PASTOR JOHN KLESS

A LIFETIME IN THE WORD

VOLUME 4 - SPECIAL OCCASIONS

Dedication:

To my wonderful wife: LuAnn

Without your commitment to share together in ministry with me these 47 years I could not have had a “lifetime in the Word”! Your countless hours of caring for me, our children, our home and the church body gave me the ability to pursue the deep study of God’s Word each week so this book is as much a product of your life as it is mine. I am thankful for you and I love you.

To our five wonderful children: Andrea, Benjamin, Amy, Jennifer and Dan

You have sat under my teaching and preaching literally your entire lives. The greatest fruit of my ministry has been to see each one of you grow up to be mature believers who deeply love Jesus, understand and value His Word and are committed to serving Him, even alongside me. I am blessed to be your father and I love you.

To my church: Glenside Bible Church

You have loved and cared for me as your pastor for 41 years. It has been my great honor and privilege to preach to you and instruct you in the Word of God. Almost all of the sermons in this book were carefully prepared for you and graciously received by you as truth from God. Thank you for being patient with me and giving me the opportunity to serve God among you in this way. I love you all.

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How To Use This Book

From June of 1974 at the age of 19 to the present at age 69 it has been my greatest privilege to preach and teach the Word of God nearly every Sunday. Originally, I made handwritten notes on paper, most of which have been lost, but around 1985 God blessed me with a personal computer (an Apple IIc with 128K of RAM and 5 ¼ floppies if you can imagine that!) and I began to type out messages and save them as digital files. Over the years I have preached hundreds of times and because they have been stored digitally, I now have the ability to edit and format them and share them with you. This book is my collected work from a life of ministry. It literally represents *A Lifetime In The Word*, a lifetime of studying the Word of God for hours each week, endeavoring to understand it as God intended and faithfully communicate it to the people of God.

So, this is obviously a book of sermons, not the kind of book that you sit down and read from beginning to end. It is more like a Bible commentary, a book in which you turn to the portion you wish to know more about at the moment. To keep its size reasonable, I have divided it into three separate volumes:

Volume 1 - Old Testament in which you'll find studies covering *most* of the books of the Old Testament.

Volume 2 - New Testament in which you'll find a study of *every* New Testament book.

Volume 3 - Thematic Studies in which you'll find studies on biographical, doctrinal, missiological and prophetic themes and more.

Volume 4 – Special Occasions in which you'll find studies for Christmas, Easter and more

1. Use it like a Bible commentary - If you are studying a particular passage of Scripture, find the message that covers that text and it will probably help you understand the meaning of the passage. The messages are based on a lot of thorough research including commentaries by many others, as well insights from the original language. It has always been my goal not to teach or say anything that wasn't true and accurate to the best of my knowledge, so you can benefit from the research I've put in by simply reading my explanation of the passage and its context.

2. Use it as an aid in teaching and preaching - These are expositional sermons which means that the points of the message are derived from the text as much as possible. The messages are in outline form rather than paragraph form so that the points of the outline are in **BOLD** type, followed by further explanation and devotional comments. Thus, here you have an outline for many of the books and chapters of the Bible and also for many of its important themes that you can use as they are or reword to suit yourself as you present them to others.

3. Use it for devotional purposes - Because the point of sermons is to motivate people rather than simply giving them information, there is much devotional material and there are many touching illustrations in this work. So, you can read through all or part of a message as part of your regular devotional life, perhaps as you read through the section of Scripture it points to.

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To the glory of God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ,

Rev. John M. Kless, Jr.

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CHRISTMAS

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A Birth Worth Waiting For
Isaac: A Divinely Orchestrated Birth

The Scripture contains many birth records, but on the whole not much space is given to them. And that's quite understandable because in most cases it is far more profitable for us to know about the lives of the great men and women of the Bible than it is to know the circumstances of their births. That's because their births were ordinary, normal events. However, there are several births in the Bible that were so important or occurred in such a wonderful way that God pulls back the curtain of obscurity on them and gives us a full record with all the details. If you compare these, their most common characteristic seems to be that each one was waited for and hoped for and turned out to be vitally important in God's plan for His people. In the end, each one proved to be a birth worth waiting for. Of course, the most obvious of these births is that of the Lord Jesus Himself, whose birth we celebrate at this season of the year. His was truly THE birth worth waiting for, but the beautiful thing is that each of the other long-awaited births in the Old Testament form a wonderful picture of what the birth of the Lord Jesus would be like when He came. And it all starts back in Genesis 21 with the birth of a boy named Isaac. Today we want to examine closely how:

I. Isaac's Birth Is A Beautiful Picture Of Jesus' Birth First, let's read:

1. the record of Isaac's birth - Gen. 21:1-7 Sarah's words can hardly express her joy at the miracle of what had happened in her life. Abraham was 100 years old and she was 90 when God chose to send little Isaac into their lives. She herself admits, *Who would have said it...* That is, "Who would believe it!!!" The chief characteristic in the whole story of Isaac's birth is that Sarah *bore Abraham a son in his old age*. It's like the Eagles coming back to win from being behind 49-0 near the end of the fourth quarter! It's like God coming through with a miracle at the 59th minute of the 11th hour before life ends. But what if He hadn't? We never think about it, but without Isaac, the whole story of our redemption ends. Without Isaac, God's word goes unfulfilled. Without Isaac there is no Jacob and no nation of Israel and without Israel, there is no Messiah, no Savior, no cross, no salvation for the world! But God did come through and because of that we are able to read:

2. the summary of Jesus' birth found in Gal. 4:4 Some 18 centuries later God sent Jesus into Mary's womb and through her into the world to redeem us from the curse of sin and death which lay upon us and to make us God's very children. Jesus' birth is, without question, the most important birth in all of history, because without this birth there is no redemption, without this birth there is no heaven for us, without this birth there is no salvation. Both of these births are vitally important in the plan of God and we're going to take the time to compare them. First of all:

II. Both Births Had Been Promised Long Beforehand By God and in both cases:

1. God made His promise repeatedly You'll notice in **Gen. 21:1** it says:

a. concerning Isaac that, *the LORD did to Sarah as He had promised.* When? Let's trace the history of that promise a bit, if you'll permit me. It actually began back in **12:2** where God had commanded Abraham in his youth when he lived in the city of Ur of the Chaldeans to leave it and promised, *...I will make of you a great nation*... Of necessity that begins with the birth of a child; no child, no nation! But along the way, Abraham begins to doubt God, complaining that a servant will be his heir, and God reassures him in **15:4**, *"This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir."* Again afterwhile, Abraham tries to do it his own way and has a son by Sarah's servant Hagar, but God pulls him up short in **17:15-16, 19**, saying, *"As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her. ...Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac*. But still the years drag on and now Abraham is 99 and one day the LORD comes to him in actual human form and says in **18:10**, *"I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife shall have a son."* Time after time, over and again, God repeated and reiterated His promise, each time making it more specific until at last Isaac was born exactly ...*at the time of which God had spoken to Him (21:2)*. Well, is that not the same thing God did:

b. concerning Jesus? Way back in the garden He promised that He would send Adam and Eve an offspring who would bruise the devil's head. He repeatedly promised Abraham, Isaac and Jacob that through their offspring (singular, meaning a son) all the familes on earth would be blessed. In **Gen. 49:10** He promised Judah that from him would come a Ruler to whom would be the obedience of all the peoples. Moses prophesied in **Deut. 18:15**, *"The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen*. **Isaiah** said, that God would cause a virgin to bear a son who would be Immanuel, God with us, in **7:14** and went on to say, *For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore...* in **9:6-7**. Through **Micah** God

promised that out of little Bethlehem, this great Ruler of Israel would come in **5:2**. Time after time, over and again, God repeated and reiterated His promise to send His Son, making it more and more specific until at last Jesus was born! What's:

2. the point: God always keeps His promises! Hallelujah! *God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?* **- Num. 23:19**. No, God will ALWAYS do what He says He will do; He always keeps His promises to us! However, the flip side of that is that you will notice that:

III. Both Births Came After A Long Time Of Waiting

1. God waited many years to send Isaac According to **21:5** Abraham was 100 years old when he was born at last. But let's back up. **12:4** says Abraham was 75 years old when he left Haran to go to the land of Canaan. But the waiting did not start then. If you look back in chapter 11 at the genealogy, you'll see that Abraham's immediate ancestors all seemed to have their first child around age 30. 11:28-29 tell us that Abram married back home in Ur and, if he married before 30 as must have been the norm, and if he was 75 when he finally got to Canaan, he and Sarah had already been waiting for a child for 45 years. 11:30 tells us that *Sarah was barren; she had no child* and it reminds us of the pain it must have been for them, the longing that must have been in their hearts in a day when having a child was everything in life! But then after they came into the land of Canaan and the promise was repeated, 25 more years went by until finally at the age of 100 the long wait, which was by that time perhaps 70 years in all, was rewarded in the birth of Isaac! 70 years is a long time to wait for anything! You can understand why it was a struggle for them to believe God's promise of a child. But:

2. God waited many <u>centuries</u> to send Jesus The wait here was not just of an individual set of parents, but of the whole race. From the time of that first promise way back at creation, the world has been waiting. Then several thousand years later, God began to make to Abraham and His descendants, the nation of Israel, a specific promise of a Messiah, a Redeemer who would come. Time after time the promise was repeated; century after century after century they waited, until at long last, *God sent forth His Son* and the Savior was born!

3. the point: we must wait patiently for the Lord's promises The Lord told the prophet Habakkuk to write down the vision that He had given him, the words He had told him, and then He said, *For still the vision awaits its appointed time; it hastens to the end—it will not lie. If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay.* - **Hab. 2:3**. What God promises He will always do, but we must wait for it, even wait and wait and wait if He tarries, holding patiently on to the certainty that it will happen because God said so. Two thousand years have gone by since Jesus said, *I will come again!* And we've been waiting and waiting for generations, but regardless, He WILL come again in the fullness of time! Peter said, *The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance*. *- 2 Pet. 3:9.* God is not slow! *The 19th century New England preacher Phillips Brooks, the man who wrote the words to "O Little Town of Bethlehem", was always noted for his poise and his quiet manner. Yet at times, even he suffered moments of frustration and irritability. One day a friend walked in and found him feverishly pacing the floor like a caged lion. "What's the trouble, Mr. Brooks?" he asked, and Brooks replied, "The trouble is that I'm in a hurry, but God isn't!"* God is always exactly on time, never in a hurry, never a minute late; it is we who must learn to wait with hope, never giving up our confidence, trusting that God will do exactly what He said at the moment He has decided!

Now let's move on to consider a different aspect of these two births:

IV. Both Births Were Physiologically Impossible

1. Abraham and Sarah couldn't conceive a child - Gen. 21:2 says *Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age.* They were 99 and 90 when that conception occurred. The point of that statement is that both Abraham and Sarah were physically incapable of producing a child at their age. 18:11 says, ...*The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah.* **Rom. 4:19** confirms it, *[Abraham] did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb*. Neither were capable of having a child at their age, so the birth of Isaac was a miracle birth, an intervention of God in the natural realm, a rejuvenation of dead bodies so that a child might be born. What a foreshadowing of the even greater miracle that occurred in the birth of Jesus because:

2. Mary was a virgin Galatians says, *God sent forth His Son, born of a woman...* There was no man involved at all! When the angel announced it to her, *Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" And the angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy— the Son of God. - Lk. 1:34-35*. What an impossible thing, that the very Son of God should be born of a human being in the first place, but then that conception would occur within her in complete holy virginity, without any natural process! Not many believe that story today, but it does not matter. Isaac's birth is just one more reminder to us of:

3. the point: we must trust God though it seems impossible As Gabriel went on to tell Mary, *nothing will be impossible with God!* And a few verses later, the Scripture tells us she believed what the Lord had spoken to her! So must we. We must trust that God will do what He says even though to our eyes it appears utterly impossible, even as Abraham did. Look with me at **Rom. 4:17-20**. There it is; we must be fully convinced that God is able to do what He promised, that He can literally give life to the dead or call into existence things that don't exist. Jesus Himself is our living proof of it! The problem lies not with His power, but with our faith. Both of these births are a powerful lesson to us that, like Abraham and like Mary, we must learn to trust Him no matter how impossible His words may seem! Of course, when they did happen:

V. Both Births Occurred Precisely As God Said

1. Isaac was born in the exact manner and time God specified Look once more at **Gen. 21:1-2**. God acted *as He had said*; He did *as He had promised*, *at the time of which He had spoken* exactly one year earlier in 18:10. It was all orchestrated by the Divine Choreographer. There was an exact plan, even though it was unknown to Abraham and Sarah all along. But looking back, we can see that God had this birth precisely planned out and with it the precise time for the beginning of the building of His nation Israel so that they would arrive in Egypt precisely on cue and therefore come out in the Exodus exactly at the time He had predicted and then enter the land of Canaan on cue when the iniquity of the Amorites was full and so on and on, that ultimately Christ might come into the world on cue. Abraham's long wait was actually a carefully structured part of God's plan for the world. And it's obvious that:

2. Jesus was born in the exact manner and time God specified He was born of a virgin as Isaiah had said. He was born in Bethlehem as Micah had said, not in Nazareth where Joseph and Mary lived, and all because of a decree made by a godless Roman Emperor at an exact time that caused the words of God through His prophet to be fulfilled! One source on the internet lists 356 individual prophecies or allusions in the Old Testament that were fulfilled in the birth, ministry, death and resurrection of Christ! www.accordingtothescriptures.org/prophecy/353prophecies.html That phrase, *when the fullness of the time had come*, is so pregnant with meaning. And two verses earlier, Gal. 4:2 specifically implies that there was actually a date set by the Father in His infinite wisdom and plan and when, and only when, everything God needed to do had been completely accomplished beforehand and that perfect time had come, did He send forth His Son! That long wait of centuries and millennia was all in the perfectly orchestrated plan! Here's:

3. the point: God watches over His Word to perform it God showed Jeremiah a vision of an almond branch, in Hebrew, "a watcher" and then told him *...You have seen well, for I am watching over my word to perform it.* - **Jer. 1:11-12**. Not the smallest letter nor the least stroke of a pen of all that God has written will go unfulfilled, Jesus said. All will be brought to pass in the precise manner and exact time that God has planned without fail because He is watching over His Word to perform it, to do what He said He would do! Christ's birth is one of the greatest evidences of that to us.

Then finally, I want you to notice that:

VI. Both Births Brought Great Joy To The World Isaac's very name means *laughter* and in Gen. 21:6 Sarah said, *God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh over me*. Imagine the joy in Abraham's camp; he actually had several hundred people who were part of his nomadic entourage. What a party they must have had when Isaac was born! But Sarah saw beyond that; she knew everyone who heard the story of her miracle would laugh with joy too and even today, nearly 4,000 years later:

1. Isaac's birth brings great joy to everyone who hears of it We still read the story and rejoice at the power of God displayed in Isaac's miraculous birth. God preserved it and all its lessons in multiple places in the Scripture so that every generation would revel in joy with Sarah, rejoicing at what God had done for her! Well, it is even more true that:

2. Jesus' birth brings great joy to everyone who hears of it That very night an angel appeared in the sky to the shepherds near Bethlehem and said, *Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.* **- Lk. 2:10-11**. And then suddenly the sky was filled with about a million of God's heavenly angelic army all shouting for joy, *Glory to God in the highest!* The news of Christ's birth, and especially of His life, death and resurrection is called THE Gospel, THE GOOD NEWS; it is not just for Mary and Joseph or just for the shepherds or the angels or the wise men who *rejoiced with exceeding great joy*, or for the Jewish people. It is for ALL the people, all the people of the human race! And everywhere the story of God sending forth His Son to redeem us is told, it brings great joy! *A Jesus Film team recently was in a small African village in the country of Togo. In that village there was a 68 year old man who had seen the film and responded to the news and this is what he later testified: "I was a follower of voodoo for over 50 years. A friend of mine invited me to see the "Jesus Film". The life of Jesus was so new to me because I knew nothing about Him. Now JOY compels me to give my life to God. Faith through prayer has raised the darkness from my life. The endless love of the Lord dwells in me! God worked a miracle in my life and I, along with my family, have left everything to follow Him. How great is the love of Christ!* Everyone, everywhere, who hears this Good News of God sending forth His son, born of a woman, to redeem us from the curse of sin and make us His children and believes it, ends up being *...filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy* as Peter said *(1 Pet. 1:8)*. So:

3. the point of all we have said ends up being this**: we should tell the news** of what God has done **and spread the joy!**

There are literally 3 billion people around the globe that are like our friend in Togo was, STILL waiting to hear the story of Jesus and what He did for us! Where they live there is no one to tell them, no believing neighbor living nearby from their own culture to tell them in their own language that when the fullness of time was come God sent forth His Son. They are people living and walking in darkness who have yet to see the Great Light! We want ALL the people on earth to hear the news and experience that great joy! But don't forget that includes the people who live and work all around and with you right here. They probably celebrate the holiday and they have almost certainly heard the story, but so many of them have not truly understood what it means and believed it and experienced the joy of it for themselves. Don't forget to pray for them in this season and ask God for Divine opportunities to share with them the joy that you have.

A Birth Worth Waiting For
Samuel: A Joyously Celebrated Birth

Over this Christmas season we are looking at three very special birth records in the Old Testament, each one of which reminds us of the birth of Jesus in its own special way. Today we skip ahead from the birth of Isaac more than three centuries to the birth of another boy by the name of Samuel, whose story is told in detail in 1 Samuel 1-2, and look at how Samuel's birth pictures for us another aspect of the birth of Christ. But before we spell that out, let's look at some of:

I. The Similarities Between Samuel's Birth And Jesus' Birth The first thing to notice is that:

1. both were born during spiritually dark times in Israel

a. at Samuel's birth, Israel was lawless He was born at the end of the 300 year era of the Judges. Look at God's summary and epitaph on those 3 centuries in that familiar verse, *In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.* - **Judges 21:25**. By the end of that period, there was no law, no moral order. Everybody did whatever they wanted without regard for God and had no one to stop them. Immorality and idolatry were common in the land. But even worse than that was the fact that the worship of the Lord had been corrupted. Eli, the chief priest who served in the Tabernacle at Shiloh in those days had grown very old and his sons who were to take his place were wicked. **1 Sam. 2:12-17** tells us they were worthless men who did not know the Lord. They used the priest's office to get gain for themselves, demanding worshippers give to them the best parts of their sacrifices and even taking them by force if they refused. Verse **22** tells us they were sleeping with women who helped with the work at the Tabernacle. Surely those who truly were godly and loved the Lord in Israel were saddened by the dark state of things and hungered for a real word from the Lord. It was very much like the time into which Jesus was born. Matthew tells us that:

b. at Jesus' birth, Israel was "walking in darkness" as Isaiah had described it, *...In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone.* **- Is. 9:1-2**. In Jesus' day, many of the priests had become Sadducees who denied the important truths of God's word, like life after death and the resurrection of the body and the existence of angels. They were more interested in political survival of the nation than in being spiritual leaders. The rest of Israel's leadership had become Pharisees and were involved in a legalistic, shallow, "I'm better than you" kind of religion that looked down on the common people. Israel was oppressed by the power of Rome which taxed them heavily and treated them brutally, especially during the reign of murder and intrigue of the mad governor who wore the title of King, Herod the Great. Truly it was a dark time into which God's Son was born. Second, notice that:

2. both boys were conceived through a miracle of God Let's read **1 Sam. 1:1-5**. Verse 5 makes it clear that:

a. Hannah was unable to conceive a child It is not only that she had no children, but she could not have any and it was the Lord's doing. He had closed her womb. We don't know how many years of waiting she endured, but the text mentions *all* of Penninah's *sons and daughters*, who I'm sure were born while Hannah was still waiting. The birth of Samuel was an absolute miracle of God, a direct working of His ha,nd to open her womb and bring about conception, which was previously impossible. And He really did heal her because after Samuel she had 5 more children according to 2:21! But this story raises the question of polygamy in the Old Testament, which God did tolerate, even though it was never what He intended and it never worked out well. Yet here's my guess as to why a godly man like Elkanah would take two wives. Hannah was probably his first wife, the wife of his youth, the one he really loved. But in that culture, as in so many of the Muslim and other cultures in the Middle East and Asia today, it was of primary importance to have a son, and preferably several of them. Sons were how the work got done and the family was supported; sons were the guarantee of someone to care for you and your wife in old age. So when Hannah had no children for many years, even as many do still today, Elkanah likely took a second, younger wife in order to have children. Which she did, but of course, the second wife knew why he married her and felt the favored position of the first wife, so she became perpetually jealous. That's why:

- Hannah was maligned for NOT conceiving a child (6-7) The new wife, Penninah, became her rival and rubbed her childlessness in her face continually because she felt less loved. What torture Hannah's heart must have endured for so many years; no wonder she cried bitterly when she came near to God's presence each year. But it also explains the great joy that literally burst out of her when Samuel was finally born!

