9-13)

In this section of scripture Jesus talks about the need for endurance at the time of the end. There are tough times ahead for those who come to Christ, but the reward is worth the effort.

Consider the photo on this page. This runner was exhausted at the end of his race, and unfortunately for him, he lost. But any sportsman who wants to compete and improve knows that they must get over it and get back into it. The very best sports people do not see loss as an end, but as a step on the journey towards winning.

As Christians we are seeking a better life. We are looking to win a better prize than competitors in a game or sports event. The apostle Paul talks about this in 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, which I quote below.

24 Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it.

25 Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable.

26 Well, I do not run aimlessly, I do not box as one beating the air;

27 but I pommel my body and subdue it, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.

Like a finely tuned athlete we too must “pommel our body and subdue it” in a spiritual sense. We are to grow in Christ and part of that is to bear the fruits of the spirit. One of those fruits is self-control, which we must learn to exercise as we grow. We are fortunate that in Christ he gives us his Holy Spirit so that we can be guided and learn how to exercise self-control in all things.

Then too as Jesus said in the scripture in Mark, when we come up against opposition, especially in the persecutions of the last days, we do not need to answer back to any of the accusations that may be put against us, for the holy spirit will answer and provide us the words to say at the right time.

Jesus said to take heed to yourselves. Prepare to the extent that you can and make sure you pommel your body and subdue it as Paul said. Like athletes, we are in training, for the kingdom of God. And like athletes if we do not compete according to the rules, how can we be crowned victorious? Our purpose is to win this victory and be able to enter into God’s eternal kingdom. Let us focus on how we shall achieve that and not on the issues, problems and worries of this life. For this life is temporary and a better one awaits if we are patient and endure to the end.

Sure, its a tough call, but the prize is worth it. Look to Jesus, learn his ways and find the path that leads to life. When you are grounded and established in the truth, nothing will be able to take you out of the loving hands of God and our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Signs of the End

(Mark 13:14-23)

In this section of scripture Jesus discusses some specifics about the times of the end. He is telling his disciples what will be some of the signs of the times at the time of the end and gives his people strong warnings about what will happen and what they should do.

Within the many prophecies of the end times there are certain events that must take place before the end. Each of these can be triggers for others and there is a sequence

to be followed. Some of these will give us information as to the start and end of certain prophecies and events.

In this section he begins by saying, “But when you see the desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not to be (let the reader understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.” (Verse 14) Now I do not believe he is speaking figuratively here but I believe Jesus is saying literally to “flee to the mountains.” Go to higher ground, especially if you are in Judea and Jerusalem.

This is a strong warning. And in the next few verses he strengthens it by saying, “...let him who is on the housetop not go down, nor enter his house, to take anything away; and let him who is in the field not turn back to take his mantle. And alas for those who are with child and for those who give suck in those days!” (Verses 15-17) It will be so critical and urgent that people flee that they need to go immediately. There will not be time to pack your things, sell the house, collect stuff together or whatever. He is saying to get out quickly and don't waste any time about it.

But why is this so desperate a plea? The trigger event is back in that first line, “...when you see the desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not to be...” He is referring here to the prophecy of Daniel. There is a ruler yet to come who is universally known as the man of sin. He is evil and will rule the world. Amongst other things he will do is to magnify himself and claim to be a god and he will sit in the temple as if he is god. The temple is yet to be rebuilt in Jerusalem, and it will happen in due course, and once it is built the temple worship rites will be re-set up including the fire of the continual burnt offering. This is all yet to come and is prophesied in a number of places.

But this man of sin at some point will remove the continual burnt offering from the rebuilt temple. He will take it away and that event will mark the beginning of the very last days. The prophet Daniel says there will be a period of 1,290 days from the time that the continual burnt offering is removed and the desolating sacrilege is set up (Daniel 12:11). This is the same event that Jesus is talking about in Mark 13.

After the desolating sacrilege has been set up, the angel speaking to Daniel continues on saying, “Blessed is he who waits and comes to the 1,335 days.” (Daniel 12:12) Why are these people blessed in this great time of evil? I believe it is because that will be the appointed time for the second coming of the Lord. This wondrous and blessed event will take place 45 days after the desolating sacrilege is set up.

Now coming back to why Jesus said in Mark 13 for the people to flee to the mountains, this too comes from prophecy. From what we see above there will be a period of 45 days after the desolating sacrilege is set up and Jesus warned the people to flee to the hills in Judea when they saw that abomination in the holy place, which is in the temple. They will have 45 days to get out of Judea and get into the mountains, to higher ground.

Angels of the Lord told the disciples that, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.” Then they returned to Jerusalem from the

mount called Olivet..." (Acts 1:11-12) Now if this is true he must return back to the mount called Olivet or the Mount of Olives.

The reason Jesus warns the people to flee to the mountains is found in the prophecies in Zechariah 14. It says, "On that day his feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives which lies before Jerusalem on the east; and the Mount of Olives shall be split in two from east to west by a very wide valley so that one half of the Mount shall withdraw northward, and the other half southward." (Zechariah 14:4) The prophet further adds, "On that day living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem, half of them to the eastern sea and half of them to the western sea..." (Zechariah 14:8)

So what we will see when the Lord returns is that there will be an almighty earthquake in Judea that will split Jerusalem through the mount of Olives, and Jerusalem will effectively become a seaport with waters running between the sea of Galilee and the Mediterranean Sea.

This is why he tells the people to flee to higher ground in those 45 days after the desolating sacrilege is set up. To escape the splitting of the earth and the devastation that will occur in the region at that instant when the Lord returns. There will be great tribulation and suffering at that time and the Lord will destroy those who have come against him, so he tells his people to head for the hills to escape the wrath that is coming on the evil of this world.

There is much that can be said about these prophecies and what I have said here only scratches the surface of them. More will be covered in due course as we get into other prophetic writings further down the track in this series of studies.

Learn the Lesson of the Fig Tree

(Mark 13:24-31)

Jesus continues describing the signs of the end in this section and specifically those leading up to his second coming. He tells us that the sun will be darkened and the moon will lose its light. The stars will fall from the heavens and the powers of the heavens will be shaken.