Of course, Jesus was also conceived by a miracle of God because:

b. Mary was a chaste virgin - Lk. 1:26-27, 34 The text is very clear. Not only was Mary NOT yet married (though she was betrothed or engaged), the Greek literally says she had never had sexual relations with a man. The Holy Spirit did a powerful miracle in her womb and created a tiny embryonic body for Jesus. It was one of the most tremendous miracles that God has ever done. Mary was as pure and innocent as the driven snow and yet, contrary to Hannah:

- Mary was maligned FOR conceiving a child We read in **Mt. 1:18-19** that when she was found to be with child, Joseph, her fiancé did not believe her story - who would? He was ready to divorce her, to break the betrothal quietly and give her up. Then when the angel finally appeared to Joseph in a dream and straightened him out so that he took Mary to his home as his wife, you can be certain what the people in the small village of Nazareth thought, where everybody knew everybody else's business. You can almost hear the comments and the talking behind her back and the judgmental looks she received all those months until they left for Bethlehem. Both Hannah and Mary endured a great deal of emotional pain before their time of waiting ended, yet we should notice that:

3. both mothers had attitudes of sacrificial self-surrender to God On this trip to the tabernacle at Shiloh, Hannah made a promise to God **- 1 Sam. 1:10-11**:

a. Hannah vowed she would give her son to God If he would give her a child, she would yield that child fully to God to be His lifelong servant. She would be simply God's instrument to bring him into the world, but she would not cling selfishly to him for her own joy and security. She would let him go, release him, literally give him up. So:

- her release led to separation - 1 Sam. 1:24-28 She didn't take him back home with her, but left him there at the age of 4 or 5 for Eli to raise, serving the Lord at His tabernacle. Can you imagine? What a sacrifice that must have been for her! Yet it was one she made willingly in her own mind, even as she made her vow. And based on what she has to say in chapter 2, I think her desire for a child went way beyond personal vindication before Penninah; I think she knew what a dark time it was in Israel and her true desire was to have a son who could change it, who would be raised in God's service, restore integrity to the priesthood and bring all of Israel back to God! God actually did all of that through Samuel, but for that purpose, Hannah was willing to sacrifice the joy of having him with her. She seems to be the very picture of Mary:

b. Mary was willing to be used by God to bear His Son Gabriel had told Mary what God wanted to do, how He planned to use her as the vehicle to bring His Son into the world! And look at her response in **Luke 1:38**. See how she surrendered herself to the Lord; she knew this would not be her child to do with as she pleased, but His to carry out His purpose. He would be the promised Messiah, the Ruler of Israel, who would eventually take the throne of David. Oh, that all mothers and fathers would have that kind of surrender, that we would realize that our children are not ours, that we are simply instruments in God's plan in bringing a precious life into the world to release for Him to use! But we know that:

- her release would lead to the cross Mary and Joseph also took Jesus up to the Temple to dedicate Him to the Lord - **Lk. 2:22**. And while they were there, an old man, Simeon, took the child and praised God that the Christ had finally come. Then look at **33-35**. With her surrender would come the sword, the sword of the grief and pain of watching her Son die a horrible death on a cross. Mary may have gotten to raise her child, but her letting go was no less final and complete than Hannah's. It was a tremendous sacrifice. Friends, our children belong to God and we have to learn to let them go, to let Him have His way with them fully in their lives and to bear whatever sacrifice that involves on our part!

So you see how similar the circumstances of the two births are, but now let's look at the most striking thing:

II. The Joyous Celebration Caused By Both Births When Hannah brought Samuel to Eli, she prayed a Psalm to the Lord in **1 Sam. 2:1-10**. Her heart was filled with joy and it sprang forth in poetic and prophetic praise. Interestingly, when Mary visited her cousin Elizabeth, before she could even tell she was pregnant, and was reassured of the truth of Gabriel's words by Elizabeth, the very same thing happened to her. She too burst out in praise and sang a psalm to the Lord in **Luke 1:46-55**. We call her song "The Magnificat" and if you compare the two, it is that evident that Mary's song of joy is clearly modeled after Hannah's; Hannah's very words have been on her own mind. Coincidentally, each song is 10 verses long, but both are singing for joy concerning the birth of their child, but for reasons that are much deeper than we usually realize. First:

1. both of these births displayed the depth of God's concern for people Read Hannah's words in **1 Sam. 2:1-3**. The song says:

a. God had *heard* Hannah's prayer and saved her, that is, she felt God had listened her prayer and delivered her from the taunts of her enemy. That's why she named her boy Samuel, which means *God hears*. Look at **1:20**. She

asked God for him and Samuel himself is the answer that says, *God heard*. She is full of joy because she now knows that God hears the cry of her heart and is concerned for her plight. That sounds like the words we read in Mary's song in **Lk. 1:46-50**:

b. God had *seen* Mary's humble position and exalted her She's singing that God has done great things for her. For who? For a nobody, a humble teenage girl, a village peasant, an unimportant piece of the human race to everybody but God. Don't forget the angel's words in verse **30**. Insignificant though she was, she had found favor with God! God cared enough to notice her and to choose her to a position of great blessing and honor, to bear His Only Son. Yes, God is concerned for YOU! The birth of Jesus shows us that God is concerned for us individually, no matter who we are or what our problems. No matter how little or unimportant or insignificant you may feel, He *hears* you when you pray and He *sees* the suffering you endure in your situation. He cares for each one of us as individual people! But on a larger scale:

c. in the birth of Christ we see God's great concern for the whole world The words of the Prophet Isaiah ring true, ...*justice is driven back, and righteousness stands at a distance; truth has stumbled in the streets, honesty cannot enter. Truth is nowhere to be found, and whoever shuns evil becomes a prey. The LORD looked and was displeased that there was no justice. He saw that there was no one, he was appalled that there was no one to intervene; so his own arm achieved salvation for him, and his own righteousness sustained him*. **- Is. 59:14-16**. God saw the great darkness the world was in; He heard the misery of the human race and He cared that there was no one to save them, no one to redeem them. He loved the whole world full of people so much that He Himself did something; He gave His only Son, first to be born, and then to die! The birth of Christ shouts joyously to us, "God cares about us!" Now secondly, notice that:

2. both of these births demonstrated God's control Continue reading Hannah's words in **1 Sam. 2:4-8**:

a. Hannah realized God can change personal circumstances If you are barren, He can make you bear. Or He can take away the children you have. If you're poor, He can enrich you; if you're rich He can impoverish you. Nothing is too hard for God; He set the world on its foundations, so He can change anything about your circumstances. He is in absolute control; Samuel's birth proved that to her! But Mary's vision goes further:

b. Mary realized God can change national circumstances - Lk. 1:51-53 Mary sings, not just about the poor and the rich, but about God being able to topple rulers from their thrones and the proud being scattered. She knew this Son of hers was God's Messiah, the Anointed One, the one who would sit on the throne of David and reign forever. He would save Israel! The supernatural birth of Jesus proved to her that God could change the kingdoms of the world and He can. In fact:

c. in the birth of Christ, God changed the whole world's circumstances The darkness Isaiah spoke of covered more than just Galilee, it covered more than just Israel; it covered the entire world! The whole world was dead in trespasses and sins, lost and without hope. Yet God was not only concerned about the state of the world; He changed it! He sent a Light into the darkness in the person of His Son. Look with me at **John 1:4-5, 9-12**. Into the darkness of our fallen world, God sent His Son in order that we might receive Him and become His very own children! *In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them...* - **2 Cor. 5:19** Hallelujah! The birth of Christ shouts joyously to us, "God can change it!" No matter how dark our state or condition, He can change it! Now finally I'd like you to notice that:

3. both of these births point ultimately to God's kingdom Read the last of Hannah's song in **1 Sam. 2:9-10**. In that last phrase:

a. Hannah said God would strengthen His Anointed King That's interesting because at that time Israel had no king! She had never had a king and never would, as far as Hannah knew, in earthly terms. Of course, I'm giving Hannah credit for more than she knew, but in her last line, the Spirit of God says through her, *He will exalt the power of "His anointed"*. *His Anointed* in Hebrew is *His Messiah*; in Greek it is *His Christ*. She's saying "If God can do this, if He can give me who was barren and childless a son, then God will send His King, the Promised One, the Messiah, the One we've been waiting for for centuries!" Likewise, in her last words:

b. Mary said God would remember His Covenant - Lk. 1:54-55 Mary sang of that same Promise from the other side, saying it is done! God HAS remembered His covenant and HAS kept His promises. He HAS sent Israel Her Messiah and therefore, He will now keep the rest of His promises! This Messiah will do the rest of what is prophesied about Him; Israel's help is on the way! So ultimately through Christ's birth:

c. God assured us that one day He will set up His Kingdom The two are connected. *For to us a child is born, to us a son is given*... That's the part we celebrate now, but the promise goes on to say, *and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his*

kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this. **- Is. 9:6-7**. Hallelujah! The Child who was born that day will one day rule the world on David's Throne when He comes to set up God's Kingdom on this earth. IT WILL BE! If God kept His promise the first time and sent His Son into the world, He will do it again! He will send Him back to rule as He promised! Christmas shouts joyously to us, "God has a glorious future ahead for those who believe!"

And still the world seems so dark when you watch the news. Six people murdered this week by a deranged ex-husband here in our county. Another wholesale massacre of 145 school children by evil men in Pakistan. ISIS marches seemingly unstoppably through Syria and Iraq slaughtering at will, creating thousands of fleeing refugees. Yet listen to this. Christian Aid Mission says that, ...*In war-torn areas of Syria and Iraq where ISIS is fighting to establish a caliphate, Muslim refugees to neighboring countries, internally displaced people and people remaining at home are learning about Christ from native aid workers, podcasts and broadcasts. Tent churches among refugees are sprouting like mushrooms. For people who have suffered such deep loss, seeing that they can pray to a personal God whom they can call Father has been the critical factor. "You can see the tears in their eyes when we pray – that God would care," said the director of one ministry working in the region. "It's the connection that makes a huge difference. Muslims who were previously taught to pray by rote to Allah... can feel the difference of having a relationship with God through Christ. They see that God can give you strength, can heal you. They say that things have changed, that they have a peaceful attitude towards those 'who have done this to my kids, wife, or husband - I can pray about it and give it to God.'" [Christian Aid Mission http://www.christianaid.org/News/2014/mir20141204.aspx?SC=MIR]* God's Kingdom has come to their lives, that's what changed! Even today in earth's darkness, the light is shining more and more brightly. His Kingdom is growing faster today than in all of history; all over the earth we see evidence of it as millions come to faith in Jesus in unprecedented numbers, roughly 100,000 every single day! If Hannah celebrated and Mary celebrated so joyously, how much more joyously should we who are this much closer to our Savior's return joyously celebrate His birth! But don't miss its message: God cares about YOU! God can change YOUR circumstances and even make you His child if you're not already, and God has a wonderful future in store for YOU! Shouldn't we do what Mary did, lay ourselves at His feet, saying "Lord, I am your servant, use me according to Your will!"

A Birth Worth Waiting For
Moses: A Greatly Endangered Birth

We have one last special birth to examine in the Old Testament. In the birth of Isaac, we saw how clearly God orchestrated all the details of his birth at exactly the right time, even though the wait was extremely long. And of course, we saw that same thing even more clearly in the birth of Jesus. In the birth of Samuel, we saw how his birth was so joyously celebrated by Hannah that she burst out into a tremendously meaningful song, and likewise how Jesus' birth was exuberantly celebrated by Mary as she burst out in her song, the Magnificat, and all that the birth of a Savior means for the world and our future. Today we'll examine the birth of Moses. Like all of the others, it was a birth that was long-awaited, not so much by his parents, but really by the whole nation of Israel. And when it finally happened, his birth forms another wonderful picture of the birth of our Savior. First of all, let me point out that:

I. Both Moses And Jesus Were Born At A Crucial Time in that:

1. both were times of bondage for the people of Israel Of course you know that:

a. in Moses' time Israel was in deep bondage to Egypt Stephen's speech before the Sanhedrin in the book of Acts records the story of Moses' birth for us in summarized form and provides several very significant insights that we would not realize from the Old Testament record alone. Look with me at **Acts 7:18-19**. It was a time of terrible bondage for the people of Israel. Jacob's family had gone down into Egypt in a good time, but the times had changed. Their refuge from the famine of Canaan had become a prison-house for them and their status as honored guests had been reduced to that of slaves under a new Pharaoh. The people were put into forced labor for the king of Egypt and became slave labor to build store cities in the land. They were forced to work unceasingly at making bricks and building, but still they multiplied greatly in their bondage. Yet what's worse, their real bondage was spiritual. Over the centuries in Egypt, the people of Israel had forgotten their God. Listen to **Ez. 20:6-8**. In their bondage, instead of remaining true to Jehovah their God, they had learned to worship the myriad idols of Egypt and that was one of the reasons God allowed their suffering to become so intense. In fact, God was so unknown to Moses that later on at the burning bush he actually had to ask God for His Name in order to identify Him to the Israelites! His very Name had been forgotten! You can tell how entrenched in idolatry they had become because the first thing they wanted to do when Moses wasn't around for 40 days at Mt. Sinai was to crystalize Jehovah into the visible form of a calf idol that they could see and act the way they did in idol worship in Egypt! Now, the era into which Jesus was born was in reality not much different:

b. in Jesus' time Israel was in deep bondage to Rome as I've told you before. They were a conquered people. The Romans taxed them and treated them with great cruelty; they ruled every aspect of their lives at will. **Mt. 2:1** says, ...*Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king*. Like the Pharaoh of Moses' day, their governor, Herod, who was given the title of "king", was particularly cruel. Wikipedia says, *He has been described as*

"a madman who murdered his own family and a great many rabbis", "the evil genius of the Judean nation", "prepared to commit any crime in order to gratify his unbounded ambition". The saying was that *It is better to be Herod's sow than his son.* That's the man under whom Israel was living when Jesus was born. However, instead of the blatant idol worship of Egypt, in this era Israel had fallen into a new type of idolatry, the legalism of the scribes and Pharisees. The nation was caught up in a bondage of outward compliance to the letter of the law and the keeping of myriads of religious rules, but had precious little knowledge of the person or the heart of God! However:

2. in both cases the time had come for the fulfillment of God's promise Go back with me to **Acts 7** and notice the key phrase in verse **20**, *at that time Moses was born*... What time is that? Look back to verse **17**. You see:

a. God had promised Abraham centuries before that his offspring would be delivered from bondage Look at that promise in **Gen. 15:13-14**. God actually set a time frame for the length of Israel's bondage and told him that the completion was 400 years in the future. And God promised him that when that time of affliction was done, He would bring them out. And in their darkest hour, in the time of the deepest oppression, the time had come for God to fulfill His promise by the birth of their "savior", Moses, their great deliverer whom God would use to set them free in a marvelous event we call the Exodus. Likewise:

b. God promised He would send a light into Israel's darkness Through the prophet Isaiah, God also predicted a time of great darkness, a time of gloom for Israel in **Is. 9:1-2**. Isaiah said that Israel, and the region of Galilee in particular, had become a land of gloom, a land of the shadow of death. And yet God promised that He was going to send a light into that darkness. How? Verses **6-7**. God promised He would deliver His people by sending a Child to be born, a Son who would later rule upon the Throne of David bringing justice and righteousness forever. And in the very darkness of this deep bondage under Herod, the time had come for this child, this Deliverer, this Savior to be born and the first part of that promise fulfilled!

Would you mind if I just point out a note of practical application? Isn't it ironic that what is for us a time of awful suffering can be to God the very time in which we see Him fulfilling His greatest promises? Do we not find the same to be true in our lives? *In 1895 Andrew Murray was in England suffering from a terribly painful back, the result of an injury he had incurred years before. He was staying with some dear friends. One morning while he was eating his breakfast in his room, his hostess told him of a woman downstairs who was in great trouble and wanted to know if he had any advice for her. Andrew Murray handed her a paper he had been writing on and said, "Just give her this advice I'm writing down for myself. It may be that she'll find it helpful." This is what was written: In time of trouble, say, "First, He brought me here. It is by His will I am in this strait place; in that I will rest." Next, "He will keep me here in His love, and give me grace in this trial to behave as His child." Then say, "He will make the trial a blessing, teaching me lessons He intends me to learn, and working in me the grace He means to bestow." And last, say, "In His good time He can bring me out again. How, and when, He knows." Therefore say, "I am here (1) by God's appointment, (2) in His keeping, (3) under His training, (4) for His time."* A good prescription for us, is it not? Now, because of the times into which they were born:

II. Both Moses And Jesus Were Born Into Great Danger In fact:

1. in both cases a King decreed death for the children. In Egypt we are told that:

a. Pharaoh felt threatened by the people of Israel - Ex. 1:8-10 This new king didn't remember Joseph who had spared the land from that awful 7 year long famine so many years before, nor did he have any regard for Joseph's God. He was alarmed by the tremendous population growth of the Israelites; they became so many that to him they represented a serious military threat. In fact, at the bottom line, he felt that his own rule was threatened, that he could actually be unseated if they continued to multiply. So he oppressed them, enslaved them, and tried to command the Hebrew midwives to quietly put all the male babies that were born to death, but they wouldn't do it. So in desperation he took an even more vicious step and openly:

- he decreed the death of all male Hebrew babies - Ex. 1:22 Can you imagine living under that decree? Our little grandson was born during church some years ago; if we lived in that day, the law would have been that our daughter and son-in-law would have had their little newborn son ripped out of their arms and thrown into the Nile River as an offering to the Nile god! No doubt hundreds, maybe thousands, of little babies lost their lives in a watery grave, while their parents wailed and were driven back to work in the brickyards by a whip over a period of several years. That was the fate that Moses and his parents would have suffered. Likewise, King:

b. Herod felt threatened by the birth of a Messiah The wise men arrived asking, *Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?* and **Mt. 2:3** says, *When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him*. Why? Because if a child was born who was destined to become king, it meant to him that he himself would be deposed and probably killed! He was already paranoid and killed anyone whom he perceived to be a threat; he actually killed his own wife and two of his sons. So, it is not surprising that:

- he decreed the death of all male infants in Bethlehem *Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men*. **- Mt. 2:16**. It was a massacre, with dozens of infants ripped from the arms of their screaming parents and killed in the most

brutal way, right in front of them. And it was all designed specifically to kill Jesus as an infant. His life was in grave danger, just as Moses' was when he was born. Now:

2. in both cases the child was special Notice that **Acts 7:20** says clearly that:

a. Moses was born *beautiful in God's sight* Three times the Scripture describes the baby Moses as a beautiful child. In Hebrews 11 and Acts 7, the Greek word used is *asteios* which means *beautiful* which is what the text in Exodus also means. However, understand it was not just that Moses' parents said, "He's too beautiful a child to throw into the Nile," as if they would have thrown him in if he was ugly! The text here in Acts literally says he was "beautiful to God", that is, from God's perspective! They saw that this child was God's good gift to them and precious in His sight, and they just could not give him up. And, of course, God knew this child was special, that he would grow up to deliver his people. Well, if that's true of Moses, how much more was the Babe of Bethlehem *beautiful to God!* As I mentioned, **Mt. 2:2** says:

b. Jesus was born *King of the Jews* Even Mary and Joseph knew He was the promised Savior and Deliverer of Israel and were determined to protect Him at all costs. In fact:

3. in both cases the parents displayed great faith Moses' parents:

a. Amram and Jochebed boldly hid Moses - Heb. 11:23 says, *they were not afraid of the king's edict.* They defied his order at the risk of their own lives and bravely hid Moses in their own house somehow for three whole months after his birth. What tense months those must have been for them, but the writer says they did it *by faith*; they trusted in God to protect them and the baby! Well, when Joseph was warned by God about the danger Jesus was in from Herod, look at his reaction in **Mt. 2:14-15a**. Instantly:

b. Joseph got up and took Mary and Jesus to Egypt that very night They trusted God and did exactly what He told them to do. They left their homeland of Israel altogether and fled as refugees to a foreign land, to Egypt. And they remained there until the death of Herod. Well, that's interesting, because if Jesus actually was born in December, as we celebrate and as I believe He was, and if Herod died in March of 4 BC, as we know from history he did, then Mary and Joseph actually hid Jesus in Egypt for about 3 months to protect Him, just like Moses' parents! But again, they also displayed great faith, following God into a circumstance where they had no idea how they would be received or protected. And, of course:

4. in both cases God supernaturally intervened to deliver the child Of all things:

a. God moved Pharaoh's own daughter to rescue and raise Moses - Acts 7:21 His parents devised a desperate plan to put him in a sealed basket in the Nile nearby and when she came to wash and heard him cry, she plucked him out and took him as her own son! The baby deliverer that Pharaoh was unwittingly trying to kill was raised in his own palace as his adopted grandson through the caring heart of a woman whom we learn from history was unable to have a child of her own and took him as hers. Doesn't God have a sense of humor? And a grand way of giving circumstances an ironic twist? What a supernatural intervention He used to deliver Moses! Of course:

b. God warned Joseph twice to rescue Jesus, once to warn him to flee to Egypt in **Mt. 2:13**, and once again to warn him not to return to Judea in verses **19-23**. God communicated His warnings directly to Joseph in his dreams and he knew with certainty they were from God. God intervened directly to rescue and to protect His Son from danger, just as He did for Moses.

Well, before we quit, let's try to draw a direct application for ourselves. You see:

III. These Two Endangered Births Teach Us A Valuable Lesson Just like Moses and like Jesus in their times:

1. we are born to serve God's purpose in our generation God had a special purpose for Moses in his time to rescue Israel and He certainly had a special purpose for Jesus in His time, to rescue all of us from our sins. **Acts 13:36** says, ...*David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep and was laid with his fathers*. David was born to serve God's purpose in his time as king of Israel. 600 years later, Esther became queen in Persia and her cousin Mordecai encouraged her to speak to the king and save the lives of the condemned Jewish people saying, ...*who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?* **- Est. 4:14**. God had a purpose for her, a plan to use her to accomplish His will in her generation. And that same thing is true for every one of us! It may not be so grand and so glorious as these heroes of faith, but Paul said, ...*we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them*. *- Eph. 2:10*. God has things that He brought us into this world to accomplish, tasks that He prepared before our births for us to do when we arrived. Yet, just as in Moses' and Jesus' case:

2. Satan continually seeks to prevent us from doing those works and to destroy us - 1 Pet. 5:8 warns us, *Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.* Believe me, he would kill you outright if he could, and he will make attempts to do exactly that in any way he is allowed. However, if he can't do that, he certainly will make every attempt to hinder you from doing the things God has

called you to do or to destroy the fruits of them in any way possible, through temptation, opposition, persecution, illness, accident, or anything else he can dream up. He does not want to see God's plan accomplished and will go to any lengths to stop you from accomplishing your part in it, no matter how small that part may seem to be, even if it is simply the godly raising of your own child, as it was for these two sets of parents. Your birth, your life, your time in this world is endangered, just as theirs was. But the lesson from these two stories is clear:

3. our God is greater than our enemy! *Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.* - **1 John 4:4**. Our God is greater than any mighty Pharaoh! He is greater than any cruel Herod! And He is greater than Satan, the prince of this whole world! In fact, Jesus said, *My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand.* - **John 10:29**! He is so much greater than all, that He turns all their plans to serve His purpose and uses them for His glory!

Blaise Pascal was a 17th century French scientist, often classed as one of the six great thinkers of all time, a genius in mathematics, a philosopher and a writer. But on Nov. 23, 1654 he experienced an overwhelming personal encounter with God that changed his life. When he died, they found a worn creased paper in a pocket next to his heart. He evidently carried it with him as a reminder of that encounter. Here's what it said, "From about half-past ten at night to about half-after midnight --fire! O God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob-- not the God of the philosophers and the wise. The God of Jesus Christ who can be known only in the ways of the Gospel. Security--feeling--peace--joy--tears of joy. Amen" [From "Whatever Happened To Worship", A.W. Tozer, p. 90-91] That conversion was real and lasted to his dying day. But here is a prayer that He wrote down on an occasion in his life when he was sick and suffering, "Lord, whose spirit is so good and so gentle in all things, and who art so compassionate that not only all prosperity, but even all afflictions that come to Thine elect are the results of Thy compassion: grant me grace that I may not do as the pagans do in the condition to which thy justice has reduced me; grant that as a true Christian I may recognize Thee as my father and as my God, in whatever estate I find myself, since the change in my condition brings no change in thy own. For Thou art the same, though I be subject to change, and Thou art God no less when Thou dost afflict and when Thou dost punish, than when Thou dost console and when Thou dost manifest indulgence." [Christian History bulletin insert] No matter what suffering we may find ourselves in, let us always pray as he did, boldly trusting that the One who lives in us is greater than anything or anyone who is against us and that He WILL accomplish His purpose through us if we continue to trust Him!

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All The Promises Of God - Luke 1-2

Zechariah: Faith Means Believing What God Says Is True - 1:5-25, 57-80

The most thorough account which we have of the events surrounding the Savior's birth is found in the first two chapters of Luke. These chapters tell four very important stories: 1) the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth and the birth of John the Baptist, 2) the story of the angel's announcement to Mary, 3) the story of the birth of Jesus followed by the glorious announcement to the shepherds out in the fields, and 4) the story of Jesus' presentation at the Temple and his adoration by Simeon and Anna. Four stories, and in each of these stories, God made a specific promise to someone, all of them promises related to Jesus:

The Four Promises God Made Concerning Christ

God said:
1. to Zechariah: *...your wife will bear you a son who will prepare Israel for the Christ (1:13, 17)*
2. to Mary: *...you will be with child and give birth to the Christ (1:31-32)*
3. to the shepherds: *...the Christ has been born and you will find [Him] (2:11-12)*
4. to Simeon: *...you will not die before you have seen the Christ (2:26)*

And in the stories, you see each of these promises concerning Christ come true. I am reminded of Paul's words, *For all of God's promises have been fulfilled in Christ with a resounding "Yes!" And through Christ, our "Amen" (which means "Yes") ascends to God for his glory. - 2 Cor. 1:20*. All the promises of God are absolutely true and can be counted on. But they demand from us a response. We have to say, "Amen, Yes! I believe!" Each of these who were given God's promises responded in faith and ended up believing and affirming God's promise. And the neat part for us is that each of them demonstrates for us a different aspect of what faith is, what it means to firmly trust what God says. So we'll look at one of these stories one at a time and we begin today by looking at:

I. God's Promise To Zechariah (1:5-17) The first thing we are told is:

1. the situation in his life (5-7) Zechariah was from the tribe of Levi and a descendant of Aaron, that is, a priest. Back in David's day, the priests had been divided into 24 divisions, each of which was on duty twice a year for a week at a time. He and his wife Elizabeth lived in the hill country of Judea and either farmed or pursued a trade and twice a year Zechariah would go up to Jerusalem to serve his week at the Temple. They were a righteous couple. They loved God and served Him with their hearts. But at this time in their lives, they were older people, probably over 60. And notice

how carefully the text says that they had no children, for two reasons. Elizabeth was barren, which means that she had proved incapable of having children throughout her married life and now, they were well advanced in age, long past the child-bearing years. And that fact is important in understanding:

2. the promise he was given (8-17) Notice:

a. the special way in which the promise was delivered (8-12) In one of those weeks when he was on duty, something extraordinary happened. Because there was a large number of priests, they always drew lots to see which one would do which thing and God caused the lot on this particular day to fall to Zechariah to go into the Holy Place and offer incense on the altar of incense. Please understand the significance of this; the offering of the incense was seen by the Jews as the highest mediatorial act. A priest was only granted the privilege of doing this ONCE in his lifetime and after that he was called "rich" and had to leave the privilege for others to attain as he had. This was THE highlight moment he had waited for all his life. Outside, the other priests and other worshippers lay prostrate before God in silent worship. At the appointed moment he spread the incense on the hot coals of the altar and would himself have bowed in worship and humbly retreated, except that in that sacred moment, an angel of the Lord, Gabriel by name, suddenly appeared to the right of the altar. Any priest was scared to approach the presence of God in the Holy Place anyway, so the appearance of the angel completely terrified him. But the angel reassured him and then delivered a promise, a promise from Almighty God Himself. It seems clear that God chose this moment and this method to make a point to Zechariah and to us: this promise is of TREMENDOUS importance! Now let's look at:

b. the two messages which the promise contained (13-17) First of all, God promised:

(1) the miraculous birth of a son Though it was by all human standards impossible, Elizabeth was to have a son. He was to be named John, "the Lord is gracious". And he would be an extraordinary son. He would be a Nazirite for life, like Samson and Samuel of old, a man dedicated wholly to the Lord and under the control of the Holy Spirit, literally from his mother's womb. And he was that; remember how in verse 44 he leaped inside her for joy when Mary arrived! But God's promise was bigger than that. He would be great in God's sight because:

(2) that son would be the forerunner of the Messiah Notice how the word *Lord* is not in all capital letters, LORD, which is the English way of indicating God's personal name, Jehovah or Yahweh. *Lord* means master or ruler and it is what the disciples called Jesus all through His life. It is the Lord, that is, Jesus, the Christ, the Messiah, who is coming. And John would be the promised Elijah who was to come first, whose coming Malachi said would pave the way for the arrival of Messiah Himself. He would be the one to make Israel ready to receive her True King!

What an announcement! What a promise at the very zenith moment of Zechariah's life; he himself would play a part in the fulfillment of God's plan for the ages and the ushering in of God's kingdom! If he could just believe what Gabriel said, he would walk away from this once in a lifetime moment holding the fulfillment of the age-old hope of Israel in his hand. And what a joyous celebration there would have been in the outer court that day as he shared the news! However instead, Luke very honestly records for us that:

II. Zechariah Struggled To Believe God (18-25) Look at:

1. the reaction he had (18-20) Before we come down too hard on Zechariah, let me humbly point out that he is a lot like us. His reaction is often our reaction to the promises of God which we have. The angel says clearly:

a. he did not believe what God told him The words came directly from God. They were His truth and would indeed come true, whether anybody believed them or not. But he did not believe what God said. Why?

b. he did not believe because it contradicted his experience Of all the things the angel said, his mind was stuck back on point on,: "Elizabeth and I are physically incapable of having children. It's impossible. We tried all our married life as a younger couple. That time is over for us. it can't be. Nobody our age has babies!" What's going on? His rational mind is standing in direct contradiction to the Word of God and there is a struggle going on in his head. Abraham had been at that same spot once many years before and Paul's commentary on that is **Rom. 4:18-21 (Living Bible)**, *So, when God told Abraham that he would give him a son who would have many descendants and become a great nation, Abraham believed God even though such a promise just couldn't come to pass! And because his faith was strong, he didn't worry about the fact that he was too old to be a father, at the age of one hundred, and that Sarah his wife, at ninety, was also much too old to have a baby. But Abraham never doubted. He believed God, for his faith and trust grew ever stronger and he praised God for this blessing even before it happened. He was completely sure that God was well able to do anything he promised.* What God said, Abraham believed, even if he couldn't understand it or see how it was possible. For Zechariah it didn't come that easy! For him it was a struggle. He had trouble getting beyond what his mind knew to take God at face value. In that brief moment, he wrestled with it. Now let me ask you a question. Are you inclined to be more like Abraham or more like Zechariah? I mean, in spite of all that God has done in your life to prove Himself to you in special ways, do you still doubt Him when what He says seems contrary to your experience? How about in the matter of your:

• **salvation:** God's Word says that when you believed in Christ you were saved, that you have eternal life right now, that nothing can separate you from Him. But do you look at yourself and see your sin and struggle to believe it's actually true, that you really are forgiven, once for all forever? Or how about the matter of your:

• **endurance:** God's Word says that you can endure any and every circumstance God allows in your life, that you can endure all things through Christ who strengthens you. But do you look at what's come into your life and the pain you feel and the fear it's brought and the suffering you are experiencing and say, "I can't make it; I'll never endure this!" and then start looking for ways to escape your situation that are not in God's will for your life? Or how about the matter of your:

• **provision:** God's Word says that as you are following Him and are in the center of His will that He will meet all your needs according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus. But do you look at the mountain of needs with which you're faced and say, "God can't possibly meet that! He won't; it's all up to me!" and you worry and fret and borrow and beg as though it all depended on you.

You see, all these things and many more come down to just one thing. Is God able to do what He says or not? And therefore, is what God says really true? Abraham said, "Yes!" Zechariah struggled with faith and basically said "Maybe," because:

c. he asked for something more to confirm what God said He did not ask "how," but literally, "By what can I know this?" That is, “Give me a sign! Give me something more; I need something more than just Your Word. Prove Yourself to me!” It's not enough that God sent an angel straight from His presence in heaven; it's not enough that it happened at that key and only moment in his life when he would be just inches from the Holy of Holies where God's glory dwelt. He wanted a tangible, visible, physical sign that God was able to do a miracle like He promised. Now let me be clear; even Abraham fell face down and asked, *Can this really be; will it really happen? (Gen. 17)*. Even Mary asked a question, *How shall this be?*, when the angel told her she would conceive. God doesn't mind us not understanding or not seeing a way. He doesn't mind us asking questions and taking a little while for something to sink in. But Zechariah's response (and he was a godly man) amounted to, "I don't believe you; show me why I should!" So many times, that's where our hearts end up. Not just questioning God's method or the clarity of His direction, but His character! Is His Word really true for me in my life? And often times, believers today do the same, "Show me God; prove yourself! Give me a sign." just like Zechariah did.

So, God gave him a sign and here’s:

2. the sign he was given (20-23) He was struck dumb and was unable to speak. He opened his mouth, but nothing more would come out. And it would continue that way until the God's Word came to pass and the baby was born as He promised. Not only that, but he was also apparently struck deaf as well, because they had to make signs to him to ask him what to name the baby in verse 62! The angel’s words were the last he heard for nine months! Now, notice that this sign:

a. it was a genuine confirmation of the truth He wanted something tangible and he had it; in fact, he had it to carry with him for a whole year! And I think in the final analysis, it did really cause him to believe. It certainly was a sign to all the waiting people outside. He had been in there long and they were worried for his life. When he came out unable to speak, they knew he had seen a vision from God. And it was a sign to Elizabeth and to all his friends and relatives at home. It prepared them for things to come later and the ministry John would have. However:

b. it was also a chastisement for unbelief His unbelief cost him something; it cost him a year of speech and hearing. My friend, when you choose not to believe what God says about you and your situation, it costs you something. I don't know whether He'll give you a sign; He isn't obligated to and indeed, doesn't need to. The cross is all the sign you'll ever need. It is the once-for-all proof of God's love and trustworthiness. But I do know that when you choose not to believe God, it costs you something. It may cost you years of struggling and misery trying to do and believe things your own way. Jonah tried that and ended up saying, *"Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs - Jonah 2:8.* If you cling to the idols of your own understanding and your own experience and your own ideas, instead of simply believing what God says, you forfeit the grace that could be yours! You forfeit the peace and the joy and the assurance and the power and all the rest, all by simply not believing what God says is true.

Well, let's look at the end of the story. Thankfully, Zechariah didn't stay that way. He went home and sure enough, Elizabeth did become pregnant. And despite his initial struggle, through those months of silence, God brought him to genuine faith:

III. Zechariah Came To Believe God’s Word (57-80) How do I know that? In two ways. First:

1. it was demonstrated in the name he gave the baby (57-66) It was the morning of the eighth day, the time of circumcision when the child would be named. As the priest was praying, *Our God and the God of our fathers, raise up this child to his father and his mother and let his name be called in Israel, Zechariah, the son of Zechariah...* Elizabeth interrupted and said, "No, his name is to be called John!” Everybody was amazed. Why would she want to do that? You always name the child after, at least, a relative! So, they asked Zechariah, the father, the final authority. And he

wrote, "His name is John!" Do you see what he's saying? "I believe what you said, Lord! You said he is to be called John and John it is. I accept your words; they are true!" But that's not the biggest evidence of his faith. Immediately:

2. it was expressed in the song he spoke (67-79) Edersheim says, *"Forthwith the tongue of the dumb was loosed and he who could not utter the name of the child, now burst into praise of the name of the Lord. His last words had been those of unbelief, his first were those of praise; his last words had been a question of doubt, his first were a hymn of assurance..."* We call it the *Benedictus*. There was an ancient Jewish prayer that was repeated during the offering of the incense each morning. It was called, *The Eighteen Benedictions*. Zechariah probably would have prayed it on that most significant morning, but he was struck dumb and unable to pronounce it. For nine long months he meditated on the promises of God he had long ago memorized and now that his tongue is loosed, it bursts forth in a confession of his faith which goes one by one through the 18 confessions concerning the character and nature of God from that prayer. We don't have time to look in detail, but just notice this much:

a. he now believed Messiah was coming (67-75) *God has come and redeemed His people...He has raised up a horn of salvation for us as He said...He is about to show mercy to us and rescue us and keep the oath He swore to Abraham...* That is him saying, "I believe the rest of what the angel said. The time is here. Messiah is coming. God is about to redeem Israel. God's word is true!" And notice:

b. he now believed John was the forerunner (76-79) *You my child will be called a prophet of the Most High for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him...* "You'll be what the angel said, what God said, the forerunner, the Elijah for whom we've waited. You will usher in the King, the Christ!"

Those are no longer the words of unbelief, but of faith. You see, Zechariah's story teaches us that:

Faith means believing what God says is true.

Yes, he struggled with that, just like you and I do. But God worked in his life until He produced that faith within him in His own time and way. He will do the same in you. But it would be a whole lot easier if you'd help the process by making a choice of your will. You can choose to say, "Let God be true and everything else a liar." God is true and my thinking is wrong. God is true and my emotions are wrong. God is true and my evaluation is wrong.

Gladys Aylward was a missionary to China many years ago. She was forced to flee when the Japanese invaded Yangcheng. But she could not leave her work with Chinese children behind. With only one assistant, she led more than a hundred orphans over the mountains toward Free China. Her story was made into a classic movie called "Inn Of The Sixth Happiness" and you can still see it. During that harrowing journey out of war-torn Yangcheng, Gladys grappled with despair as she never had before. On one particular occasion after passing a sleepless night, she faced the morning with absolutely no hope of reaching safety. But a 13-year-old girl in the group reminded her of the story they all loved so much, the story of Moses and the Israelites crossing the Red Sea. Her faith wavering, Gladys cried in desperation, "But I am not Moses!" "Of course you aren't," the girl said, "but Jehovah is still God!" They made it through. Zechariah might have thought, "But I am not Abraham..." You might think, "But I am not Abraham, I am not Zechariah, I am not a missionary or a pastor or a Sunday School teacher. How could God's promises be true for me?" Simply because they don't depend on you! It doesn't matter who you are or what you think or how you feel. Jehovah, the Mighty God, is still God and every word of God is still sure. You can bank on it. You can risk your life on it. I don't know where you may be struggling in your life, in what area your mind and your emotions may be wrestling against accepting God's truth for you, but wherever it is, won't you make this simple choice today to end the struggle and simply believe that what God says is true?