Some people fear that he is describing the outcome of a global nuclear war, which blackens the sky and prevents the light of the sun and moon coming through. Add this to the scripture in Mark 13:20 where he says that if the Lord had not shortened these last days then no human being would be saved. Whether this is a true reading of these signs I do not know. In my own opinion I think they are wrong. I say this because other scriptures do not suggest the widespread panic and destruction a nuclear event might cause. For example, Jesus said that things would be quite normal, like they were just before He flooded the earth when only Noah and his family survived. Look at Matthew 24:37-42 below:

37 As were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of man.

38 For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark,
39 and they did not know until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of man.
40 Then two men will be in the field; one is taken and one is left.
41 Two women will be grinding at the mill; one is taken and one is left.
42 Watch therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.

In my opinion there is some other cause of the shutting out the light of sun and moon and this I believe is of spiritual origin not men. But I may be wrong. Like all prophecy and future events we need to keep an open mind and watch. That is the Lord's recommendation too. Understand these things will happen and watch so you see the signs when they occur.

And in this section of Mark 13 he reminds us of the need to be alert. He tells us of the lesson of the fig tree. When spring is just around the corner, the branches of the fig tree become tender in readiness to bud and shoot new growth. This is a sign that spring is close.

In the same way when we see these signs we know that he is returning very soon. In the next section we will see that the key to all of these things is knowing that they will occur and to watch for them.

Watch for the Coming of the Lord

(Mark 13:32-36)

This is probably the most important lesson of all of the prophecies of the Lord's return that he gave to us. Right throughout these few scriptures he hammers home the message to watch for his return. Watch for the signs and know that he is on the way soon.

One thing we need to take heed of is the when the Lord tells us to do something, we should do it. He provides this same insight in the parable about the wise and foolish builders in Luke 6:46-49. The wise man dug deep and laid his foundation upon the rock. But the foolish man just built on the ground without a foundation. Then when the floods and storms came and the floods broke against the two houses, the wise man's house withstood the flood for it had been well built. But the foolish man's house collapsed, fell and was destroyed and the ruin of that house was great.

The one distinction the Lord makes between these two builders is that the wise man came to the Lord AND listened to his words AND did them. He acted upon what was heard. He was solidly grounded in the word of truth and the application of that word in his life.

But the foolish man by contrast also came to the Lord and heard his words, but he did not apply them in his life. He did not grow strong through the application of the word in his life and so when he was tested, he fell.

We must certainly hear the words of the Lord, but we must also apply his teachings in our life. Thus when he tells us to watch for his coming and to note the signs of his imminent return, the we must keep an eye out for those signs.

Look at what is going on in the world around you and I today. Earthquakes, tsunamis, wars and rumours of wars, famines, insurrections and so on. All of these are some of the signs that the end is coming soon. These are what Jesus calls the birth-pangs. They are like a pregnant woman who is just entering labour and getting the first few birth pangs. As time rolls on the pangs will become more pronounced and severe until the final event occurs: a baby is born in one case and Jesus returns in the other.

Watch, he said and watch we must. Learn what the prophecies of his coming are and keep an eye out for the completing of them. There are still many things to happen, but I believe they signs are commencing now and we will see them progress in the coming years.

As he also said in this section, no man knows the day and hour of the Lord's return, but in the signs there are trigger events that can give us a clue to when this will occur. I covered one of the key ones in my last post. When that will occur I do not know, but if we do not watch for the events leading up to his return, we too will be caught out, for he will come like a thief in the night. Thus we must watch.

Looking at Things as Jesus Sees Them

(Mark 14:1-9)

In some of my recent posts I have alluded to the way that the Lord does not look at things as man does. The Lord looks at things from a spiritual perspective, but man sees things in a physical way. Naturally this is because Jesus is spirit and man is flesh. So man sees things and perceives the world through what can be understood using his five senses. He makes decisions, assessments and judgements based on what he sees, hears, and feels and so on as things exist within the physical realm.

But Jesus looks at all things as God looks at things. God is spirit and so too is Jesus, so he sees, perceives and understands things in a spiritual way which is beyond what a man can understand just with his senses.

Jesus taught this principle saying that we too need to perceive things in a more spiritual way. In John 7:24 he said, Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgement." Again he emphasised this principle in John 8:15 while upbraiding the Pharisees saying, "You judge according to the flesh; I judge no one." This same principle is repeated many times throughout Jesus' ministry and we see it in action in the things Jesus said and did in various situations.

One such situation is this one in Mark 14:1-9. Here a woman brought a flask of costly ointment, pure nard, which she broke open and poured on Jesus' head anointing him with it. Some of those about him were indignant saying to themselves, "Why was the ointment wasted like that? For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii and given to the poor." (Verse 4-5)

This is typical of the way man sees things. It's all about making a profit. Where can there be a dollar made in this thing! And we know from other versions of this event that it was Judas Iscariot who made these comments, not because he cared for the poor, but he was a thief and he stole from the moneybag. (John 12:3-8)

But then we see Jesus' response. He said to leave the woman alone for she had done a beautiful thing to him. He said you will always have the poor and can aid them at any time you want, but that he would not always be there and the woman had done what she could for him. In essence when you come down to it, Judas had no right saying or thinking that the woman should sell the ointment and give it to the poor. It was her ointment and she had the right to do with it as she pleased. Sure she could have given it to the poor, but that was not what she wanted to do. She wanted to give it to the Lord and He saw it as a preparation for his imminent death and burial and that she would always be remembered through the scriptures for this beautiful sacrifice she had made for the Lord's sake.

So we see in Jesus words and behaviour an entirely different perspective to that of the men. Jesus saw a beautiful action done for him, the men saw waste and a loss of potential profit. Jesus saw a gift bestowed upon him out of love, joy and a desire to please the Lord. The men saw it as foolishness and a senseless loss of a profit making opportunity.

How different these two responses are from each other. And it is the Lord's desire that as we grow and mature we too will think as Jesus did. That as we develop the fruit of the Spirit described in Galatians 6, we too will see the beauty and blessing in things where man sees the opposite. It never ceases to amaze me when I see these types of examples and look at the world today. The things prized by men are considered worthless and useless in the eyes of God. Indeed many of the highly thought of professions will not even exist in the kingdom of Heaven. There will be no doctors, no lawyers, and no judges and so on for there will be no sickness or disease, no criminals or evil and God will judge the people.