All The Promises Of God - Luke 1-2

Mary: Faith Means Accepting What God Wants In Your Life - 1:26-56

Last time we examined the faith of Zechariah and the promise God gave to him of a son, John, who would be the forerunner to the Messiah. We saw his struggle to believe and how, at last, he learned to stand on God's promise and we learned for ourselves that faith means believing what God says is true. Now, while all this was going on, God was busy working in someone else's life and we find Him making a second important promise:

I. The Promise To Mary (26-33) First let's try to understand:

1. the situation in her life (26-27) Mary was a relative, perhaps a cousin through her mother's family, to Elizabeth, Zechariah's wife. But she did not live near Zechariah and Elizabeth. She lived 60 miles north in the hills of Galilee in the town of Nazareth. Elizabeth had completed 5 months of pregnancy already and Mary had not been to visit or heard any news. Mary was a young woman betrothed or engaged to be married and looking forward to that day. She had kept herself a pure virgin and saved her virtue only for the man who would be her husband. His name was Joseph. He was a descendant of King David in genealogy (as was she), but a simple carpenter by trade. They were both poor. Later when they dedicated Jesus in the Temple, they could only afford the poor person's offering of a pair of doves. Theirs was not a grand life, but a simple day to day existence of hard work and their wedding would be simple too, a small gathering of family and friends for a meal, but at least then they would be together to share this simple, if difficult,

life. Perhaps this adds a little extra meaning to what the Scripture says, *though He was rich, yet for our sakes He became poor...* God chose the humblest of situations into which to send His Son! Then look at:

2. the manner in which the promise was made (28-29) One day while Mary was alone in the house, the angel Gabriel who had appeared suddenly to Zechariah in the Temple, now entered and came to her. Perhaps he came less suddenly and with more of a human appearance this time because she was not as agitated by his appearance as she was by what he said. His greeting was, *You are highly favored! The Lord is with you.* Though it is not in several of the most ancient manuscripts, the KJV adds a phrase that is found in many others and which seals the point of why Mary was so troubled, *Blessed are you among women!* "Who, me? Highly favored? Receiving God's grace? Blessed among all women? I'm just a simple Nazareth girl who's going to be a carpenter's wife. I'm a nobody. What could God possibly want to do with me?" But the angel reassured her and delivered God's promise. Now let's look carefully at:

3. the two messages which the promise contained The first was absolutely incredible. God promised:

a. the virgin birth of a son, Jesus (30-31) She would become pregnant and have a son whom she was to name Jesus. Reading it, we might easily assume that he meant that after they were married she would have a son, but she didn't assume that. She assumed it meant right now during her virginity and in a moment, the angel confirmed that she was right. But if that's an incredible promise, the second part was even moreso:

b. the identity of Jesus as the Messiah (32-33) This baby would be the Hope of Israel, the long-promised Messiah, the Son of God Almighty, the One who would sit on David's throne and bring about the Kingdom of God on earth so that the lion would lie down with the lamb and righteousness would cover the earth as the waters cover the sea! Every Jewish girl had this secret hope, that her child might be the One, that she might be the mother of the Redeemer who would crush the serpent's head and set the captives free. There is almost no way I can convey to you the tremendous impact of this promise: "The Hope of all the Ages is coming now and He's coming through you!"

What a privilege! What a gift of grace from Almighty God! That from among all the women of the human race for all the centuries, she, a humble poor teenager from Nazareth, should become the mother of the Son of God! But that privilege demanded a response and that's really what I'd like to focus on this morning:

II. The Surrender Of Mary (34-38) First, we have to understand:

1. the demand which the promise placed on her First of all:

a. it meant believing that God could do the impossible (34-35) Mary asked a question, not out of unbelief like Zechariah, but simply to say, "I don't understand; I'm confused. I'm a virgin. I've never been with a husband." But note that she did not say, "This can't be!" But rather, "How is God going to do this?! Tell me more!" So the angel told her that God the Holy Spirit would cause the miraculous conception to occur inside her without a man so that truly this child would be holy, untainted with human sin and truly called His Son. Now we're back to the fact that faith means believing what God says is true. This was harder than Zechariah's case. At least he was married. Everything in all human history and experience before and since says that there is no way. This can't be. A baby takes two, a man and a woman. There is no such thing as a virgin birth! It is impossible. God was asking her to trust Him to do the impossible! It meant completely defying human knowledge and standing on God's Word. But it also demanded something else:

b. it meant completely surrendering control of her life and she fully understood it. Not another human being on earth would believe her when she turned up pregnant before marriage with the story of the angel. Everyone would call it unfaithfulness, adultery. How could Joseph ever believe it? In point of fact, he didn't. Three months later when he finally found out, he planned to divorce her, until God supernaturally changed his mind in a dream! Would she end up single, perhaps for life? How could her parents believe it? Would she end up rejected, cast out, without a home? How would she provide for herself and her child? Certainly, the people of Nazareth would never believe it! Would she end up a public disgrace, snubbed by everyone, or worse yet, be officially accused of adultery and stoned? Do you see? Believing God meant trusting Him and surrendering the control of absolutely everything in her life to Him. If God wanted to give His Son to the world through her, she would have to trust that He would take care of all these things and surrender her every desire and fear in favor of cooperating with His will in her life! And so it is for you and I. Faith means handing over to God the reins of your life and yielding the right of control to Him.

- **It means surrendering people**, **t**hose people you care so much about, your spouse, your children, your parents, the ones you love. It means putting them and your relationship with them in His hands and being willing to let Him do what He wants. He may separate them from you. He may break your engagement or take your loved one to heaven. He may move your children or you away from each other or send them to the mission field. He may not do any of those things. But faith means telling God whatever He wants to do with the people in your life is OK. He's in charge!
- **It means surrendering your circumstances**, your plans your dreams, your goals, your ideas of the way things are going to be. Faith means placing where you live and what you do and how your health is and whether you have plenty or go hungry in His hands. Faith means that I delight myself in the Lord and it's His business to

direct all my paths and that's OK by me. Jesus went down into a garden. The road the Father wanted him to travel pointed to a cross. Everything in Him, humanly speaking, was repulsed by that direction. It meant arrest, humiliation, suffering, pain and death. And in prayer, He agonized in pressure so great that He sweat great drops of blood. But His position was firmly, "Father, if this cup cannot pass from Me unless I drink it, Thy will be done! Thy will, not my will! I surrender it to you. It's yours to control!"

• **It means surrendering your reputation**, what people think of you, whether they understand you or agree with you or even like you. That's His business; yours is to accept what He wants in your life. In so many places in the world, Christians are considered criminals simply for believing. They are seen by Muslims and others as enemies, sneaky and underhanded and trying to take people away from the "true faith". Or in many places, and even here, if a person leaves the "established church" and becomes a "Bible Christian," it may mean being ostracized by the family and facing all kinds of pressure and opposition. But faith says that belongs to God; that's His realm and I give Him the right to control that, not me! And then, at the bottom line:

• **It means surrendering your very life** Whether I live or die is not really mine to control either. Faith means trusting Him, even if He allows me to have some terminal disease, even if He allows me to be martyred for my faith. Paul put it this way, *Whether we live, we live unto the Lord or whether we die, we die unto the Lord. So whether we live or die we are the Lord's!* And faith means I leave that in His hands and accept His will for my life.

Faith means turning over the right to control your own life and placing it in the Father's hands to turn out the way He wants. Of course, God understood Mary's human frailty, as He does ours, and so he gave her some means of assurance through the angel:

2. the assurance which God gave to her First there was:

a. the assurance of Elizabeth's example (36) Elderly, barren Elizabeth is already six months pregnant! That's just as much a miracle! Here was something tangible she could go and see in someone else's life. And God often reassures us through the example of what He has done in the lives of others. Certainly, Mary's life has become an example to us along with all the other folks like Moses and little David and a host of others whose stories of trusting God are recorded for us in Scripture. But God usually comes closer to home than that. Often He uses the very people around us in our lives as reassuring examples. That's why I think it's so important to share testimonies with one another as God works in our lives. As I see you trust God and God at work in your life, I am encouraged to turn control over to Him too! And then the angel also gave her:

b. the assurance of God's character (37) Oh, that familiar phrase, *Nothing is impossible with God*. But I had a surprise when I looked at the Greek text. There's a word in it that all the English translations leave out. Literally, it says, *no **word** shall be impossible with God* and it means a spoken word. In other words, God has power to do anything He says! If God says it, He can do it; that's what it means to be God. What He has promised, He's able to perform! Either that's true or God is not really God at all, but is limited and weak like we are!

So Mary placed her trust in the One who spoke the word, even before she had seen the human example of Elizabeth. Just look at:

3. the complete surrender which she made (38) Oh, this verse is precious because it helps us to understand the concept of surrender. You see, it stems from this:

a. she knew her true identity: *...I am the Lord's servant* Paul knew it too. That's why he referred to himself so often in his letters as the same thing, a servant, a *doulos,* a bondslave whose will was completely subject to the direction of his master. And the word *Lord* used here is not God's name Jehovah (LORD), but His title *Lord* which means Master. “I am the Master's servant.” You see, we're not here for God to serve us, to do what we want Him to do, to carry out our will and our desires and our program. We are here to serve Him, to do what He wants us to do, to carry out His will and His desires and His purpose! Mary knew that and:

b. she surrendered control of her life to Him: *...may it be to me...* “Master, you will act according to your character; I will act according to mine. I am Your servant. I submit to your will. I surrender control of my life to you!”

Was it real, this faith, this trust that God is God and I am His servant? It was. Look at the end of the story and you can see:

III. The Faith Of Mary (39-56) It was:

1. shown by her actions (39-40) She packed up her bag right away and hit the road to Judea. The 60 mile trip took several days, but she hurried to Elizabeth's house. Why? To verify God’s promise and see whether what the angel said was true? No, to see the miracle that she believed God had already done! Her journey was an outward manifestation of her faith. How do I know that? It is:

2. stated by the Spirit (41-45) These two hadn't seen each other in at least six months. They had not talked with each other. Neither knew anything about the other's situation. Elizabeth had not talked to her or known she would be the

mother of the Messiah. But the Spirit took control of Elizabeth at Mary's entrance through the door and He said through her what the angel had said, "You are blessed among women; you are the mother of the Messiah, the Lord!" And in verse 45 the Spirit adds, *you are blessed because you believed what the Lord has told you will be accomplished!* That's God's assessment, not Elizabeth's. She believed what God said would be done, impossible or not, and so she was willing to surrender herself to Him. And finally, it was:

3. shown in her song (46-56) We call it "the Magnificat", not because it is magnificent but because of how it starts, *my soul doth magnify the Lord... (KJV)* Elizabeth blessed her, but she turned around and handed that blessing back to God. We don't have time to study it carefully, but just note two things she confesses there:

a. she believed in God's might to do the impossible (46-49) She already accepted her own virgin pregnancy as a done thing, before she could possibly have had any physical signs of it. She confesses her faith that God had done great, yea impossible, things for her and that all generations would indeed call her blessed for the privilege given her. And:

b. she believed in God's mercy in sending the Messiah (50-55) In other words, she believed the rest of the angel's words. Her son would indeed be the promised Messiah, the Deliverer, the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham. That was as clearly already done in her eyes of faith as her own pregnancy and as Elizabeth's which was obvious before her.

You see, faith means believing what God says is true. Mary did that, but along with it, ***Faith means accepting what God wants in your life.*** It means recognizing that you are God's servant and surrendering control of everything to Him. Let me close with a story. *During the terrible days of the Blitz, a father, holding his small son by the hand, ran from a building that had been struck by a bomb. In the front yard was a shell hole. Seeking shelter as soon as possible, the father jumped into the hole and held up his arms for his son to follow. Terrified, yet hearing his father's voice telling him to jump, the boy replied, "I can't see you!" The father, looking up against the sky tinted red by the burning buildings, called to the silhouette of his son, "But I can see you. Jump!" The boy jumped because he trusted his father.* God does not ask you to see. He asks you to leave the seeing to Him, to trust that He knows it all. Bill Gillham puts it this way; “You're a time critter.” You see things in sequence one after the other. God is eternal. He's outside of time. He sees all things at the same time. All things are present to Him. He knows the end from the beginning. Our position is not to be the "seer" and the "director". He is Lord, not you. You are His servant. Where is it in your life today that He wants you to trust Him and turn control over to Him? Won't you surrender? Won't you say with Mary, "Behold the servant of the Lord, may it be to me as You will!"

All The Promises Of God - Luke 1-2

The Shepherds: Faith Means Acting On What God Has Shown You - 2:1-20

Let me review what we've learned so far in this series. From Zechariah we learned that faith is believing what God says is true. From Mary we learned that faith is accepting what God wants in our life. Now, the third promise Luke tells us about is one that God made to a group of shepherds in a field near Bethlehem.

I. The Promise To The Shepherds (1-14) First, let's briefly look at:

1. the situation of Jesus' birth (1-7) There are two key elements to notice:

a. the census which brought Him to Bethlehem (1-5) At the time when Mary had come full term in her pregnancy, she and Joseph were forced to leave their home in Nazareth. There had been a decree made by the Roman Emperor Augustus that all the citizens of his empire should be registered for the purpose of taxing them. This was carried out in various provinces in different ways. In Judaea, each man had to be registered in the city of his clan and since Joseph was of David's line he had to go to David's hometown, Bethlehem. However, the timing was not very good. He couldn't leave Mary in this condition, so, pregnant as she was, he brought her with him. The significance of this is found in the prediction of **Micah 5:2** which says that Messiah would be from Bethlehem! There is no way that God's Son could be born in Nazareth! God needed His chosen couple in Bethlehem, so He moved the powers that move the world to put them there at just the right time. Then there's the second element:

b. the stable in which He was born (6-7) Bethlehem was full of visitors. Every home had extra people. The inn was full. There was no place to stay. The only place available was in the stable with the animals, probably a cave next to the inn, sheltered from the cold, shielded from the hustle of the crowd, and kept warm by the many animals inside. There, in the quiet of the night, Jesus was born. They had brought their "baby clothes" along, strips of cloth in which newborns were wrapped to keep them warm. And there was no bed, no crib. However, a feed rack did fine, a manger with soft hay for a mattress. It was a very unusual place to find a baby and that plays a key role in the next piece of the story. Look at:

2. the situation of the shepherds nearby (8-9) There were shepherds close by, living out in the fields, even though it was winter, and God sent an angel to them to announce the birth of His Son. But there are two things that are not immediately apparent from the story. First, they were at:

a. the special place, "The Watchtower of the Flock" Close to Bethlehem on the road to Jerusalem, was a place called in Hebrew, *Migdal Eder*, the Watchtower Of The Flock. It's mentioned in Gen. 35:21as being near where Rachel was buried. It was a stone tower that overlooked the fields where the shepherds could retire for shelter and see a long distance. But the Jews held this as a special place because of **Micah 4:8**, *As for you, O watchtower of the flock, O stronghold of the Daughter of Zion, the former dominion will be restored to you; kingship will come to the Daughter of Jerusalem."* Jewish tradition held that when Messiah came, he would be born in Bethlehem but announced from Migdal Eder nearby. And so, it was here that God chose to make the announcement! Second, there is:

b. the special nature of the flocks The flocks which were pastured at Migdal Eder were the Temple flocks, the flocks which provided the lambs for daily sacrifice at the Temple. How fitting that it was to the shepherds guarding the lambs destined to provide the sacrifice for Israel that the angel announced the Lamb of God, the Savior, who would take away the sin of the world by His sacrifice!

Anyway, it was to these special shepherds that night that:

3. the promise that was given (10-12) It was three-fold:

a. the Messiah has been born today What a day! Israel had been waiting for that day for centuries! The day Messiah would come, that the Promised One would be born, the Redeemer who would set the captives free! And today's the day! Here and now! The hope of the ages has been realized already, today, right here, and you will see it:

b. you will find Him in a manger Where would they find him? How many newborn babies would there be in Bethlehem? How would they know him? Could they knock on every door in town to find him? And on top of that, he wasn't born with a sign on his forehead that said, "I am the Messiah"; His parents might not even know he was to be the Messiah! But the angel gave an unmistakable clue, “You will find him in a manger.” Mangers are found in stables, in cattle stalls. What homeowner would put their baby in the stable with the animals! The inn! Of course! The city was crowded with people looking for places to stay. It would be full and when it was, people would stay with the animals in the stable, just to have shelter. They knew just where to look! And the final piece is that:

c. this Good News is for everyone “It is not just for you. It is for all the people, the whole nation, for everybody you meet. This news shakes the world and they need to know it!” And no sooner was the message out of his mouth than they experienced:

4. the spectacular confirmation (13-14) Instantly the sky was filled with angels booming out in a loud chorus, "Glory to God in the highest..." You talk about a sign! Can you imagine sitting in your backyard on a dark night and suddenly the sky is full of bright angels chanting in chorus? That would shake your boots! At any rate, it left them with no thought that they were seeing things or that the angel's message wasn't real. And that's really what we want to focus on this morning:

II. The Faith Of The Shepherds (15-20) Notice that first of all:

1. they believed what God said was true (15) Literally they said, *Let us go see **this word** which has become [been fulfilled].* They understood this whole thing, not simply as an event, but as a fulfillment of God's Word, as God keeping His promise. And they were convinced He had. It was true. It had happened and they wanted to go see it and enjoy it! They believed what God said was true and so:

2. they acted on what they believed First:

a. they hurried to see what they had been told (16) The angel had said they would find him, so faith led them on a search. They set out in a hurry for Bethlehem and hurried to the inn and searched for the child. It didn't take long, I guess. But the point is this. God had said they would see a baby in a manger and they looked until they found one, because they believed Him. They acted on what He said. Then:

b. they shared with others what they had been told (17-18) They couldn't keep their mouths shut. They told everybody in the busy inn where there was no room that out in the stable the Messiah was born! But they didn't stop there; they told people in the street, anybody they could find. Maybe they knocked on a few doors, I don't know, but it says they spread the news, night or not! And everybody who heard it was amazed! However, don't miss the point. The angel had told them it was for everybody and they believed that word and shared it with everybody! Just think, we in the church have a similar word from God, *Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit... - Matt 28:19.* If we really believed what God said to us, we would be sharing it too, just like they were, wouldn't we! Again, they believed what God said and acted on what they believed. And finally:

c. they praised God for what they had been told (20) When they acted on their faith and went, everything was just as they had been told and it moved them to burst out in praise, all the way back to the hillside. Those poor sheep! First, a sky full of angels and now a bunch of charismatic shepherds shouting hallelujah! When you act in faith on what God has said to you, you will always find Him true to His Word and yourself full of joy, whether you're sitting on a quiet hillside near Bethlehem or in a Philippian jail at midnight!

Faith means believing what God says is true; faith means accepting what God wants in your life instead of demanding what you want. And today we've learned:

Faith means acting on what God has shown you!

Where is it in your life that you need to live what you believe, that you need to quit just saying you believe what God says and act on it and do what He says? *[This message was given at a baptismal service, therefore it included the following.]*

Now what does all this have to do with baptism?

3. the application of this truth to the practice of baptism Isn't that exactly what I am doing when I am baptized? I am not simply believing what God said, I am acting on it; I am doing what He has told me to. You see, the person who is coming to be baptized is saying:

a. I have received and believed the Good News of the Savior just like the Shepherds did. "I believe that the Savior was born and that He was my Savior. He was born for me. He lived for me. He died for me on the cross to pay for my sins and He rose from the dead for me, so He could live in me and I could live with Him forever!" Baptism itself is a symbol, a human action. I want to be very clear that the act of baptism has no saving merit, it does not wash away sins or anything of the sort. It is a simple dunking in water. These who are being baptized this morning have already received the Good News that Jesus died for their sins and they have believed it and have placed their faith in Him as their Savior and asked Him to come and live in their hearts. They are already saved and have eternal life because they have trusted in Christ. Now, as each one is baptized, they are saying:

b. I am acting upon what I believe through obedience "Jesus told me to be baptized in His name after I believe and I'm doing that. I'm putting legs to my faith. I don't just believe academically or theoretically. I believe in a way that touches my life. Jesus said to be baptized in His name to indicate that I am His follower and I believe it and I'm acting on it by doing it. So as I am baptized:"

c. I am proclaiming to others that I believe by my action The shepherds ran and told everybody that Jesus who was born is the Savior. Baptism is a sermon, a message, an action that shouts a message, "I belong to Jesus, I believe in Jesus and I want you to know it!"

All The Promises Of God - Luke 1-2

Simeon and Anna: Faith Means Confidently Waiting For God's Time - 2:21-38

First, in this series we looked at Zechariah's faith and his *struggle* and how he finally came to understand that *faith means accepting that what God says is true*. Then we looked at Mary's faith and saw that faith means the willingness to *surrender* to God's will for your life. Last time, we looked at the faith of the shepherds which led them on a *search* for the baby in the manger and learned that faith means acting on what you believe. Today we'll learn a fourth and final lesson about faith from a pair of elderly characters who met Mary and Joseph shortly after Jesus was born. As a background, let's think about:

I. The Steps Which Followed Jesus' Birth (21-24) Mary and Joseph did not return to Nazareth immediately after the baby was born. In fact, I don't believe they planned to. I'm sure that when they left Nazareth, they knew that the time was so close that the baby would not be born there, though they probably didn't expect it so instantly. They had hoped to find lodging and stay in Bethlehem awhile before traveling back, which they did. They located a more permanent place to stay and set up a home as best they could. There were three very important events which they planned on. First:

1. the circumcision and naming of Jesus (21) On the eighth day, the traditional ceremony was held and the priest performed the ritual of circumcision, investing the child as a full heir to the covenant God made with Abraham. At the same time, he was officially named and Mary and Joseph demonstrated their belief in God's Word by choosing the name they were told by the angel to give him, Jesus, "Jehovah is salvation". Then they waited for a second event:

2. the purification of Mary (22) According to Lev. 12:1-5, a mother was considered ceremonially unclean for 33 days after the birth of a child because of her bleeding. After that time, she was required to bring to the Temple for sacrifice, either a lamb for a sin offering and a dove or pigeon for a burnt offering, or if she was poor like Mary and Joseph obviously were, two doves or young pigeons. Then she would be clean. So, they needed to stay in Bethlehem at least a month to be able to go up to Jerusalem, which was nearby, and do this. And at the same time, they kept another obligation:

3. the presentation of Jesus (23-24) Num. 18:15-16 says that every firstborn son belonged to the Lord and must be redeemed or bought back when he was a month old, by the payment of a redemption price of five shekels of silver, which, of course, was done at the Temple. A brief ceremony was performed where Mary and Joseph handed the baby Jesus to the priest, who then pronounced short benedictions or prayers over him and handed him back. Then the redemption money was paid into the treasury.

These two events were usually combined into one visit, since they occurred at approximately the same time. And so, it was while they were on this visit and still in the Temple, having completed everything that God required, that they met simultaneously two very special people. Now let's change our focus and look at:

II. The Two Who Met Jesus In The Temple: Simeon and Anna Though we read the account of Simeon encountering Mary and Joseph first, Anna joined the group immediately and what strikes you is how much alike the two are. Look at:

1. their common characteristics

a. both loved the Lord deeply (25, 36-37) Simeon was a righteous man and very devout, sincerely devoted to the Lord. He was probably in the Temple frequently to pray. Anna had been a widow for more than 60 years and practically lived in the Temple and worshipped and prayed and fasted. Her whole life revolved around the Lord. He was #1 in their lives. And:

b. both were controlled by the Spirit The Spirit of God was upon Simeon and it says that Anna was a prophetess, a lady whom the Spirit used to speak God's word. They were Spirit-controlled people, yielded to and filled with the Spirit of God, saying and doing what He wanted, following His leading. What examples these two are to us! But most importantly, note this:

c. both waited their whole lives for God's promise to Israel (25, 38) Luke says that Simeon's life was characterized by expecting and looking for the coming of the Messiah, Israel's consolation. Anna associated with those who were the same, looking for and expecting the Messiah to come to redeem Jerusalem. Both of them had grabbed hold of the ancient hope of Israel, the promise of Almighty God that one day a Redeemer, a Messiah, would come and they lived their lives looking forward to that expectation in faith. Anna was 84 and ever since she was a young woman, this was the focus of her life, believing that God meant what He said and expecting that in His time Messiah would come, not knowing, of course, whether she would still be alive to see Him. We don't know how old Simeon was, though we usually presume that he too was elderly from the way he talks about dying, but:

d. Simeon had an additional specific promise (26) The Spirit of God had made a promise to him personally that he would not die before he had personally seen the Christ. In his lifetime the promise would be fulfilled and he would see it. Of course, we don't know whether this promise was given in his youth and he had patiently waited all his life or whether it was revealed only shortly before this encounter. Either way, God promised him it would be so. Now let's look at:

2. their encounter with Jesus Notice that the text emphasizes that:

a. both were sent by God at the perfect time (27, 38a) Just as Mary and Joseph had come into the Temple Court to present Jesus to the Lord, the Spirit moved Simeon to arrive there at exactly the same moment. We are not told that he was a priest, but he did what the priest would have done; he took Jesus in his arms and pronounced two benedictions, one concerning redemption or salvation and the other a blessing toward the parents. And then notice that Luke comments that it was at that exact moment that Anna also arrived, no doubt also moved by the Spirit! Listen, God's timing is perfect; it's right! He knows just when to do what He plans to do. Five minutes before or after on any one's part and this meeting would never have occurred. God brought it about in His perfect timing and He does things that way in your life too! He has a time for things to occur, for the things that He has ordained for you to come to pass and it is as you obey the Spirit of God that it happens! Notice also:

b. both recognized Jesus as the Messiah through the Spirit As I said before, He didn't have the word "Messiah" tattooed on His forehead. Nor did Mary and Joseph tell them, "This child is the Messiah". The Spirit of God in each of them knew Him immediately and revealed it to them instantaneously. They simply knew in that moment that He was the One they'd been waiting for. And what I want to show you is:

3. their reaction of faith: certainty unaffected by time There is a definition of faith in the Bible that we have not yet considered in Heb. 11:1, *Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.* Faith means that we absolutely expect what God promises to come to pass and are as certain and sure of it as if it were already done, even though we do not see it. And that certainty is unaffected by time. Notice:

a. they both praised God for keeping His promise (28-29, 38b) For hundreds of years, the faithful in Israel had been standing on the truth of God's promise that one day Messiah would come. Generations of them had died without seeing that fulfilled, yet the faithful still held it to be true. It is the same way with the promise we have from Jesus that He will return. Generations of Christians have lived and died counting that promise true, without ever seeing it fulfilled and we still count it true. We still hold God's promise true, even if death claims us before we see it! But

here were two people who all their lives had patiently waited for God to keep His promise and now recognized that He had, so they burst out in praise to Him. You see:

b. they both believed what God said was true, though they did not see it All their lives they lived in faith, a confidence, a certainty that what God said was true, though they did not see it and that's evident because:

c. they both counted Israel's redemption as done, though they did not yet see it accomplished (30-35, 38c) Both of them would be dead before Jesus ever grew up. They may have seen Him, but they would never see the salvation He would provide both for Israel and for the Gentiles. Yet to them it was already as good as done. It was just as sure as the birth of the Messiah who was in front of them. What I'm actually getting at is that:

d. they were willing to trust the timing of things to God They counted His Word as true and left the timing of its fulfillment up to Him. The lesson for us is this, ***Faith means waiting confidently for God's time.*** What God says is true; the timing of its fulfillment doesn't matter and is up to Him. Faith is a confidence in the truth that is timeless, that is, it is not diminished by time. Jesus Himself told us in Acts 1:7, *...It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority.* Timing is a realm that belongs to God, not to us. Yet so many of our questions and our hang-ups relate to timing, don't they? "When, Lord? How long, Lord?" We want things now! We don't want to wait for them.

- **We want our suffering ended now - Ps. 6:3** *My soul is in anguish. How long, O LORD, how long?*
- **We want our sorrow to go away now - Ps. 13:2** *How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart?*
- **We want rescued from our troubles now - Ps. 35:17** *O Lord, how long will you look on? Rescue my life from their ravages, my precious life from these lions.*
- **We want justice to be done now - Ps. 94:3** *How long will the wicked, O LORD, how long will the wicked be jubilant?*
- **We want our prayers answered now - Hab. 1:2** *How long, O LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen?*

One day Jesus' brothers were trying to get him to go up to Jerusalem and publicly proclaim himself as the Messiah *Then Jesus said unto them, My time is not yet come: but your time is always ready. - John 7:6.* God has a time, a perfect time for things. For human beings the time is always now! Faith is trusting God so completely that you're willing to wait with confidence for His time.

When Leonardo da Vinci painted The Last Supper on the wall in the dining room of the convent in Milan, Italy, the monks began to have many questions about his ability and his integrity. The picture was merely a copy of the dining area; the table, linen, even dishes used by the monks were identical to those pictured. Some monks thought da Vinci was taking advantage of his contract to paint this picture and were resentful of his long periods of inactivity, when he would stand for hours without touching his brush to the wall in front of him. When they asked da Vinci about this apparent inactivity, he replied, "When I pause the longest, I make my most telling strokes with my brush." No other event in the life of our Lord has been painted more often, but none can match the one painted by da Vinci some 500 years ago. Century after century the faithful waited, confident that one day God would keep His ancient promise. Most of them never got to see it in this life. But the Scripture says, *But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. - Gal. 4:4-5.* Simeon and Anna waited confidently for God all their lives and they got to see His promise kept. Christmas is the season when the world remembers the day, when, after God delayed and man had waited for so long, He accomplished His most wonderful work for mankind. Where is it in your life today that you're growing impatient, complaining to God, beginning to doubt Him? Won't you make a decision today to trust Him completely and leave the timing in His hands?

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As The Father Has Sent Me - John 20:21

Part One: Jesus Was Sent Into The World

The story of Christmas is the story of a journey, an incredible journey made by Jesus, the eternal Son of God, from heaven into this world. If you think about it, every journey can be looked at from two points of view. In 2010 at Christmas time, LuAnn and Dan and I were about to embark on what was for us a tremendous journey of our own to visit Andrea and Steve, Kirsten and Jordan in the country of Jordan for Christmas. Now over in Aqaba, Kirsten was asking, "When are Nana and Pop coming?" To them our journey was a "coming". They were getting ready for our coming, anticipating our coming, looking forward to what would happen when we came and they were filled with joy when we finally did come! That is the way we usually see Christmas. We talk about Christ's coming into the world. We sing, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" and "Come Thou Long Expected Jesus". We understand the joy the angels brought the shepherds, because of all that Christ's coming means to us. *Years ago a Christmas card entitled "If Christ Had Not Come" told of a minister falling*

asleep in his study on Christmas eve and dreaming of a world in which Christ had never come. In his dream he found himself looking through his home, but there were no stockings, no wreaths of holly, no Christmas tree. He walked out to the street. No church with spire pointing heavenward could be seen. No bells sounding the praise of God could be heard. Back in his library, every book about Christ had disappeared from the shelves. A knock at the door brought a request to come to a dying mother. At her bedside he said, "I have here something that will comfort you." He opened his Bible to look for a familiar verse, but it ended with Malachi. There was no Gospel, no promise of life beyond the grave. He could only bow his head and weep in hopeless desperation. Two days later, he stood beside the grave to conduct this mother's funeral. But he had no word of comfort to say, no message of resurrection to proclaim. He could only utter, "dust to dust, ashes to ashes," and one long, last, final farewell. In his dream he burst into sobbing. Suddenly, nearby music woke him with a start. When he realized what he was hearing, a great shout of joy burst from his lips. The choir in his church next door was singing on Christmas morning, "O come, all ye faithful, Come and behold him, O come let us adore him, Christ the Lord!" This is how we see Christ's journey when we stand on earth, but every journey has another point of view, that of the one who does the going! Here in Glenside, we were saying, "Soon we will be GOING!" We were preparing ourselves to go, packing all the myriad of things we were taking along for them, thinking about the things that would happen to us there and, of course, anticipating that we would come back. We seldom think about Christmas from Jesus' point of view or ponder how this whole journey looked to Him. Look with me in Galatians where Paul gives us:

I. The Heavenly View Of Christ's Coming Into The World - Gal. 4:4-5 *But when the fulness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, in order that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons*. Century after century, indeed from before creation itself, the Father and the Son had been planning this journey together. They had been hard at work preparing the world, preparing the nation of Israel, preparing the exact circumstances for it. All of heaven looked forward with them to that day and when the appointed moment finally arrived,

1. Jesus was "sent" forth into this world on a mission by the Father The root of that word *sent* is *apostello* from which we get the word *apostle*, which means *one who is sent*. The comparable term in Latin is the word missi,o from which we obviously get our words *mission* and *missionary*. The Greek verb in this verse is actually intensified. God *sent forth* or *sent out* His Son, that is, on a mission. What this verse is describing is what missiologists call the *Missio Dei*, the mission of God, the eternal purpose God has to redeem the world through His Son. It is important for us to understand:

a. what being "sent" means It is not the ordinary word that you'd use in saying, "I sent Dan to the store to get some milk." To be sent is a thing of importance. A year after our trip, North Korea opened fire upon South Korea, creating an emergency situation with tremendous international tension. That week the President "sent" a delegation led by the Deputy Secretary of State to Beijing to urge the Chinese to pressure North Korea to stop. That's the kind of *sending* this word is indicating. To be sent means:

(1) being invested with the authority of representing the sender and his interests. You act on his behalf and speak for him, because he sent you. And further, it means:

(2) being charged with a responsibility to carry out for the sender You're not there for a vacation, to do whatever you please. You have been sent on a mission, to accomplish a task that the sender expects to be done. When Paul writes, "God sent His Son", that's what he means! And if you listen to the words of Jesus:

b. Jesus was continually conscious of being "sent" In John's Gospel you will find Jesus more than 20 times saying, *The Father sent Me* in one form or another. Check it out in a concordance. Over and over He repeated, *He sent Me, He sent Me, He sent Me...* "Don't you get it? I've been SENT! I'm here on a mission for the Father. That's what my life is about!" It pervaded His thoughts all the time and was the basis of everything He did. He was here as a man on a mission. Now what was Jesus sent to do?

2. Jesus was sent to save the world - 1 Jn. 4:14 *...we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world*. It was a rescue mission! The whole world was lost in the darkness of sin, but the Father sent His Son to save it. Jesus Himself described His own mission this way, *God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. - **Jn. 3:17***. Some of you are old enough to remember the TV show *Mission Impossible* from the early 70's. It's trademark was the lead secret agent playing a tape, "Your mission, Mr. Phelps, should you decide to accept it, is..." And then follows some impossible task the American government needs done and the tape self destructs. Well, talk about an impossible mission, think about literally being sent to save the whole human race! Nobody could do that, only Jesus, and He decided to accept the assignment! Look at what it involved. First:

a. He was sent to become a human being like us - Gal. 4:4 He was *born of a woman*. The eternal, infinite Son of God emptied Himself of everything glorious. He took to Himself the tiny body of a helpless human embryo in the womb of a virgin and trusted Himself to the care of human parents. To save us, He had to become one of us! We can't even begin to comprehend all that that involved! He traded His glorious heavenly life for that of a human being, a simple carpenter and itinerant teacher on the dusty backroads of Galilee and Judea for 33 years. But that

was only the prelude. **1 Jn. 4:10**, *This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins*.

b. He was sent to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins Our problem was that we stood condemned under the righteous judgment of God. Forgiveness required atonement, payment for the sin, a righteous substitute who could take that judgment in our place. Jesus was sent forth to go to the cross to die a horrible death under the wrath of God. Why? **1 Jn. 4:9**, *This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him*.

c. He was sent so that we that we might live through Him, so that we who were dead in trespasses and sins might live again, so that we might have life that is eternal. And why does God want us to have that? Look at the text, **Gal. 4:5**, ...*that we might receive the full rights of sons!* Jesus was sent here to redeem us:

d. He was sent to make us God's sons and bring us to glory - Heb. 2:10, *In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting [necessary] that God... should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering*. There it is! God wanted to make us His children and bring us to glory to live in communion with Him forever. His heart loved us and wanted us, so when the time was right, He sent forth His son on the mission to save us by dying for us! And:

3. when Jesus' mission was completed He returned to the Father who sent Him He told His disciples early on, ...*I am with you for only a short time, and then I go to the one who sent me*. **- Jn. 7:33** and He reminded them again in the Upper Room in **16:5**, *Now I am going to him who sent me*... And, having risen from the dead, He ascended back to Heaven to the glory He shared with the Father before the world was. Mission accomplished!

That's the heavenly view of what Christmas is all about! However, I told you all of that to set the stage for you to understand the meaning of another verse. Look with me at **John 20:21**. That's the fourth time the New Testament records the Great Commission and that is:

II. The Heavenly View Of Our Lives In This World *As the Father has sent me [forth into the world on His Mission], SO [exactly like that] I am sending you!* You see:

1. when we come to Jesus, our purpose in life is dramatically altered Before we come to Jesus, life is about self. It is about getting our needs met and doing the things we want. It is about growing up and getting married and making a living and having a family and finding enjoyment, living the way the people all around us live every day. But when we come to Jesus and He applies that salvation to us and gives us eternal life by His Spirit, everything changes! Turn with me to **2 Cor. 5:15**:

a. we are no longer to live our lives for ourselves They don't belong to us anymore! Our lives have a new purpose after such an impossible rescue; they are to be lived for Him who died for us! They are His to command! And what Jesus said to us in John is that:

b. Jesus sent us on a mission just as He was sent He said it again to the Father in prayer, *As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.***- Jn. 17:18**. Your life is now caught up in a mission on which you have been sent by Jesus Christ. You are SENT; you are on a mission! And what is it?

2. Jesus sent US to save the world Look at **2 Cor. 5:18-20**. Put simply, God reconciled the world to Himself through sending Christ. He made salvation possible for the world. Now, He is reconciling the world by sending US to the whole world with the message of that salvation. We, all of us without exception, are "sent ones", apostles, missionaries, sent to redeem the world by bringing many sons to glory with us!

a. we carry the offer of salvation to the world with His authority We're His ambassadors. Because He sent us, we represent Him. We speak for Him; we bring His message. We make the offer of salvation on His behalf and plead with people to take it. He has committed that task to us and sent us to do it. So in essence:

b. we bear the responsibility of completing the task He began Our mission is part 2 of Jesus' mission. What Jesus began, His church is to complete and when it is done, He will return and set up His Kingdom. To God, our lives are about that mission, the mission of God to redeem the world. And what that means for us personally is:

c. we must be continually conscious of being "sent", just as Jesus was. Wherever He was, whatever was going on around Him, whether in a storm on a fishing boat in the sea or meeting a funeral procession on the road or meeting a demonized man in a cemetery, the first thing on His mind was not His own comfort, His own desire, but the mission on which He had been sent and He responded accordingly. Likewise, wherever Jesus puts us, whatever is going on around us, whether at our job or our school or in our neighborhood or on jury duty or in the military or whether literally sent to the ends of the earth, we are there, we are in that circumstance at that moment, as ones sent to carry out our mission, His mission to bring Him many sons to glory. The consciousness of that should continually be in our minds and next time I plan to share in a lot more detail what it means to live that way. But for us personally:

3. when the time allotted for our part in His mission is complete, we return to Jesus who sent us, just as He returned to the Father who sent Him. My question this morning is this; at the end of our lives, will we be able to say to Jesus what He said to the Father at the end of His? *I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do. - John 17:4*.