So as we grow and mature in the Lord we need to focus on maturing and looking at the things around us from that same perspective as the Lord has. We need to learn to think as Jesus thinks so that we can become like he is. This is the aim for all of us, to be transformed into the image of Christ, which is to think, speak, act and behave as he does in any and all circumstances.

Betrayal of Jesus

(Mark 14:10-11)

Judas Iscariot was one of the twelve disciples hand-picked by Jesus to walk with him and assist in the ministry. But unlike the other disciples he was selected also for a separate purpose. And there are lessons we can learn from Judas that will help us today too.

Jesus said of Judas in John 6:70, "Did I not choose you, the Twelve? And yet one of you is a devil." Judas was going to betray Jesus even though he walked with him and was one of the chosen disciples to spread the word. But we also must understand that Judas was like a wolf in sheep's clothing. It was not apparent to the rest of the disciples that Judas had an evil heart. He was well hidden and disguised among the disciples and he did not stand out so that any of the rest could identify him as the betrayer.

When Jesus announced to them all that one of them would betray him, "...the disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he spoke." (John 13:23) They individually asked "Is it I" because they truly did not know who it could have been amongst them that was the likely candidate to do this dreadful thing.

This is how Satan works. He is the master of deceit and deception. He does work the "big evil" things as well, but his most insidious work is done in secret through lies, deception and half-truths. Paul wrote of the way the devil works among men in disguise and deception saying, "...such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness." (2 Corinthians 11:13-15)

Today we also will see the servants of the devil among us as Paul showed they were amongst the church in his day. Today the work of Satan through his people will continue to infiltrate the church so as to sway and deceive the people in the church to accept lies, believe falsehoods and to try and take them away from learning the truth. His mode of operation, like Judas, was deception, betrayal and deceit carried out in secret. Thus it is imperative that we gain a solid understanding in the word. We must learn the truth that will set you free. We must follow the sound words given by the Lord to his people and we must seek the truth and be guided by the Holy Spirit so we understand what the Lord is showing us.

As for these deceivers, they will become apparent. They are false teachers and wolves in sheep's clothing and they will be seen for what they are in due course. Jesus said, "You will know them by their fruits." (Matthew 17:15-20) And their fruits are their behaviours. For although they may look like sheep, they are wolves and a wolf will always act like a wolf. Wolves always seek to destroy and devour, but they are cunning hunters. These people are also cunning for they are well disguised, just as the devil disguises himself as an angel of light. But they will not remain hidden forever.

Thus we must watch and know that if a devil could infiltrate the twelve apostles selected by Jesus, a devil can also infiltrate the church today. Watch carefully so that you are not taken in by the smooth talking and cunning of such false teachers that only want to lead you away from the truth to serve them rather than the Lord.

Jesus Speaks of His Betrayal

(Mark 14:12-21)

In this section we see Jesus eating his final Passover with the disciples. The disciples ask where they should prepare the Passover for him and we see him operate the word of knowledge advising them where to go. He tells them they will find a man carrying a jar of water and to follow him and when he enters a house to tell the owner that is where they would eat the Passover. Furthermore he says that this house would have a large upstairs room furnished and made ready for them.

Clearly there is no way anyone could have known and described these things except by the hand and insight of the Holy Spirit. Jesus was given this foreknowledge and insight as to this matter as he did also on other occasions.

But then we see him announce at the table that one of those eating with him would betray him. I discussed this in part in my previous post and will emphasize again some of the key learnings from this sequence of events.

The disciples were quite sorrowful when they heard this and began to ask him, "Is it I?" Clearly none of them wanted to betray the Lord, except of course the betrayer, Judas Iscariot, and as such they were deeply troubled and concerned.

Now the important thing to see in this, which I mentioned last time, is that when Jesus said this, no one immediately turned and looked at Judas. No one had any idea who the betrayer would be which shows how effective Judas was at disguising his intentions. He did not stand out as the obvious choice for the betrayer but was well hidden.

Satan is just like that too. He is not like the typical depictions in the art and fancy of man as a red devil with horns and a pitchfork. Instead he is cunning, deceptive and well disguised. When Jesus talks about wolves in sheep's clothing this is what he is talking about. The emissaries of Satan are well camouflaged; they blend in with those around them, they do not stand out for that would work against their evil deeds.

Consider this. If an evil person comes to you ranting, raving and with threats of violence and ill will, you will be immediately on your guard. But if someone comes speaking words of honey, agreeable and smooth talking, they can slip right under your guard and wreak havoc.

The devil is such a being; cunning, smooth talking, deceitful and a teller of half-truths. But also in these things he is destructive and focussed on the destruction of those who seek the Lord. Consider how he deceived Eve in the Garden of Eden. Smooth talking and a teller of half-truths that deceived Eve into taking fruit from the one tree that she had been told not to touch. The devil used his deceitful ways to slip under Eve's guard and condemn all of mankind to death as a result.

This is the message we get from the betrayal of Jesus. It was one of those closest to him that would turn against him, and the rest did not see it coming for the betrayer was so well hidden. But Jesus knew who it was for it was revealed to him. Likewise we are to be on our guard. Like the wolves in sheep's clothing that will be known by their fruits, we must watch and listen to see what is coming from those around us.

The words of the wolf will soon show what is in their heart. For it is from the heart that the mouth speaks. The thoughts and intentions of all people are what come through in their speech and although they may try to hide it, and will hide it for a time, eventually they will be seen for what is in their heart.

But to know and see where they stand we must come to a knowledge of the truth and seek the Lord diligently. If we are to stand against the evil these men would do we need to know the truth. If we are to stand we need to set our feet solidly on the rock of Jesus Christ and go to him when we need insight. Then we will see the betrayers as Jesus saw through the disguise of Judas and knew the source of his betrayal.

Breaking Bread in Remembrance

(Mark 14:22-25)

As Jesus and the disciples took the Passover, Jesus blessed and broke bread giving some of it to each of them. He said, "Take; this is my body." (Verse 22) Then he took the cup and gave it to them to drink saying, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many." (Verse 24)

The breaking of bread, whether you call it that or the taking of communion, is one of the fundamental teachings in the New Covenant. In it we remember the sacrifice that the Lord Jesus made on our behalf. He died so that we could have life eternal and be saved from our sins. It is through the regular ceremony of breaking bread and taking the cup that we remember and we participate in these things.

The bread represents the body of Jesus that he gave up for us. This was the sacrifice and in it we see the similarity to the Passover feast. Jesus is the Lamb of God. As a lamb was slaughtered at the first Passover so that the first-born of the children of Israel would not die when the angel of death crossed Egypt, so too Jesus as the Lamb of God was sacrificed so that we would not die.

In Egypt the blood of the Lamb was painted onto the portals of doors and lintels of the houses so that the angel would pass over the houses of the Israelites. It was the blood of the lamb in Egypt that brought that covenant into effect, that is, the covenant with God so that the angel would not destroy the first born.

Likewise the blood of Jesus is the blood of the covenant that we now have with God so that we too can enter life. It is through the blood that Jesus shed that the covenant was brought into effect. Forgiveness and the release from sins can only be effected

through the shedding of blood. (Hebrews 9:22) Thus, under the law forgiveness was achieved only by the process of the blood sacrifices.

Why is this so? Man sins and the penalty for sin is death. Sin is the breaking of God's law. Sin came into the world through the breaking of the original law of God in the garden when Adam and Eve ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which they were forbidden to do. So also man dies today because of sin.

But the law is only binding on a man while he is alive, as Paul showed in Romans 7:1. Thus also, once a man dies he pays the penalty for sin in his death, for the wages of sin is death. (Romans 6:23) Thus once we die we have earned the wages that have accrued throughout our lives through sin and the debt is paid. But of course once a person has died it is too late for them to receive forgiveness and so a better way needed to be established.

God did this through Jesus Christ who has shed his blood on our behalf. Jesus did not sin but still paid the penalty of death and so became the perfect sacrifice for us. We can now take on the death of Jesus as if it were our own and enter into his death and thus pass through death and into life. This occurs through the process of water baptism where we are baptised into the death of Jesus and resurrected as new creations in Christ Jesus, set free from our past sin, and set free from law and as a result future sin too is overcome. We have the victory over sin through entering into the death of Jesus Christ.

And this is given to man freely as a gift from God. That is why the scripture mentioned above in Romans 6:23 continues on saying, "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

When we break bread or take communion we are remembering this sacrifice and showing that we are part of this new covenant in Christ Jesus. As the Israelites partook of the Passover feast to show they are part of Israel and remember the freedom from death they received in Egypt by the covenant of God, so too we remember the freedom from death that we have received through the death and sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ. May his name be praised and glorified forever for what he has done for us in obedience to the will of God the Father, and let us remember and give thanks always.

I Will Strike the Shepherd

(Mark 14:26-31)

Jesus was about to be arrested and taken to trial and he told the disciples that on that very night they would all fall away. This was to fulfil the words of the prophets that said, "I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered." (Verse 27)

The disciples quite horrified that Jesus would say such a thing and they vehemently denied that this would happen. Peter went so far as to say, “Even though they all fall away, I will not.” To this Jesus responded that before the dawn and the crowing of the cock, Peter would go so far as to deny the Lord three times. Peter was again vehement saying, “If I must die with you, I will not deny you.” (Verses 30-31)

Now Jesus knew better. He understood what these men would do, and although they did not know it at the time, it was necessary that they fall away and run away. Consider for a moment if they had stood their ground and then all been killed with the Lord. How would the gospel have been spread to the rest of the world? How would we have received the words of life today if the disciples had died on that night? No. Despite their protests to the contrary it was actually necessary that they run away so that the truth would be preserved and the message could be handed down.

This is not a foreign principle in the gospel either. The Lord does not expect us to stand and fight when we are in danger. It is acceptable to run when in peril. He instructed us as such saying, “When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next.” (Matthew 10:23) Despite the bravado and chest beating of the disciples, Jesus knew that when push came to shove they would run and save their own skins, and it was necessary they do so in order that they could later spread the gospel to the world.

As for Peter’s denial of Jesus, that too was understood by the Lord. In another version of this event he says, “Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail; and when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren.” (Luke 22:31-32)

Jesus knew that Peter would deny him despite Peter’s protestations that he would die with Jesus first. Did Jesus condemn Peter for his weakness? No, instead he said when you have turned again, that is, when he had repented, strengthen those around him. They would all be in shock and torment over the loss of the Lord and their Teacher. But the Lord was commissioning Peter saying that when he had overcome his grief and guilt, which the Lord was not going to hold against him, that he should work with the rest of the disciples to help them to move forward. They had a work to do and the Lord knew Peter had the strength to carry the rest through after he got himself sorted out.

There are times when we too, like Peter, can be faithless and may deny what we believe. Should we wallow in guilt and despair? No. Like Peter we too need to repent so that times of refreshing may come from the Lord. For the Lord has promised to be with us even when we make mistakes. We are shown this by Paul saying, “...if we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself.” (2 Timothy 2:13)

So let us put our trust and faith in the Lord. Let us hold onto our faith so that we can be strengthened in the Lord. And finally let us remember that when we fall, not to give up but to come back to him in repentance as Peter did so we can be strengthened and learn from our mistakes and move forward.

Let This Cup Pass

(Mark 14:32-42)

Jesus took the disciples, Peter, James and John with him into the gardens at Gethsemane to pray, knowing his betrayal was at hand. He was greatly distressed and deeply troubled, as he knew the suffering that he was to suffer on our behalf. And in this section we see how deeply that pain was affecting Jesus.

One of the scriptures in this section has been badly translated in almost every bible I have seen. It is verse 38 which reads, "...Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." You will note I have made the word "you" bold. The original Greek text does not have this word "you" in it, and when it is removed it changes the whole context of what is being said here.