John Piper writes about *Count Nicolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf, a German, born in 1700, who founded a community of earnest Christians called Herrnhut which became part of the Moravian Church and was best known for its unparalleled missionary zeal. After Zinzendorf had finished university, he took a trip throughout Europe looking at some of the cultural high-spots. And something very unexpected happened. In the art museum at Dusseldorf, he saw a painting by Domenico Feti entitled "Ecce Homo" ("Behold the Man"). It was a portrait of Christ with the crown of thorns pressed down on his head and blood running down his face. Beneath the portrait were the words, "I have done this for you; what have you done for me?" As he stood there, as it were, watching his Savior suffer and bleed, he said to himself, "I have loved him for a long time, but I have never actually done anything for him. From now on I will do whatever he leads me to do." For the rest of his life, the blood of Jesus had a central place in the doctrine and devotion of Zinzendorf and his community at Herrnhut. When the first two young missionaries boarded the ship in Copenhagen to sail for the West Indies, perhaps never to return, they called out to their friends on shore, "May the Lamb that was slain receive the reward of his suffering!" That became the cry that sent out Moravian missionaries around the world. When Zinzendorf stood before the painting in Dusseldorf as a believing, faithful member of the church of Jesus Christ, he could say… "These wounds were meant to purchase me. These drops of blood were shed to obtain me." He could never get over it. He was not his own; he was bought with a price. Do you get up in the morning and say, "I am not my own today. I belong to another. I have been bought with a price.* [I have been SENT for a purpose!] *And I will live every moment of this day so that the Great Purchaser of my soul will receive the full reward of his suffering"? [From John Piper's sermon "At The Price Of God's Own Blood" http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/sermons/at-the-price-of-gods-own-blood]*

As The Father Has Sent Me... - John 20:21

Part Two: We Are Sent Into The World

The premise of this little series of two messages is simple. Please look again with me at John 20:21 and allow me to paraphrase it, *As the Father has sent me [forth into the world on His Mission], SO [exactly like that] I am sending you!* At that first Christmas, God sent forth His son into the world to save the world through Him and when He had accomplished that mission on the cross, He returned to heaven. And before He left, Jesus turned around and said to US, His followers, "Now I am sending YOU in exactly that same way. Go forth and save the world! Finish My mission!" Consequently, we, like Jesus are "sent ones". Paul never lost sight of that. He begins every one of his New Testament letters (except two), *Paul, a SENT-ONE [an apostle] of Jesus Christ*... Peter did the same. They lived continually in the consciousness that they were *sent ones*, sent on a mission by Jesus Christ. It dominated their lives and thoughts, just as it did Jesus'. My simple premise is that if we look at what it meant to Jesus to be sent by the Father, we will discover what it should mean to us to be sent by Jesus! Fortunately, Jesus talked about it a lot, mostly in incidents recorded in John's Gospel, so keep your fingers nimble and we're going to take a walk through a bunch of verses in John which will show us what it means to be "sent". First of all:

I. Being Sent Means We Are Here To Seek The Father's Glory, not our own **- Jn. 7:18** We're here to get Jesus a reputation, not to make one for ourselves. We work to get Him honor, not to get it for ourselves. That, of course, is the exact opposite of what living in this world has taught us. In 2004 Max Lucado wrote a book called, *It's Not About Me: Rescue From The Life We Thought Would Make Us Happy.* In it he writes: "We've been demanding our way and stamping our feet since infancy. Aren't we all born with a default drive set on selfishness? *I want a spouse who makes me happy and coworkers who always ask my opinion. I want weather that suits me and traffic that helps me and a government that serves me [and I would add 'and a God who does my will']. It's all about me.* We relate to the advertisement that headlined, 'For the man who thinks the world revolves around him...'" When you understand that you've been sent, all of that changes. You realize life is NOT all about you! In fact, none of it is about you; it's all about Him! You see, like Jesus:

1. we have been set apart and sent into the world by Him - Jn. 10:36 That's what He's done with you! He has set you apart as His very own. That's the word *sanctified.* You are set apart as holy and belonging to God for His holy purpose. You are one of that multitude whom God is taking out from among all the inhabitants of the earth as a people *for HIS Name!* You've been chosen; you've been selected. He said, "Out of all the 8 billion people in the world, I have chosen YOU to be Mine!" Do you realize what a privilege that is, to belong to God, to be His child, His Son, His Daughter? But He didn't set you apart for you to simply enjoy it as a personal benefit. He set you apart for a purpose, to SEND you into the world to save it! Most of you have seen the movie *Pearl Harbor* and you know about the Dolittle Raid, the airstrike we made on Japan in retaliation for their assault on Pearl Harbor which brought the US into WWII. President Franklin D. Roosevelt decided that it was imperative that the US bomb mainland Japan as soon as possible. So the US Air Force chose 16 of its best pilots to send on that desperate and difficult mission. They were not sent on a sightseeing trip; the morale of the entire US and our armed forces rested upon them and they flew with a tremendous sense

of urgency, because they had been set apart for a mission of great importance. Being selected and set apart is a great privilege, but it is not for you; it is for Him! You are one of the select few sent into the world by our Great Commander in Chief to carry out His mission of the highest priority. Your life must come to have that urgency that says, "I must be about My Father's business!" Now, just as the Father was with Jesus:

2. He is always with us - Jn. 8:29a He did not send us out alone. Jesus told us plainly that He and the Father would come to us and dwell with us in the Person of the Spirit. In all that He has sent us to do, He is right there! In fact, **He is our very life - Jn. 6:57**. We live because of Him. We live because of His Presence inside us. His life gives us life now and IS our life. We are well-equipped for this mission! Our Commander is living in us, supplying us with everything we need! And the result is that:

3. we are how He reveals Himself to the world - Jn. 12:44-45 When the world looks at us, they don't just see us. They see the Father living in us. They see Jesus living through us. They see HIS life lived out in front of them through our flesh and bones. Just as Jesus was the Father living in front of men in flesh and bones, so are we! And it gets Him glory and honor, EXCEPT when we forget our mission and revert back to making it all about us! Secondly, in looking at Jesus' life, we learn that:

II. Being Sent Means We Are Here To Do The Father's Will - Jn. 6:38 He didn't come down from heaven to do whatever he pleased and we are not sent out into the world to do whatever we please. He came to do His Father's will, not His own. And He taught us to pray that the same thing might be true of us, *Thy will be done!* So every time we come to a choice point in our lives, no matter how big or how small, the question to ask is always, "Father, what do YOU want?" And when we really get serious about this:

1. pleasing Him becomes the driving factor in our lives as it was in Jesus' **- Jn. 5:30, 8:29b**. Nothing else matters; pleasing him is everything. It's all we think about. It's our only consideration. We ask ourselves, "What pleases Jesus?" and then we rush to do it. And when this is the way we live all the time, here's where we end up:

2. we accomplish the Father's work, just like Jesus did **- Jn. 9:4**. He didn't do His own work; He did the work of the One who sent Him. He worked the works of God! And so do we! When we please Him, we do the very work of God on this earth; God is at work in everything we do. His work and ours are one and the same! Imagine that! Of course, to many people that doesn't sound appealing at all! They would object, "But we never get to do anything WE want to do! It sounds like a life of servitude, a life of bondage and slavery." Yet the amazing thing is that:

3. we find our deepest satisfaction in doing this, just like Jesus did. When He had won the Samaritan woman to faith at the well in chapter 4 and didn't feel like eating when his disciples got back with supper, they couldn't understand it and he explained it to them this way **- Jn. 4:34**. In other words, doing the will of God, accomplishing His work, satisfies me in a way that food or any other earthly pleasure never could! It is a delight to me! I LOVE to do what pleases Him! *G. Campbell Morgan told this story: "A lady said to me some years ago, 'I'm tired of this worldly life. I'm going to give myself to Christ. I know what it means; I will have to do all the things I most dislike, but I am determined to be a real Christian.' When I returned to her town a year later," said Morgan, "she was one of the first to welcome me. 'Do you recall,' she inquired, 'what I said to you when I rededicated my life?' I told her I certainly did. Then she looked at me and the light of God was on her face as she exclaimed, 'But it's been so different, Dr. Morgan! I began to follow Christ feeling that I would have to do all the things that were contrary to my desires, but now I do what I want every day because God has made me pleased with the things that please Him!'"* That's how Jesus lived and how He intended for us to live as sent ones! Now thirdly:

III. Being Sent Means We Are Here To Speak The Father's Words, just as Jesus did **- Jn. 3:34**. So much of what the Father wants us to do, so much of what pleases Him, has to do with what we say, with our words. Here's a novel thought. God didn't save us so that we can say whatever we please, so that we can have freedom of speech! He saved us so that He could send us out into the world as His mouthpieces, so that He could speak to the world through our mouths. He plans to speak His words to the world through us, every day. But that only works, of course, if:

1. we teach what the Father tells us, the way Jesus did **- Jn. 7:16, 8:26**. For many years, I called one or more pastors in the country of Kyrgyzstan weekly, to encourage and pray with them. And to do that, I had a friend who served as my translator. What a translator does is really simple, but extremely important. He listens to what I say and then does his best to tell the other party exactly what I said, but in Kyrgyz, of course. He is not free to hold his own conversation with the person we're calling, to say whatever he feels like. If I'm saying something hhe doesn't like or if it doesn't make sense to him, he doesn't have the right to change it. He has one primary responsibility, to tell exactly what he is told by me as accurately as he can. Do you get it? That's how we speak for our Father! He tells us what to say and we are careful to say exactly what He says to us and not to offer our own opinions or say whatever comes into our heads! Certainly, that's true in preaching to a crowd or teaching a class. I am always very careful to check out the truth of even minor facts or illustrations I share because I want to be sure that I'm sharing things that are true and that God wants passed on. However, this is not just for public situations! God wants this to be true in the way that we talk at home and at work and at school, to our wives and our husbands and our children and our parents and our crotchety

neighbors and our overbearing friends. That's why Paul wrote, *Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen*. - *Eph. 4:29.* God wants us to talk HIS talk, to say HIS words, to listen to His Spirit and say what HE wants, all the time. And, of course, when we do that:

2. we speak with the authority of the Father as Jesus did **- Jn. 14:24**. If you've said what the Father wants, it doesn't matter whether the listener likes it or not or believes it or not. They aren't your words; they are God's. You're just the messenger and you've fulfilled your duty! The person has to take up their case with God Himself. However, a word of caution is in order here. It is really easy to develop an attitude of pride in this area, one that says, "God told me to tell you this..." Listen, any time you are not directly quoting Scripture, which you know is God's actual Word, that statement is open to question! Truly speaking God's words is a matter of learning to listen to the Holy Spirit, to hear His quiet whisper in your thoughts. It takes lots of practice and sometimes even those with years of practice hear wrong. So make sure you're humble in the process, not puffed up. But the good news is that when we are truly listening:

3. He shows us what to say and how to say it - Jn. 12:49-50 If I'm listening, He shows me, not only the content of WHAT to say, but the manner of HOW to say it! *Phil Downer shares the experience of one woman. Her daughter's husband had just left her, so the she flew across the country to be with her daughter for Christmas. Of course, the daughter was devastated by what had happened, and so it was anything but a happy holiday. The days were filled with grief and shock. The mother couldn't do much except cry with her and pray with her. By the time she left for the airport to go back home, she was emotionally drained and very discouraged about the whole situation. Before she got on the plane, she stopped in the airport gift shop to buy some postcards for her grandchildren. The cashier was making small talk and asked her where she was from and if she'd had a nice vacation. The woman almost started crying and explained that it hadn't been a vacation and why. She briefly told the cashier what had happened to her daughter and that she felt terrible leaving her alone to go home. [I'm sure the young lady must have breathed a quick prayer for wisdom because she] ...reached across the counter and took the mother's hand and smiled at her and said, "Ma'am, God is good. He'll be with your daughter even when you can't be." That mother felt such encouragement and comfort in those words that she hugged the cashier before hurrying off to catch her flight. [Brave Strong and Tender by Phil Downer. Vision House, 1996. Page 118.]* That's how God wants to use us. He has sent us to say just what He wants said, in just the way He wants it said, at just the right moment, to touch and bless the people He puts in our lives! He wants to speak through us, but we have to learn to listen! Now finally, let's take that thought one step further. Like Jesus, we have been sent to proclaim a particular message:

IV. Being Sent Means We Are Here To Proclaim The Father's News Look how Jesus described His own mission in **Lk. 4:18-19**. There was a particular message the Father had sent Him to deliver. It was GOOD news. Imagine what it would be like to be in prison all your life and then one day someone opens your cell door and gives you the message, "You are free to go!" Or imagine what it would be like to be blind all your life and suddenly someone walks up to you and says, "You can see!" and light floods your eyes! Or what it would be like to be a slave forced to work hard in the fields day after day, being barely given enough to survive, and one day a stranger comes and says, "You are released!" That's the kind of life-changing news that God has sent us to proclaim. The Good News of Jesus Christ, of His life, death and resurrection, makes poor men rich, sets imprisoned men free, gives oppressed men release and blind men sight! It is that life-transforming message of salvation in Jesus that we have been sent to deliver! Now when I see who the Father sent Jesus to, it makes me think that:

1. He has sent us in a particular way to the poor, the prisoners, the blind and the oppressed, to the downtrodden of the earth. Of course, salvation is for everybody, but we have a special responsibility, as Solomon put it, to *Rescue those being led away to death; hold back those staggering toward slaughter. - Prov. 24:11*. We are sent to the aids victims and their orphans who number in the millions across Africa, to the single mothers desperate to feed their starving children, to the teens being "graduated" out of orphanages onto the street who end up trafficked in Kyrgyzstan, to the refugees reduced to nothing by war and strife or by some natural disaster that destroyed their homes. These are the kinds of people that the Father's heart goes out to! The needy! The poor! The helpless! These are first on the Father's heart, though they are often last on ours and He has sent us to them with the message of hope in Jesus Christ. Of course, He has also sent us to ordinary people living ordinary lives, just as Jesus preached in village after village in Israel. Yet even in that process, Jesus reminds us that:

2. He has sent us to preach the good news to ALL, not just some One village wanted to hang onto Him, to keep Him there to keep blessing them, but look what He said in **Lk. 4:43**. "I was sent to ALL, not just some! The rest need to hear the news too!" The word ALL is at the heart of the Gospel. It's primary message is not "Jesus loves ME." but "God so loved the WORLD". *I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also... - John 10:16*. Jesus was always about "other sheep" and it's a good thing He was, because WE are the "other sheep" He was talking about! The heart of God is ever after those who have not heard the Good News, who have never had opportunity to hear the Good News and since we are sent by Him, so must ours be. It can never be content with "my church and my Christian friends". We are sent to ALL, not just some. And the amazing thing is that:

3. He has sent us so that all who will listen and believe will have eternal life - Jn. 6:39-40 We are sent to literally change the eternal destiny of people! Those who believe the message we bring them will not be lost, not one of them! They will live forever with Jesus and even their bodies will be raised at the last day! We are not talking about simply making their lives a bit better or seeing that they eat better; our message secures for them an eternal future. That's why it is so important for them to hear and that's why it is so important for us to realize every day that we are SENT! We are literally sent to save the world! That's how important our mission is!

Back in the nineties a pastor in Hong Kong sent two young simple Chinese girls who were new believers at their own insistence to Hainan Island, a large island off the coast of China where there were no Christians. At the end of two years they were back for the first time and he asked them to visit him. He asked them, "How many churches have you established on Hainan?" They put their heads down and answered, "Oh Pastor, we have only been there two years, not very many. Not very many." "How many?" "Oh, not many, we have only been there a short time. The people were not very friendly...sometimes they became very vicious. Yes, sometimes they told us they were going to drown us in the ocean...several men threatened us...and because we were so young, some of the other ladies did not like us, some even called us terrible names...so not many churches." "How many? How many churches do you have?" After two more rounds of this exchange, one looked up as though confessing to a crime and said, "Only thirteen." "Thirteen! my goodness!" But the Pastor's assistant interrupted and said, "She did not say thirteen; she said thirty!" "Thirty churches in two years...my word! And how many people are in the churches?" "Oh, not many, not many." "How many?" "Only two hundred twenty people. Not many, no..not many." "Two hundred twenty people in thirty churches?" "Oh no, in only one, but that is a very small church, very small. There are bigger ones." "Two hundred twenty is small? Dear Lord... How many are in the big churches, you know, the biggest one?" "Oh, not many..." "Yes, yes, I know, but please ladies, HOW MANY?" "Oh, less than five thousand. Only four thousand nine hundred... we have just started." The pastor began to weep. [And here's the part I want you to pay attention to. He asked:] *"But what did you do, how did you do it?" They looked astonished. "What did we do? Why nothing. Yes, we did nothing, nothing." "Nothing? You have thirty churches with thousands of Christians and you did NOTHING?" "No, nothing, we just prayed." "I know you prayed but what else did you do?" They looked as if they did not understand the question. "We just prayed. After we prayed, the Holy Spirit would tell us exactly what to do. We would keep praying and He would tell us what to do and we would do it. Then we prayed and He would tell us what to do. We would do it and keep praying." [from The Coming Influence Of China, pp. 187-192].* That sounds just like the life Jesus lived, doesn't it? He was always conscious of being sent into the world with a purpose, always praying and asking the Father's will and hearing Him and doing His work, saving the world! God will probably not send you to Hainan Island, but He has sent you into the world to save it and you do it by that same process. Be conscious that you've been sent to represent Him and proclaim His news. Ask Him what to do and then do it and keep asking and doing and asking and doing. Live the life HE planned for you as a sent one. Set your heart to finish His work and you will be amazed at what He will do through you!

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If That Isn't Love... - John 1:1-14

Part 1: The Leaving Of The Son

Each of the four Gospels begins in a different manner to describe Jesus' coming into the world for us. Mark begins by skipping it altogether and going straight to the beginning of His ministry. Matthew and Luke begin by laying out for us all the details of the earthly circumstances of his birth, from his miraculous conception to that glorious night in Bethlehem when the angels sang, to the later arrival of the wise men to worship Him as King, all the things we usually focus on at Christmas time. But John starts in a different place from all of them. He sets out to tell the story from heaven's viewpoint rather than earth's, from God's perspective rather than man's. His opening verses remind me of a Gaither song we used to sing years ago:

"He left the splendor of heaven knowing His destiny, was the lonely hill of Golgotha, there to lay down His life for me.
If that isn't love the ocean is dry, There's no star in the sky And the sparrow can't fly!..." - The Gaithers

Jesus left the splendor of heaven to go to a cross in an act of love that is so deep and so infinite that we can only begin to hope to comprehend it. John's Gospel is here to explain to us and remind us of:

I. Where Jesus Came From (1:1-2) We sometimes become so enamored of the story of the birth of Jesus as a baby that we forget the broader picture. His life did not begin in the manger in Bethlehem, nor even when the angel appeared to Mary and the Holy Spirit caused the miraculous conception to occur inside her body. Jesus had existed long before that. In fact:

1. He came from a glorious eternity of being God (1) He already "was" in the beginning. Before the creation of anything in our present universe, He had already existed from forever. He is God; He has no beginning. And that existence before Bethlehem, before David and Moses and Abraham, even before creation, was a glorious one. When Jesus prayed in chapter 17, He said, ...*now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.* **(17:5)** And in verse **24**, *"Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see*

my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world. Oh, what a life the Lord Jesus had, a life filled with splendor and glory so vast and wonderful that we can't even imagine it. And what made it so glorious was that:

2. He came from an eternal relationship with the Father (1-2) John says it twice: He was with God; He was with God in the beginning. It wasn't somebody else; it was the same One, the same Jesus who was born in that manger at Bethlehem. He didn't become the Son of God because He was born of Mary. He has always been the Eternal Son of God. From all eternity past, He and the Father enjoyed the one-ness of true fellowship within their own being. There is no human way to describe it, no illustration to compare it to. Our God has enjoyed fellowship with Himself as a Tri-une Being since before time began. And on top of that, John reminds us that:

3. He came from a position of creating and owning all things (3) He made all things. The physical creation. The sun, moon and stars. The earth itself with all its features, the mountains and oceans and plains. All of the plants and the animals that live on it and especially people, the crown of His creation. He invented us! The Lord Jesus put us together along with everything else. And you know, when you make something, it belongs to you, doesn't it? You own it. It's yours. A whole universe created for His pleasure, controlled and ruled by Him. And then John says:

4. He came from a place of complete life and light (4, 9) He had life in Himself, the very life of God, eternal life. That life was intended originally to be passed on to men. But it came to them as light. It had to be seen and understood and received. It was intended to be for every human being that they would see the light and receive it and have life and enjoy that glorious life of eternity with Him forever and ever. Everything in Jesus' experience, before the angels fell and Adam fell, was light and life. No sin. Perfect. And even after that, the glories of heaven were unaffected by it. All around Him was light and life. So now just look at the contrast of:

II. What Jesus Came To In choosing to enter a virgin's womb and be born as a baby:

1. He came to a world filled with darkness and death (5) To a world tainted everywhere with the effects of sin, a world where everything and everyone dies, where nothing lasts. To a world full of people who were deceived by His arch enemy and had fallen into unimaginable depths of degradation, far from what He had ever intended for them. To a race of people blinded by their sin, who couldn't see His glorious light and didn't care. To a world where babies are slain by wicked rulers like Herod or offered as sacrifices to idols, a world where the wicked prosper by oppressing the helpless and millions go to bed hungry. And what's worse:

2. He came to a world that did not recognize Him (10) Here He was, the Creator of the Universe, the One who made it all. And nobody even knew who He was. A few shepherds and wise men had a bare inkling. When He grew up, He multiplied bread and walked on water and healed the sick with a touch or a word; He even raised the dead! But still nobody, not even His own disciples, fully recognized Him, for if they had known, the world would not have crucified the Lord of Glory! It's like your spouse being in a coma or having dementia and not having a clue who you are, but it's worse. And it's not just that the world didn't recognize Him:

3. He came to a world that did not receive Him (11) They rejected Him. They refused to believe. They accused Him. They called him an agent of Satan. They called him an enemy of the state. They called him a liar and a blasphemer. They shouted, "Kill Him! Crucify Him! We have no King but Caesar!" It's worse than your child growing up and cutting all ties with you, denying everything you've ever done for him and saying, "You are not my mother or father!" He came into His own world, to His own people Israel, who were supposed to be waiting for Him and they rejected Him completely. And on top of that:

4. He came to a life of the limitations of humanity (14) He became flesh and dwelt among us. He was the One and Only, the Only Begotten Son of the Father, full of grace and truth, dwelling in glory. And he came to a human body that had to crawl and to walk and to eat to sustain itself. A body that hurt and grew old. He came from omnipresence to walking to the market, from omnipotence to carrying wood planks by hand for his father, from creating the world out of nothing by a word to shaping boards for hours with a crude rasp. From perfect joy to all the suffering of human experience. From the worship of angels to fleeing for his life into Egypt. From a scepter in His glorious hands to having them nailed to a cross! That's what Jesus came to! In the cantata, A Light Still Shines there is a song that says:

> *Accustomed to the darkness, we never missed the Light, Confounded by our wisdom, we wandered in the night. So far from what was Promised, so blinded by our sin; forgetting all His favor, we turned our back on Him.*
> *Though regal beyond measure, the King of all the earth, to save His dearest treasure, He came of lowly birth. He gave of all His riches, our poverty to end, though few beheld His glory, though few could comprehend.*
> *STILL HE CAME from the Father's throne, to a world so lost, unnoticed and alone. In human form, now locked in time and space, behold His matchless grace, the Savior came. [A Light Still Shines]*

Now here's another thing to consider, perhaps the most amazing of all. He came KNOWING what would happen, what His reception would be, knowing what He would leave behind and what He would face at Calvary. It did not take Him by

surprise. Things did not simply go awry after His arrival. Let's take a brief tour through John's Gospel and see how often he reminds us of:

III. What Jesus Knew When He Came First:

• He knew all men and what was in them - Jn. 2:24-25 Not just a few, but all men. He knows every human being. He knew the ones He was coming to. And He knows what is inside them, what they're thinking, what's in their heart. He doesn't need to be told!

• He knew what He was going to do ahead of time - Jn. 6:6 He always knew what He would do, what came next, what miracle, what teaching, what situation He would encounter and how He would handle it.

• He knew in Himself what His disciples were thinking - Jn. 6:61 He heard their whispered grumbling, but not with His ears. The Greek and the KJV say, "He knew IN HIMSELF..." He knew the very thoughts of their hearts, not by hearing anything, but because nothing is hidden before Him.

• He knew from the beginning who would believe and betray - Jn. 6:64 He knew which of his followers were false, which ones were only in it for the bread, which ones would walk away when things got tough. He knew which one would sell His life for 30 pieces of silver and which ones would come back and remain true to Him. As you move on thru His life, you find:

• He knew the time had come to leave and return to the Father - Jn. 13:1, 3 He knew where He came from. And He knew He was going back there to the Father. And He knew the way back was the cross and that the time for it had come. As He entered that last supper with His disciples and bent down and washed their feet:

• He knew who was going to betray Him - Jn. 13:11 He knew all along that that night Judas would sell Him out, but washed his feet anyway. As they wrestled with His trying to explain to them that He was leaving:

• He knew what His disciples wanted to ask - Jn. 16:19 He knew they didn't want to see Him go and couldn't understand how that could be. And even as He hung in agony on the cross, in the last few moments of it all:

• He knew everything that had to be completed - Jn. 19:28 He knew it was all finished, that every prophecy was fulfilled, except one little one that said He would be given wine mixed with gall to drink so He said, "I thirst". He knew it was time to cry, "It is finished! Father, I'm coming home!" and release His spirit and die.

Oh, my friend, He knew it all. From all eternity, He knew it. Before the creation of the world, He knew it. He made the human race, KNOWING it! *He left the splendor of heaven knowing His destiny was the lonely Hill of Golgotha there to lay down His life for me...* And STILL HE CAME! But why? What would move Him to do such a thing? To leave all of that to come for this? You see:

IV. Why Jesus Chose To Come The writer of Hebrews says that it was for the joy that was set before Him that He endured the cross. There was a joy set before Him that He knew would make it worth it all. And the cross was the only way that joy could be procured. John spells it out for us:

1. He came that we might see the glory of the Father in Him (14, 18) There was no other way for us to see His glory. No one has ever seen it. The darkness has never been dispelled. We could not know Him. So He came to us as one of us that we might see, that the light might shine among us. And:

2. He came that we might receive Him and believe in His Name (12) He came so that a remnant of the human race, so that some of us, the few who would see, who would believe, would receive Him, would fall at His feet and say, "My Lord and My God, My Savior!" and worship Him. And:

3. He came that we might become God's own children (12-13) That we might experience a new birth from God in our souls, that we might be transformed by His Spirit, that He might live in us and we might be His children forever, that we might receive the adoption of sons and share in that glory between the Father and the Son and all His sons and daughters forever and ever.

If that isn't love, the ocean is dry, there's no stars in the sky, and the sparrow can't fly. If that isn't love. You may be saying, "But where's the application? I already know all that. What's the point?" There is only one point this morning. Somebody loves you! If nobody else in this world loves you, Somebody loves you. If lots of people in this world love you, Somebody loves you more. Somebody loved you so much that He would rather die than live without you! Somebody loved you with such a great eternal love that He went out of the ivory palaces into a world of woe. Somebody loved you so much that He did leave His throne and His kingly crown when He came to earth for you. The only point there is today is that in all of your wonderful holiday festivities and celebrations, be sure to celebrate this: He loves you! And the only gift that will thrill His heart is that you fall at His feet and worship Him and love Him back!

Pam Drum wrote a song that put it like this:

No palace, no jewels, No kingdom to rule, No crown of majesty, No throne and no robe, No silver no gold, No courts of royalty. Yet the King of kings left heaven To become a lowly man. He left all heaven's glory, To fulfill His Father's plan.

No family, no friends, To help at the end, No out, no substitute. Much pain and much hurt. To give love and worth, He bore our sin's abuse. Yet the hope that He offered, So outweighed what must be done. He chose to be my victor, And assured my pardon won.

He still came just for me, He still came. Knowing all He would endure, He still came. Disregarding every cost, From the manger to the cross, He still came Just for me He still came. [© 1990, 1992 Magnolia Hill Music, LLC (Admin. by Integrated Copyright Group, Inc.) / Did My Music (Admin. by Integrated Copyright Group, Inc.)]

My friend, He loves you. Will you love Him back with all your heart?

If That Isn't Love... - John 1:1-14
Part 2: The Sending Of The Father

Last time we turned to John's version of the Christmas story so that we might see the tremendous love of the Son of God for us in coming into this world. We let this song remind us that, *He left the splendor of heaven knowing His destiny was the lonely hill of Golgotha there to lay down His life for me. If that isn't love...* What love Jesus had, to leave behind all the riches of eternal glory to come to earth to save me, knowing all He would endure! Nobody has ever loved me like that! But today let's turn around and consider the same event from a different angle. Let's think about God our Heavenly Father sending His Son into the world and all that means. We sing a song that Harry Bollback wrote called *Ring The Bells* every Christmas and in it is this bridge:

"God the Father gave His Son, gave His own Beloved One,
to this wicked sinful earth to give mankind His love, new birth.
Ring the bells, ring the bells, let the whole world know!" - Harry Bollback

While we are often reminded of the love of Jesus in coming for us, how seldom we pause to think about:

I. The Love Of The Father In Sending His Son So let's go back to John's opening verses and see three truths that it's so easy to forget. First, let's notice that:

1. the Father sent away His Son to be our Savior (1-2) Last week we noticed that He was with God the Father in the beginning and was indeed always with God. To save us, He had to leave the enjoyment of that immense privilege. But think from the other direction. The Father had been with His Son from all eternity. Together they had created the universe. Together they had named the stars and arranged the earth. Together they said, "Let us make man in our image..." They had done it all together, always inseparable, always glorying in one another. The Father loved His Son with an eternal love greater than any human father and son. And yet John writes in **1 Jn. 4:14-16a**, *And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world... And so we know and rely on the love God has for us....* That word *sent* is *apostello*, to send away, to officially and with authority tell someone to go where you want them to go. The Father sent Him away. He said, "I want you to go." He deliberately sent Him away from glory, away from safety, away from protection, away from joy and happiness and peace, in order to be our Savior. Some of you have sent your children away to college or away for the summer and you know how hard that is. You want them with you. You have enjoyed their presence. You know how hard it is to send them away, even when you know they're going to a wonderful experience that's good for them. Where did you get that instinct, that drive to keep your child safe with you? It's the image of God in you! Think how much love the Father had for us that He would send His own Son away from Himself! Then think about why He did it. Why did He choose to send away His Son?

2. the Father sent forth His Son to make us His sons (12-13) God wanted more children! He wanted sons and daughters. He wanted us who were lost in sin, who lived in darkness and didn't want the light, to be born all over again by His power and become His children. That was His will. Paul put it this way in **Gal. 4:4-5**, *But when the fulness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, in order that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.* Here's that same Greek word in emphasized form, *exapostello,* to send forth, to send out away from. God sent His Son forth out of heaven into the world for us, that we might be adopted into His family, that we might have the relationship with the Father that Jesus had, that we might be the very sons and daughters of God. Hebrews says that God's purpose was "bringing many sons to glory!" His heart longed to one day stand in the gates of glory and sing, "*Welcome home, children! This is the place I've prepared for you. Welcome home children, here by my side you will always be..."* That was His passion for us and so He sent forth His Son on a mission to redeem us and rescue us and bring us home. But that mission carried a great price:

3. the Father sacrificed His only Son to give us life (14) Jesus was His One and Only, His ONLY begotten Son. There was nobody else He could send. Ten thousand angels couldn't do the job. He had to send His Son, but in chapter 3, John used a different word in **Jn. 3:16**. He didn't just SEND Him to us; He GAVE Him to us. *God the Father gave His Son, gave His own Beloved One to this wicked sinful earth to give mankind His love, new birth.* He gave Him as a gift. He gave Him as an offering. He didn't just send Him to do a job. He gave Him as a sacrifice for our sins; He gave Him to go out to die that we might not perish, but have everlasting life. He gave Him to scorn and scoffing and suffering and death because He loved us. Some of us have sent our child to the other side of the world as missionaries to reach

people who were dying without Christ. And that was hard enough, to not have them with us. But what if we knew that meant sending them to a painful death? That would be another story for us. Would we love them enough for that? Would we say, "Go, save them anyway!" I doubt it; we're only human. But Steve Amerson's song pictures it this way:

Heaven stood in hushed anticipation, The moment of all time would soon begin. The Father turned to look at His creation, A fallen man, a hopeless cry of sin. He knew the sacrifice that would be needed, He knew the cost His heart of love would pay. He looked to the eyes of His beloved Son, Creation stopped to hear the Father say,

"Go change the world, Go change the world, Your light will pierce the darkness, Your life will lead the way." "Go change the world, Go change the world, Their only hope is in a Savior. Go change the world." [© 1993 Word Music, Inc. (a div. of Word Music Group, Inc.) / Dayspring Music, Inc. (a div. of Word Music Group, Inc.)]

Behold, my friends, how much the Father loves you; He sent His Only Son for you! *Behold what manner of love the Father has given unto us that we should be called the sons of God!* Now secondly, let's consider:

II. The Son's Love For The Father In Being Sent The Son of God had two motives in entering the world through Mary's womb and going to the cross. The one we have talked about is His great love for us, His willingness to die for us. But that is only half the story. He also came out of love for the Father. The Psalmist recorded Jesus' words prophetically, *I come to do your will, O God.* He told the Jews, *"When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am [the one I claim to be] and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me. The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what pleases him." - John 8:28-29* Jesus loved the Father so much that He had only one purpose, to say what He wanted said, to do what He wanted done, to always do His will. So, when the Father sent the Son to be the Savior of the world, this was the ultimate display of that love because:

1. loving the Father meant entering the darkness (4-5) As we said last week, it meant going out of the ivory palaces filled with heavenly light and purity and going into a world of woe, a world filled with sin and death, a world where evil often triumphs and injustice abounds and you are sure to get hurt. It is like an earthly father saying, "Son, I need you to go and live in the worst part of the ghetto or in the worst part of a maximum security prison." Or, "Son, I need you to go and live in the slums of Calcutta as a beggar." Name your own dark place. Yet the son, without a moment's hesitation, saying, "Yes, Father, I love you, I'll go wherever you need me to go, no matter how dark and difficult it is!" That's what Jesus did. And:

2. loving the Father meant becoming unrecognized (10) It meant going from being the Lord of heaven and angels bowing down, to a world where nobody knew Him, where nobody believed Him, where nobody understood Him, not even His own disciples. A world he had created which couldn't see it, no matter if He stilled a storm, healed the sick or even raised the dead. It meant being the only One who knew the real truth and having everybody call it a lie and Him a liar. It meant saying, "Father, I love you so much that I'm willing for all of that!" And:

3. loving the Father meant choosing rejection even to death (11) It meant choosing to go, knowing not only that you would not be received, but would be fully rejected, despised, plotted against, arrested, falsely accused, spat upon, beaten and nailed to a cross to die. It meant saying, "Father, I love you enough to die for You, if that's what you need me to do to accomplish your purpose!" Oh, you may never have considered it before, but what a love the Son had for the Father in saying "Yes" and coming to that manger in Bethlehem! And I remind you of it so that I can point out that we are in the exact same situation. Look with me at **Jn. 20:21** where Jesus said to the disciples who loved Him and thus to us, *As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.* What a powerful statement. Just as the Father sent the Son to be the Savior of the world in all that that means, in that very same way, the Son and the Father have sent us forth on a mission now that we have believed. And it is one and the same mission. The Son loves us; we are His children. He would rather have us safely at home with Him. But He has said to us, *All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.* - **Mt. 28:18-20** "Go, my sons, my daughters, whom I have loved enough to die for, Go save the world!" That's what's still on His heart, yet if we love Him, we have to respond and say, "Yes Lord, I love you so much that I will do your will." Now what does that look like?

III. Our Love For The Father And Son In Being Sent Well, first:

1. loving Him means being willing to enter the darkness - Mt. 5:14-16 Our tendency is to make ourselves a little Christian enclave of light, to surround ourselves with Christian friends, to hide in our church family and venture out only as far as work or neighborliness necessitate. But Jesus went back to heaven and now WE are the light of the world and we have to choose to enter the darkness of the world around us. Loving Him means to choose, like Jesus, to go and eat with publicans and sinners, to build relationships with non-believers wherever we are in life, to talk about our faith in Jesus, our love for Him. To let our light shine and that doesn't just mean doing without saying. It means sharing the Good News and then people will measure the truth of what we say by the righteous way we act and some of them will fall down and worship our Father in heaven! And loving Him means entering the darkness beyond where we live also. It means investing our lives in getting the Gospel into the darkest places at the uttermost parts of the earth.

Laboring in prayer, giving sacrificially and even going there if He so directs. That's His will and if we love Him, we'll do what He wants. Now in that process, as we go into the darkness of the world:

2. loving Him means being willing to be misunderstood - 1 Pet. 4:4 warns us that people living in the darkness of this world will *think it strange that you do not plunge with them into the same flood of dissipation, and they heap abuse on you.* Many of them won't understand you as they didn't understand Him. They will think you're strange; they can't imagine you won't do what they do and live like they live. They will embarrass you, make jokes about you, deliberately provoke you or tempt you, to get you to sin. And some of them will target you for hate, just because you love Jesus. So:

3. loving Him means being willing to endure rejection - Jn. 15:18-20 Jesus warned us in sending us. Look at history. Followers of Jesus Christ have been persecuted, even martyred, and it continues around the world today in China, Sudan, North Korea and a hundred other places. Even in the safer environment that we are fortunate to have at the moment, we may become targets. People may determine to hate us and treat us badly simply because we love Him. And loving Him is to deliberately sign up for it all, darkness, misunderstanding, even rejection.

A Chinese itinerant evangelist was traveling one Christmas in the rugged province of Gansu. He trudged on foot from village to village. It was snowing and a cold wind blew, but his heart was warm. This was his first trip as an evangelist, and he had made quite a few converts in the five villages he had just visited. But as he approached the sixth village, he was to be catapulted into a drama that, when looked back upon, seemed like a replay of Bethlehem itself. He tells the story with great emotion:

As I drew near the village, I sensed that something was wrong. People were huddled together, talking in low tones, glances darting accusingly at each other." I introduced myself to them. "Greetings, I am the bearer of Good News, that...' A small man interrupted me. "Well, we have only bad news here right now." With ill-concealed irritation, he explained, "A couple has just had their baby stolen." In the poorer areas of China, where couples are restricted to one child, baby snatching is not uncommon. Indeed, there are even gangs that roam the countryside, stealing babies for wealthy childless couples in the cities. I asked to see the couple, but the people just said to me, "Go away. We don't want you here. Stop pestering us and move on." Tears sprang into my eyes. I had rarely been spoken to like that. Should I shake the dust from my sandals and move on? Or should I strive with them a while? "Please take me to the couple," I pleaded with the villagers. "I may be able to help." Reluctantly, maybe only because I was a stranger, they took me to the cottage of the unfortunate couple. I stepped inside the house to find both husband and wife staring quietly at me. Other villagers crowded at the doorway. There was silence. The couple's grief hung heavily in the air. I said, "I'm so sorry to hear about your plight, but I know someone who may help... God. Let me pray to Him." There was no reaction on the couple's faces, so I went into my prayer, feeling very uncomfortable indeed. "Dear Father, many years ago at this same time of year you sent a child into the world and rescued us all. We ask now that you will send back this child to us, and deliver this village from the sadness that grips it. Amen."