Typically when people read and explain this section of scripture they believe that the Lord is upbraiding the disciples because they fell asleep. It is generally explained as being that the disciples spirits are willing, but their flesh is weak and thus instead of watching with Jesus they nod off. But is this what the section is really talking about? I believe it is something altogether different from this normal view.

Consider for a moment what is going on and what is about to happen. Jesus is praying to the Father asking if it is possible, the hour, that is his impending death, might pass from him. He says, "Abba, Father, all things are possible to thee; remove this cup from me; yet not what I will, but what thou wilt." (Verse 36) Jesus was about to suffer extreme humiliation, pain and great suffering and he is asking the Father if there is a way out.

So who is being tempted in this situation? The disciples? No. It is Jesus who was being tempted to escape the suffering that was to come. Were the disciples being tempted in any way? No, they were simply tired and unable to remain awake. Jesus knew that he had to go through this pain and suffering so that the New Covenant could be brought into effect and so that we could receive life. But he knew it would be painful and he was seeking whether there was any other way to do what had to be done.

Thus when he said, "...the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak," he was not talking about the disciples but his own spirit and flesh. In his spirit he was willing to go through what had to be done, but in his flesh he did not want to go through the suffering. It was Jesus speaking about himself when he was saying these things and he was looking for support from the disciples in his hour of need and trouble.

Three times he besought the Father over this, which shows how pained he must have been, but in the end the answer from the Father was "No." And even though he would have liked an alternative way to achieve this result, Jesus was obedient to the Father and went through the deadly process, which was to our advantage. At no time did he disobey but through his obedience he showed himself worthy of all praise as the Son of God.

Jesus was not worried about the disciples' spirit being willing but the flesh weak and failing; he was concerned that his own flesh would cause him to fail. He was concerned that the weakness in his own flesh would cause him to run and to disobey God the Father in the very hour for which he came. That is why he prayed the way he did and that is why he sought the support of the others.

And we learn from this too that sometimes when we ask God for things, the answer will be "No." Sometimes we will have to likewise go through difficulties and troubles for the purpose of strengthening us so we can learn to stand. But always let us remind ourselves of the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ and the wondrous gift that he gave us through his suffering. For it was through this one act of obedience to the Father that he assured we would have access to the Father and to life, if we believe in him and live according to the will of God.

Jesus Betrayed

(Mark 14:42-50)

Here we see the betrayal of Jesus take place. All that he said would happen came to pass. Judas came by night to this private garden with a contingent of soldiers and others to betray him into the hands of the chief priests for trial and his murder.

What is typical of the way this took place is the same as criminals and the evil have conducted their affairs throughout history. They came under false pretences, under cover of darkness, in hefty numbers and appearing to be something other than they actually are. Judas had given the soldiers a sign saying, "The one I shall kiss is the man; seize him and lead him away under guard." (Verse 44) In a false act of greeting he came to Jesus calling him "Master" and kissing him to betray him into the hands of evil men.

This is the nature of evil people. They will appear to be your friend, but their intention is deception for their own ends. Is it any wonder that Jesus did not trust himself to men (John 2:24-25). And they do their deeds under the cover of darkness and in secret places for they fear being exposed for the frauds and the evil that they are. Thus as Jesus did not trust himself to men, we need to beware of men as well for if they did it to him, they will do it to the followers of the Lord as well.

Now we see that one of those with Jesus struck back by drawing a sword and cutting off the ear of the slave of the high priest. In another version of this event we see that it was Peter who did this act. But there Jesus said for him to cease and he healed the ear of the man struck, for Jesus knew he was to go through this ordeal and death and he did not want the disciples to suffer as well. (John 18:9-11) This was to fulfil prophecy that he was not to lose any of those the Lord God had given to him.

At this point the disciples all forsook Jesus and fled, as Jesus had already told them they would. Despite their earlier bravado, when confronted by the angry mob they ran for safety, which was what the Lord told them they would do and what they needed to

do so that the gospel would be preached after Jesus' death. They would suffer grief over this, and Peter especially who would shortly deny even knowing Jesus, but when they came around and repented they would return to their faith and seek the Lord as they moved forward.

The lesson here for us is that when we too fall, we must pick ourselves up and return to the Lord as well. We must not allow our weaknesses and failings to prevent us from standing with the Lord. Even if we fall and fail over the same issue many, many times. When we come to our senses we need to turn to the Lord with a repentant heart and be prepared to move forward. In due course we will have the victory over the issue as he strengthens us when we look to him for the truth.

The Trial of Jesus

(Mark 14:51-65)

Of all of the recorded trials in history none could possibly compare to the trial of Jesus for a complete lack of evidence and a judgement that was made before the trial began. To call this a "kangaroo court" is to muddy the name of kangaroo courts. It was such a farce that even in pretence it was pointless. The chief priests wanted rid of the Jesus who was undermining their position and they were prepared to go to any ends to see him killed.

They conscripted base men to testify against him, and yet they could not even get their stories straight. They made up false evidence to accuse him with and it too failed for its falseness. They tried all manner of evil tricks and traps and yet they could find no fault in him. Even when they took him before Pontius Pilate as described in another version of these events, Pilate wanted to release Jesus for he found no fault in him.

But the chief priests would have their way regardless of truth. Indeed in this trial truth was the greatest casualty, which led to the ultimate death of Jesus. And Jesus remained silent throughout these proceedings for he knew what was coming and he knew that he must die for our sake. Without his death the New Covenant could not come into effect and we would still have to live in our sins. But through his death we who come to Christ and believe in the power of his death and resurrection have been freed from sin.

When asked by the chief priests if he was the Christ he replied, "I am; and you will see the Son of man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven." For this they accused him. For this statement they took the Lord of glory and nailed him to the stake. And yet he spoke the truth. His words bore witness and the deeds he performed all bore witness to the truth of who Jesus was, but the priests chose to ignore all of this evidence and had him killed.

They judged him without a cause and they condemned the Christ to death. Even though it was necessary on our account that this occurred, it is still the greatest

travesty and miscarriage of justice to ever have occurred. To that end then we must give thanks that the Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ was willing and obedient to the Father to do this for us. It is a humbling thing that he was prepared to die on our behalf who were undeserving of the great sacrifice he made. Let us always remember this sacrifice and give Jesus all the thanks he deserves for he has given us the chance of life in this one action.

Peter Denying Christ

(Mark 14:66-72)

After Jesus had been arrested and taken away, Peter followed at a distance, entered the courtyard and was warming himself at the fire. He was recognised by one of the maids of the high priest and subsequently by other bystanders as having been amongst the disciples of Jesus. Three times this happened and three times Peter denied it saying, "I do not know this man (Jesus) of whom you speak." (Verse 71)

Then the cock crowed and Peter recalled the words of Jesus. He left in utter despair and he wept bitterly when he realised what he had done. How would he have felt at that point in time? Surely it would have felt like the lowest point in his life.

Here is a man who had walked with and learned from the Lord for three years or so and when it came to the crunch he could not even admit to knowing the Lord. Is it any wonder that he went out and wept bitterly when the realisation of what he had done hit him.

Jesus was well aware that this would happen for he told Peter as much previously. He also comforted him previously saying to him that when he had turned and repented of this action, to strengthen the others. It was clear that Peter was a remarkable individual to be able to carry out this work in the face of his actions. But he knew that the Lord did not hold it against him. In essence the Lord said for him to "Get over it," and help the others who perhaps did not have Peter's strength.

There is a lesson in this for us too. We see here the failings of Peter, who was perhaps the greatest of the disciples. Peter was the one the Lord commissioned to feed and tend the flock after the Lord went. (John 21:15-19) It was Peter who was given the task of teaching, protecting and caring for the fledgling church. Surely Jesus would entrust such an important role to just anybody. Peter was the apostle to the Jews as Paul said in Galatians 2:7-9.

So if this great apostle and chosen instrument of the Lord could fail miserably and then get back on his feet to carry out his tasks for the Lord, then we can too. We need to understand too that when we fail and fall, we must not wallow in the depths of despair over our weaknesses, but instead we must rise, repent and return to the Lord as quickly as we can. More than that we must learn the lessons of our failures to try and not repeat those things that caused us to fall in the first place.

This is the challenge of Christianity and also the blessing. We are challenged as we walk to grow stronger and to become like Christ. But along the path we will fail occasionally and the challenge is not to fall headlong into condemnation.

The blessing is that we have a Saviour who has been through all of these things and understands our weaknesses. Jesus Christ is also compassionate and forgiving, knowing that the road we are walking can be tough sometimes. That is why God gave us his grace so that when we fall, our failures will be covered and we can rise and get back on the straight and narrow pathway to life.

Peter's denial of Christ was a tough thing for him to have to go through. But it also shows us that there is forgiveness in repentance and the opportunity to grow when we turn back to the Lord. A lesson we should always remember and take to heart.

Jesus Sent to Pilate

(Mark 15:1-15)

After Jesus was put on trial before the chief priests and elders, they held a meeting and decided to bind him and deliver him to Pilate. Pilate asked Jesus whether he was King of the Jews and Jesus responded, "You have said so." (Verse 2) Despite the many charges made by the chief priests and scribes, none of which they could prove. Jesus made no answer and so Pilate wondered.

Now the reason they brought Jesus before the governor may have been twofold. First, as governor they needed his consent to put Jesus to death. And second, by focussing on the fact that Jesus was King of the Jews they hoped Pilate would sentence him to death on the basis that he would be perceived as a threat to the rule of Rome over the land.

As the event continues we see that Pilate recognises that the priests had brought Jesus to him not for any crimes committed, but out of envy. (Verse 10) Pilate had a tradition that he would release one prisoner back to the Jews at the time of the feast each year. Knowing the envy of the priests he chose to offer Jesus or Barabbas, who was a rebel and a murderer accused in the insurrection. The comparison between these two should have led to the release of Jesus for Pilate deliberately offered a truly evil man that no person in their right mind would want back on the streets.

However he underestimated the power and the will of the priests. They stirred up the crowd to call for the release of Barabbas and to put Jesus to death. Pilate was completely perplexed over this matter for he said to the crowd when they sought Jesus' death, "Why, what evil has he done?" (Verse 13) In the end he gave over to the crowd and having scourged Jesus he delivered him to be nailed to the stake and released Barabbas. (Verse 15)

Here is a lesson for us today. There is a rule of the mob or the crowd. Riots and insurrection are caused by the rule of the mob. Crowds become charged with emotion

and take on a life of their own which cannot be reasoned with and cannot be easily controlled. Look at any television report where there is a mob out of control. Look at the eyes of the people in the crowd as they run to cause violence and destruction. They are not in control of themselves but are driven by adrenalin and emotion.

Emotion is the tool of the devil. By whipping people into a frenzy they lose their self-control and can be pushed to all kinds of evil as the devil leads them. Mob rule is satanic for it ignores what is good, right and true because mob rule is based upon emotion and not reason. This is exactly what happened before Pilate when Jesus was condemned. It takes only a few well-placed people with axes to grind to whip a crowd into a frenzy, which is how the chief priests whipped this crowd into murdering the Lord and Saviour of the world.

It is the same today. Occasionally you hear of riots that have been orchestrated by certain pressure groups. All they need is a crowd and a few people to drive the agenda through emotion and the process is set off and running like a runaway train. It is literally a train wreck waiting to happen.

Stay away from mobs. If there is a large gathering of people getting together to protest an issue, beware. It does not take much for it to turn to insurrection and violence as the mood of the crowd is pushed and pulled by those who want to stir up violence. I say it again; beware of mobs and crowds that can turn to violence. There is no good to be done in such a situation, and if you find yourself in such a place...flee!

Jesus Led Away to Death

(Mark 15:16-32)

Jesus had been tried, convicted and condemned in a kangaroo court. There was no justice and the greatest casualty of the process was the truth. He was taken off to his death on the basis of lies.

Adding insult to injury he was mocked and belittled by the soldiers who led him away. When they had finished their mockery, he was taken away to the place of his death carrying the beam to which he would be nailed. Clearly he was weakened from the trials and tribulations of the preceding days for the soldiers compelled a passer-by, Simon of Cyrene to carry the beam for Jesus.

Here is an interesting situation. Some churches talk of the "Stations of the Cross." I have seen different variations of this teaching with up to fifteen different "stations." However most of these so called stations are the invention of man and are not written in the bible. They indicate at least three times Jesus was supposed to have fallen. They speak of two instances where Mary, his mother, is supposed to come to him. They speak of one instance where someone wipes his face and another station where Jesus is supposed to whisper "Thank you" to Simon of Cyrene. None of these events are shown in the Bible and so they should not be relied upon as truth.

It is important to know the truth in ALL matters. Even simple things like this, which could be thought of as harmless actually are not. The two instances of Mary's presence are intended to heighten her role in this process as something greater than it was and to give her glory. In fact Mary was there during the process, but she looked on from afar. She did not come up to Jesus as he walked and she did not hold him in her arms when he was taken down after he had died. Do not be taken in by things that are simply not true. If you accept a part of a false teaching you might accept more.

The following parable Jesus gave talks expressly to this issue. "The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is sound, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is not sound, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!" (Matthew 6:22-23) We perceive much of the world through what we see and take in through our eyes. If you allow any "darkness" in then it can darken your understanding and prevent you finding the truth. Thus it is critical to learn the truth so your whole body will be full of light.

Back to the scripture. When Jesus was nailed up he continued to be derided by all those around him. Even the two criminals that were put to death with him mocked him and they deserved what they got. It was interesting that the charge Pilate had nailed above him saying, "The King of the Jews," was actually the truth. And in it the truth was testified, albeit unintentionally.

So we see here the final suffering of the Lord and in the next section we will look at the circumstances surrounding his death.

Death Of Jesus

(Mark 15:33-39)

The death of Jesus from a human perspective is one of the saddest and most unjust events of all time. He suffered and died the death of a criminal when in truth he had done no wrong.

However there is another aspect to the death of Jesus which for mankind is the greatest blessing of all time. In his death we have been given the chance and the opportunity to receive eternal life and to stand righteous before God.

The death of Jesus was also the momentous of all occasions to occur on the earth. Nothing in all of human history can compare to it. At the death of Jesus we see the end of one era and the beginning of the next.

Jesus said that "The law and the prophets were until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached." (Luke 16:16) In this statement Jesus draws a line in the sand. He said that the law and the prophets ended with John the Baptist, and after him came something new, the good news of the gospel of the kingdom of God which Jesus himself preached.

But there is also a transition period here too. In the period between the ministry of John and the death of Jesus, first John and then the Lord were preparing and preaching this new message. Then at the end of Jesus' ministry he is put to death and this single event is the beginning of the New Covenant age. The symbolism of the curtain of the temple being torn in two from top to bottom (Verse 38) indicates the close of the Old Covenant age and that after the death of Jesus the way has been opened for all of mankind to come and stand before God, not just the priests.

Under the Old Covenant, once the law and the commandments had been given, Moses took the blood of goats and bulls to establish the covenant. That is, through that initial sacrifice he brought the covenant into being. This is discussed in Hebrews 9:19-20 saying, "For when every commandment of the law had been declared by Moses to all the people, he took the blood of calves and goats, with water and scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people, saying, "This is the blood of the covenant which God commanded you."

Likewise when Jesus died and his blood was shed, he brought into existence the New Covenant, for he offered his own blood to the Father and thus the covenant began. Blood was the means by which covenants were established. In a similar way we see that it was a blood covenant that caused the angel of death to "pass over" the houses of the children of Israel when the first-born in Egypt were killed to convince Pharaoh to let the people go.

In the same way Jesus died at the Passover feast as the perfect "Lamb of God," and through his blood sacrifice God now passes over our sins so that we can stand before him righteous through Jesus Christ. The children of Israel took on the blood covenant of the lamb's sacrifice in Egypt by painting it over the frames and lintels of their doorways. Today we take on the blood covenant of Christ by being baptised into his death, which is our doorway to God through righteousness by faith. As the Egyptians did not receive release because they did not take on the blood covenant of the lamb, likewise today those who do not take on the blood covenant of Jesus Christ (the Lamb of God) through righteousness by faith and baptism into his death do not receive sanctification. It is through baptism into the death of Christ Jesus and accepting his death as ours through faith that we can receive righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ.

That is why the death of Jesus was such a significant event. That is why Jesus came in the first place; to preach the good news of the Kingdom of God and to become the perfect sacrifice for our sin so that we can be reconciled to God, not through anything we do, but through Jesus' act of obedience on our behalf.

Burial of Jesus

(Mark 15:40-47)

After Jesus had died we see there were some women looking on from afar. They included Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James, Joses and Salome, who was actually Jesus' mother.

When he had been taken down Joseph of Arimathea, who was a respected member of the council, took courage and went to Pilate to ask for the body of Jesus to be delivered into his hands. This Joseph although a member of the council was also seeking the kingdom of heaven and clearly recognised in Jesus that there was a teaching he needed to know more of.

Jesus body was given to Joseph and he had him wrapped in a shroud and placed in his own newly carved tomb in which no one had ever lain. The two Mary's watched and saw where he was laid, intending to return after the Sabbath to attend to the details of his burial as they still did not understand about the resurrection.

There is a key point as Christians we understand from this. The founder of our faith was Jesus Christ. But unlike every other faith or form of worship in the world today that was founded by somebody, there is no tomb that can be visited. Many people who are followers of other religions and their religious founders or leaders build shrines to these people who have died and are dead and buried. But as Christians we cannot do this for the simple reason that the founder of our faith...is alive!

In spite of the plotting and scheming of those who wanted Jesus dead, he could not be held by death and so his remains do not reside in some tomb. We can still communicate with him today and he communicates back to us also. He guards, guides and leads us so that we do not fall and as he said to the disciples all those years ago, "I am with you always, to the close of the age." (Matthew 28:20)

We can take comfort from this knowledge for we do not worship someone who is dead and gone, but we worship a living and active Saviour who is with us always.

Jesus Resurrection

(Mark 16:1-8)

This section of scripture contains the defining moment in Christianity. The one significant difference between Christianity and all other religions of the world lies in these few verses. The major difference between Christianity and all other religions is in the resurrection.

Only Christianity preaches and teaches the resurrection of the dead. It is the hope of all Christians that they will attain to the resurrection of the dead and come into new life with Christ. Death is the end point of all other religions, but as Christians we believe that the death of the body is not the final death of the soul or spirit of a man. Christians believe and expect that when the Lord returns, we too will be resurrected and live into eternity with him.

This is the hope of Christianity...life! Eternal life, as well as a better life here and now. We believe that we will be resurrected for Jesus was resurrected as sin could not hold him.

Death is the outcome of sin. The bible says “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 6:23) As men we earn death through sin, for death is the wages of sin, but in Christ our sins have been wiped away and we receive life as a free gift. Jesus could not be held by death for he never sinned and thus he did not “earn” the wages of sin even though he died. It was through his sacrifice though that he died for us so that we could take on his death as if it were our own and then not have to earn death too. This is the critical difference between Christians and other religions for we have a means of salvation from sin and death through Jesus Christ.

This is a very brief look at the ministry of the resurrection and what it means in Christianity, and I shall go into this in much greater detail in future posts.

Believe in the Lord

(Mark 16:9-14)

When the Lord arose on the first day of the week he appeared first to Mary Magdalene. Then he appeared to two others who were walking in the country. Each of these people then went to the apostles and others and told them they had seen Jesus.

And what was the reaction of the apostles? Were they overcome with joy? Were they ecstatic that what the Lord had earlier told them, that he would rise on the third day, had come to pass? Did any of these things happen?

No! They did not believe those who had seen the Lord and testified to his resurrection.

Now think about this for a minute. The Son of God had told the disciples earlier that he would arise, and yet they did not believe. Remember too that it was only three days since they had last seen him. How could they have got it so wrong? Did they think that the word of the Lord could not be trusted? Did they think those who had seen him were untrustworthy or were hallucinating? Or perhaps they did not want to get their hopes up too much in case they were dashed when he did not return. Whatever the reason we see that Jesus did rise as he said he would and he did appear to a number of them.

Now why did he not appear to those who were closest to him first? Why not go directly and stand amongst the apostles and speak first to Peter, James, John and the others? Well there is an interesting twist in this event that is often missed.

We see that the first person to see him was Mary Magdalene. Then there were two others who were not of the twelve. In the Luke version of this event (Luke 24:1-12)

we see that there were other woman also to see him appear at the tomb including his earthly mother Mary and Joanna. When these people testified to the apostles that Jesus had risen, they were playing a part that we today also play. They were testifying to the resurrection of the Lord. In fact what Jesus had done was to give the first testimony and ministry to preach the resurrection to people other than the disciples, and most of them were women.

In my post yesterday I stated that resurrection is the most important message in the Christian message and the one that sets it apart from all other forms of religion. And here we see that Jesus entrusted this commission to preach the resurrection first to the apostles to a group of women. If you consider some of the arguments that rage in the church today about women in ministry, and then look at the fact that the first people Jesus entrusted with this most important teaching were women, it rather makes a mockery of the arguments today. Jesus showed no partiality in who could preach the word and neither should we.

And the apostles did not believe those who had seen the risen Christ. Did Jesus say to them, “Oh well, I guess seeing is believing!” Absolutely not! He upbraided them for their unbelief and hardness of heart because they had not believed those first eyewitnesses to the resurrection.

The apostles should have trusted these women and the others. Today we initially believe because of the testimony from the Bible written by men who could be trusted. Jesus entrusted the preaching of the Gospel to these men who wrote the Bible we use today, and unlike their lack of belief when the Lord appeared, we must believe. This is the second lesson from this section of the scripture. Believe in the Lord and accept the word of his eyewitnesses for they can be trusted.

The Great Commission

(Mark 16:14-20)

In these final verses of the Gospel of Mark we see the Lord commission the disciples to go out and preach the gospel to the entire world. He adds some interesting details, information and conditions in this section that it is worth listening to.

The key to salvation mentioned in this section is faith. Jesus said, “He who believes and is baptised will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.” (Verse 16) You cannot be saved without faith. There is nothing a man can do to be saved other than to believe in God and the Lord Jesus Christ. You cannot work for salvation, you cannot buy it, and you cannot study to get great knowledge to get it. All you need to do is to believe for that is the basis and the key to salvation.

But he also added a condition, baptism. Why is baptism important enough that he would mention it as part of the great commission to the disciples? Baptism is one of the foundation teachings of the New Covenant as defined in Hebrews 6:1-2. It is through baptism that we take on the Lord’s death, for we are baptised into his death,

and by baptism our sins are taken away and we are released from the law of sin and death. Baptism is the mechanism by which we enter the kingdom of God for when we are baptised into the Lord Jesus Christ we “put on Christ.”

So if you are not baptised, how do you receive these promises and enter into the kingdom of God? If Jesus made this one of the pre-conditions for salvation, should we ignore his word and think it is OK not to be baptised? Absolutely not. Part of the process of salvation is to be obedient to the Lord and being baptised is just one small aspect of that obedience.

Jesus then goes on to show the signs that will accompany those who believe. He said, “And these signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up serpents, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover.” (Verses 17-18)

These signs certainly operated in the days of the disciples and they still operate today. There are plenty of instances of these things when you search and read the testimonies of Christians on the web and speak to believers that you may meet. I have seen and experienced some of these myself as I have testified to in the testimonies section on my web site.

He shows that there is protection, power and authority given to Christians in these signs. Speaking in tongues is given so that they can communicate with God and learn how to walk in the Spirit. Healing through the anointing of oil and laying on hands was given so that people did not have to suffer illnesses needlessly. And the drinking of deadly things or picking up snakes was provided as protection. I can testify that these things still exist and abound today and I have seen the power of these things in my own life.

There is a time coming when the Lord will send out the great invitation to all the people of the earth, just before the end and His return, and I believe we will see even more miraculous signs performed by those people he can trust to do his work. In the last verses of this section we see that the disciples went out and preached everywhere and Jesus confirmed the truth of the message by the signs that attended it. It will be the same today. Where the truth of the Lord is there will be confirmation of the message through the signs He gives to attest to the truth of the message.

This ends the Gospel of Mark.