Suddenly the young husband spoke. "Shut up and go away. We have prayed to our gods and nothing has happened. Why should yours be any different?" I was grabbed from behind by the other villagers and propelled out of the village. "Don't you dare come here again!" they bawled as I retreated. What a failure! I wandered the hills in a daze of humiliation and tears. "Lord, have I prayed in vain?" I shouted. Then I stopped, and began to think a little about Christmas. The Son of God had come to a world knowing He would be despised, kicked, beaten, misunderstood and finally crucified. Yet He still came. And I thought, "I went to that village expecting a hero's welcome, or at the very least, I relied on being a curiosity, quizzed and entertained by people who live very dull and isolated lives. Instead, I had only been treated a little like Christ was treated." Kneeling there in the snow, I knew what I had to do. I had to go back to that village, knowing for sure I would be despised. This was to follow in the Master's footsteps. He had the courage. So must I. Yet I quaked with fear. Those villagers had handled me very roughly. My arms and shoulders were still sore from the bruises they had inflicted when they grabbed me. With a pounding heart, I turned and began to walk slowly back towards the village. It was going to be dangerous, and what would I say? Suddenly, in the still afternoon air, I heard a baby's cry. I headed toward the sound. There was the cry again. coming from what appeared to be an old well shaft. I reached the shaft. Six feet down was a little baby, wrapped in a thick blanket, lying at the bottom of the dry well. "Lord I praise you," I shouted into the well, and the booming echo frightened the child into another whimper. The baby was blue in the face, and I climbed down to hug some warmth back into it. This must be the missing baby from the village, snatched only that morning. I unwrapped the blanket. Ah, there was the explanation, it was a baby girl. Those who had taken it did not know it was a girl, and finding later that it was, left it in this old well to die. The city couples that finance this hideous trade invariably want only males. I walked back to the village with the precious bundle of life clasped to my breast. The villagers came running. They were amazed and overjoyed. Loving hands led me to the cottage of the poor couple, and the smile on the mother's face as I placed the baby into her lap was unforgettable. "Come, warm yourself by the fire," said the husband. They drew up a chair for me, and as the other villagers crowded around, he asked, "Who was that God you prayed to? "What an invitation! Here I was, the honored guest, looking at 30 people waiting eagerly to hear the Gospel. "Well," I began, "He came to earth in the form of a little baby, just about this time 2,000 years ago.... The couple believed in Jesus that night, and I learned a great lesson. I only heard that baby's cry because I had turned to go back to the village. If I had refused, I would have walked in an entirely different direction, far out of earshot of the baby's cry. If I had not had the courage to take the Gospel despite the

consequences, I would never have found the baby, never have introduced people to the Lord. I had to first accept the price of evangelism, of taking the Good News knowing I would be despised, caring nothing for myself. I gained a great insight that Christmas into the courage the Lord Jesus showed in coming to such an unwelcoming village as our world. I went back to that village reluctantly. He came willingly. My prayer is, "God grant me more of that courage that made Christmas possible!" [True story - Open Doors Newsbrief, Vol. 15, Issue 12, Dec. 2000] And I add, Father grant me that love that Jesus had for you, that when You sent Him, He said "Yes!" I leave you with the words of the song as Jesus' words to you:

"Go change the world, Go change the world, Your light will pierce the darkness, Your life will lead the way.
Go change the world, Go change the world, Their only hope is in a Savior. Go change the world."- Steve Amerson

What will your response be?

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"The Dad He Didn't Have To Be"

The Christmas Story Through The Eyes Of Joseph

A Husband To The Virgin Mother - Mt. 1:18-24

There's a hymn that says, "I heard an old, old story, how a Savior came from glory..." It's a story that is meant to create wonder and amazement in us. Yet as we look at the Christmas story year after year, again and again, I'm afraid it is all too easy for it to become simply an "old, old story". Familiarity does indeed breed contempt. That's why it's important to strive to find ways to make it alive and real in our minds and that's what this series is about. Before we start, I want to give proper credit up front by saying that some of the ideas and specific illustrations in this series of messages originate with Bill Crowder in his little book *Windows on Christmas* which you can purchase from Discovery House Publishers. And I'd like to begin by reminding you about:

I. The Importance Of Perspective Clint Eastwood produced two major historical movies in 2006. Both movies told the story of the famous WWII battle fought on the island of Iwo Jima in the Pacific. The most reproduced photograph in the history of photography is that of six soldiers struggling to raise the US flag on the top of Mt. Suribachi on Feb. 23, 1945; we've all seen that photo. Eastwood's first movie, *Flags of our Fathers*, tells the story the way we know it from the American perspective, a hard-fought and won victory in which 6,800 American soldiers gave their lives to take this piece of Japanese soil. But his second movie, *Letters From Iwo Jima,* masterfully tells the same story, but from the perspective of the 22,000 Japanese soldiers who planned not to survive in the first place and who ultimately perished on that island in what was to them a shameful and tragic loss that sealed their empire's fate. You see, the meaning of what happened there depends on whose eyes you're looking through, doesn't it? And the same problem plagues us as we try to understand Scripture, because:

1. we often view past events through the lens of our own present reality We look at the record of people's lives and understand and judge it:

a. based on the information <u>we</u> know instead of what they knew. We know the whole story. We know about Jesus' life and ministry and death and resurrection and the establishment of the church and its growth down through history. We know that His birth is the fulfillment of a long line of promises and the beginning of the events that changed history for all time and has transformed millions of lives. But Mary and Joseph didn't know ANY of that. What is to us a glorious, joyful event, started off to Joseph as a personal tragedy that nearly ruined his life! Plus, we often view stories like this:

b. based on the life experience <u>we</u> have here in western culture. We write the story in our minds of a young couple in love enduring the setback of an unexpected pregnancy and having a quaint little birth where the donkey's manger becomes a cute little cradle and masterfully dodging King Herod's attempts to catch them, as though it is some kind of touching movie script with a happy ending. We have no idea what it was like for an engaged girl to turn up pregnant in the village of Nazareth or for a couple to deliver a baby in a barn without help or to flee for their lives from Roman soldiers. You see:

2. true understanding must consider the reality of the original participants If we want to understand the depth of the meaning of this story, we have to do our best to go back and look at the events that happened through *their* eyes, not ours, events that happened in the world *they* lived in, not the one we live in. So this year, I'd like for us to look at the events of the Christmas story through the eyes of the one person who is mostly forgotten in the narratives. Joseph never says one word that is recorded for us. He never utters a "Magnificat," like Mary does, so we can hear his thoughts. After the birth stories, he passes totally off the scene, except for one brief glimpse when Jesus is 12 and yet he played a vital role in the life of the Son of God. I had never given him much thought, really, but Bill Crowder's book helped me to see the one thing that really stands out about him:

II. Joseph Made A Choice He Didn't Have To Make Country singer Brad Paisley has a music video titled "He Didn't Have To Be". You can watch it online for free and cry if you want, like I did. The singer pictures himself as a little boy who

was the only son of a single mom. And every time any man asks his mom on a date, they always look inside the house and see that she has a little boy sitting on the steps and they always walk away. One man after the other doesn't want him. Yet one day when he's five a man comes to call and sees him sitting there and smiles at him and invites him along on their date. That man becomes his stepfather and now, singing as an adult, he celebrates growing up with the love and acceptance of a stepfather who made their house a home and their twosome into a family. And finally, standing there beside him at the nursery window in the hospital, watching the nurse bring out his own newborn son, he sings,

Lookin' back all I can say
About all the things he did for me
Is I hope I'm at least half the dad
That he didn't have to be... you know, he didn't have to be...

That thought rings so true about Joseph. Joseph signed up for something he didn't have to sign up for, to be a husband to a pregnant virgin, to be a stepfather to the Son of God, to be a protector to the infant King. He chose to be "a dad he didn't have to be". If you'll turn with me to Matthew 1, you can see right there in verses 18-19 pretty much all of:

1. the facts we know about Joseph (18-19) There aren't very many of them. From other texts we know that Joseph:

a. he was a carpenter and lived in Nazareth 30 years later, the crowd in Nazareth said this about Jesus in **Mt. 13:55**, *"Isn't this the carpenter's son? Isn't his mother's name Mary, and aren't his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas?* That's how we know Joseph was a carpenter, a tradesman, a craftsman who worked with wood. We don't even know what kinds of things he made, really. Likely he started with rough logs and an adze and a plane to make beams to hold up the roofs of masonry houses or boards which could become part of anything from tables to boats that sailed the Sea of Galilee. Perhaps he made wagons and wooden yokes for oxen or turned wooden bowls or carved bows for hunting and staffs for shepherds. He was not among the elite and powerful, nor among the poor and despised. He was a man with a respected trade and well-known in his community, *the carpenter*. Jesus followed him into that trade, as did most all Jewish boys, and became known as a carpenter as well. However:

b. he seems to have died before Jesus' ministry began Mary appears at various points throughout His 3 years of public ministry. On one occasion she and his brothers came to take him home; Joseph is noticeably absent. From the cross, Jesus assigned John to take care of her in His place as oldest son, which would indicate that she was a widow. You see, Jesus probably lost his dad sometime between the age of 13 and 30 and was left with being the provider of the family. Maybe some of you can relate to that, but that's another story. However, the fact that he probably died many years before she did, seems to indicate that **he was perhaps significantly older** than she. So, the picture we have of two young 17-year-olds in love is probably not very accurate. Joseph was likely an older man, established in his business, and verse 18 tells us that:

c. he was betrothed to Mary in an arranged marriage To us, engagement is a young man on bended knee with a ring in his hand asking tenderly, "Will you marry me?" Sweet as that is, it is not the way marriage worked in Jewish culture, nor the way it works in many, many cultures of the world today. Most likely, Joseph actually "proposed" to Mary's father, "Will you give me your daughter in marriage?" and an agreement was made. She was "pledged" to, or betrothed to him, perhaps even some years ahead of time and they were waiting until the agreed time for her marriage. Or, perhaps Joseph was a friend of the family and Mary's father approached him as a respected man in the community with the prospect of marrying his daughter when she turned of age. It is very possible that Mary and Joseph didn't really know one another at all personally. We simply are not told. What we are told in verse 19 is that:

d. he was a righteous man, which, in the culture of that day, means that **he was a devout keeper of the Law**. He was reverent and respectful of God and careful to keep all the regulations and the ordinances God had commanded. You can see it in the glimpses we have of him. Luke tells us that on the eighth day, he had Jesus circumcised and named Him, just as the law says. On the fortieth day, he took Jesus up to the Temple to offer the proper sacrifices commanded under the law, a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons. Every year, Joseph would take his family up to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. These were not things Mary could initiate; they were Joseph's doing. And they were things not everyone did; they were marks of devotion to the Lord, of godliness in his life and respect for the Scripture. And that's all we know about him; he was a lover of God, a hard-working, well-respected carpenter, betrothed to a younger woman and awaiting that marriage to begin his family. Now let's consider:

2. the natural choice that Joseph intended to make when he learned that Mary was pregnant. You see:

a. the "discovery" of Mary's pregnancy was sudden and unexplained It is not like Mary ran to Joseph that night after the angel appeared to her and told him the story and how she would be pregnant and he watched this all unfold. That wouldn't have been natural. She ran to the hill country to her cousin Elizabeth, whom the angel had told her was already six months pregnant by a divine miracle. It confirmed her faith and she stayed there three months. So, when she came home to her parents, she was obviously pregnant. They are the ones who "discovered" it and were shocked and shamed. Her father is the one who had to go to Joseph and say, "My daughter has violated our pledge; she is with child." You can probably bet that even if Mary did explain her vision of the angel to her parents, that her father probably DIDN'T say to Joseph, "You see, an angel appeared to her and this is the only occasion of this kind of supernatural miracle of pregnancy without a father to ever occur." That probably wouldn't

have flown well; it didn't with anyone else! Joseph was shocked, I'm sure, perhaps angry at first, certainly disappointed, maybe shamed, because it was an act of insult and disregard toward him, as he would understand it. Yet verse 20 tells us that:

b. he deliberated his reaction carefully (20a) He didn't make a rash decision. He certainly couldn't marry her; in his righteous eyes she was no longer a virgin, no longer pure. In anger, he could have dragged her before the elders of the town and shamed her and demanded that they enforce the penalty of the law upon her. By law, being betrothed meant already married, and she could be stoned. However, Rome wasn't allowing the Jews to do stonings at this point. Yet she could still have been publicly humiliated in the eyes of her whole community, while he was vindicated as innocent! If he wanted get even, the opportunity was surely there, even if her father may have begged him not to do that. Yet verse 20 says that:

c. he was kind and did not want to publicly disgrace her He was not only a keeper of the letter of the law; he had something of the heart of God. He realized how this event, in his eyes, would ruin her life anyway, how she would always be viewed as an "unfaithful" one, her child as "illegitimate." He thought of the suffering and shame she would have to endure and he did not want to bring that upon her. After pondering and praying at length, in his kind heart:

d. he decided to divorce her privately, to go to her father, break the agreement, get his dowry back and let her quietly go on living her life in the shelter of her father's house the best she could. He would separate himself from her; he would simply break the deal and go on. A divorce; it was the best option he could think of. That is, until God stepped into his life in a dream that night! Look at:

3. the "counter-natural" choice God called Joseph to make (20-23) The angel told him he was supposed to do three things. First, he was:

a. to accept Mary as his pure virgin wife, to marry her immediately and accept that she had not been unfaithful, that God had performed a miracle and caused her to become pregnant. Second, he was:

b. to declare that her son is the promised Messiah/Savior He was to accept that this child was the Promised Messiah who would come and would save Israel from their sins. And he was to declare this publicly by naming him Jesus, *Jehovah saves.* And finally, he was:

c. to believe that he was fulfilling God's ancient plan, that Isaiah had said 750 years earlier that a virgin would be with child and give birth to a son who would be Immanuel, God with us, and that here and now, God was making good on that promise in the body of his betrothed and he was to participate in it.

It was a call to lay down every preconceived idea he had, to accept as God's truth things that were beyond his very comprehension. It was a call to lay down all his plans and dreams, all his personal agenda as the carpenter of Nazareth who wanted to start his little family and embark on a journey of faith that would take him literally to places he never dreamed of. It was a call to choose to be obedient to what God told him to do, in spite of all the ridicule and lack of understanding he would face. To use Beth Moore's phrase in describing Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, it was his call "to step up!" When everybody else around bows down to the idol, God calls us to "step up" and "stand up" and be counted as obedient, no matter what, for the glory of His Name. Joseph didn't have to do that. But he did. Look at:

4. the choice of faith that Joseph made (24-25) First of all:

a. he accepted all consequences *...he took Mary home as his wife* immediately. Before the town probably knew what was up, he married her and took her to his own house. He became her husband and let the questions and the innuendoes and the rumors all fall on him. In one sense, he rescued her; he gave her valid standing in the community as his wife. Even if they blamed him for fathering the child and moving up the marriage, it didn't matter. He believed God and stepped up and obeyed. Secondly, notice that:

b. he surrendered all privilege Usually being married comes with the privilege of enjoying sexual union with one another, but *...he had no union with her* until AFTER Jesus was born. Though living together as husband and wife and acting like family, it would be seven more months before he could experience the physical union he had waited for for years, because he had to protect God's name and reputation in this; there could be no ground for accusation that this was, after all, his natural child. He must be able to swear in full truth to the miracle that he had never touched her. And ladies, in case you don't know this, let me tell you that to a guy, that's a big deal! But Joseph stepped up and said, "Yes God, I'll die to what I want; I'll lay down my plans and my desires. I'll die to self." Hey, young people! Did you know God calls you today to step up in a similar way! He calls you to abstain, to have no sexual union until you marry. Why? Not only because it's good for you and it's right, but for the glory of His Name! So you can say to the world, "I'm a Christian; I don't do things like that!" And along that same line, notice thirdly that:

c. he declared his faith: How? *...he gave him the name Jesus*, just like the angel said. Instead of the natural choice like *Joseph Jr.,* he chose to declare that THIS CHILD was the Savior by naming Him so.

And that's how Joseph became the dad he didn't have to be. He had a choice. He nearly made the wrong one. He nearly went along with the crowd and common sense. But he considered it carefully and when he finally understood God's call on his life, he chose against everything that stood in the way to step up and follow Him and be a husband to a virgin mother and, as we'll see next time, a father to the Son of God. What is God calling you to step up to? *Harry Rimmer tells the story of a young man who entered the army. As a boy he had formed the habit of studying his Bible in his bedroom each evening and then kneeling down to pray. He faced a real test the first night in the barracks, for he was surrounded by scores of rough servicemen preparing to retire. Many of them were joking and cursing loudly, so he considered lying down on his bunk, concealing his Bible under the blanket, and reading it so no one would notice. But then he told himself, "I'm a Christian! I must take my stand for the Lord. I won't hide my faith. I'll do just as I did at home!" So, the young man took his Bible and after quietly reading a chapter, he knelt and offered a silent prayer. When the men noticed his actions, a few sneered, but in about two minutes the barracks became quiet as some who respected the new recruit hushed the others. He felt like a goldfish in a glass bowl. After a while the talk began again, but the cursing stopped. The next night when he opened his Bible, eight of the other men dug out their Bibles and did the same. Within a month, everyone in the outfit respected that young Christian so much that they would defend him against anyone who would criticize him. Rimmer said, "They brought their troubles and questions to him to be settled, and he influenced more men for Christ than half a dozen chaplains could have moved in a year of Sundays."* All because he heard God's call and he stepped up. He didn't have to, but he did. What God's calling you to do may be very different, it may seem very small and simple. But it just might change somebody's life, or even the world. Will you be like Joseph and step up?

"The Dad He Didn't Have To Be"

The Christmas Story Through The Eyes Of Joseph

A Father To The Son Of God - Lk. 2:1-7, 21-52

We are looking at the Christmas Story this year through the eyes of Joseph, trying our best to see those familiar events from the perspective of one who actually lived through them, rather than through our sugar-coated, fairy-tale like modern telling of it. This illustration comes to mind. A few weeks ago, I caught the movie "Titanic" on TV and was reminded again of the pain of that terrible, tragic night in which nearly 1,500 souls perished in the icy waters of the North Atlantic as the greatest ship ever built sank in 1912. Then it struck me that the way I knew about the Titanic growing up was probably the same way some of you did, through a kids' song that we learned. It's been sung decade after decade as a fun song at summer camps and goes like this:

Oh, they built the ship Titanic to sail the ocean blue, And they thought they had a ship that the water would never leak through, But the Lord's almighty hand said this ship would never land Oh it was sad when the great ship went down! Chorus: Oh, it was sad, Oh, it was sad; It was sad when the great ship went down, to the bottom of the ...Husbands and wives, little children lost their lives, It was sad when that great ship went down.

Do you remember that? That ought to be a reverent funeral dirge, not a silly camp song. When I remembered it, it hit me how easily we re-write history, even the events of our own lives, right in our own minds. And at Christmas time what do we teach our children to sing? A sweet little lullaby, *Away in a manger, no crib for his bed, the little Lord Jesus lay down his sweet head, the stars in the bright sky looked down where he lay, the little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay, a*s though it were a quaint, peaceful scene where all is right with the world. Let me tell you, to Joseph, it was anything but that. If you read the story thoughtfully, you'll see that:

I. Joseph Courageously Cared For Mary Through what must have been **A Traumatic Birth (1-7)** First of all:

1. he was forced by imperial decree to travel to Bethlehem at the worst possible time Six months had gone by since he had taken Mary home to be his wife. Now she was nine months pregnant, full term, in the last days or weeks before the baby was to come. Do any of you remember what that's like? Basketball for a stomach, you can hardly walk, everything is difficult. It is during these last weeks that word of the Roman Emperor's decree comes. There is to be a registration, a census of the entire Empire, so that taxes can be levied equitably, of course! And, in the Jewish part of the Empire, each man must travel to his ancestral home town, to the city of the tribe of his forefathers, so that his name can be recorded in the proper lineage. But there is evidently a deadline! It must be done now, in Mary's ninth month, when she is in no condition to travel anywhere! I'm sure he's tempted to leave her at home, but he can't bring himself to do it. He can't risk missing this birth! And yet, taking her is also a risk; what if she delivers on the road? And there are no exceptions; there is no nice judge to write to ask for an extension of time due to extenuating circumstances. Keep in mind that Caesar is not some benevolent "Uncle Sam" who needs YOU; Rome is the conqueror, the occupier, and Caesar is the tyrant, the hated despot, and here comes an order of his whim that you have to drag your pregnant wife a hundred miles next week to keep his tax roles in order. I'm trying to convey that the arrival of this decree to Joseph was a tragedy or at least a tremendous hardship, kind of like your mean boss firing you two weeks before Christmas or your stingy landlord evicting you on a week's notice with nowhere to go. "Why now, Lord? Why not a month from now when the baby's here and Mary can travel? Why not two months ago when we could have traveled

without danger?" The answer to that from our perspective is simple. God had declared in Micah 5:2 that His Christ would be born in Bethlehem, not Nazareth. All the Jews knew it, too. God needed Mary in Bethlehem to keep His ancient Word. So, he moved an Emperor of Rome to make a decree and a governor of Syria to carry it out, at just His perfect time. But Joseph didn't know all that! All he saw was a greedy enemy making him endanger his wife and child at the worst possible moment. And yet, whether he was angry or anxious, he had no choice; he went. And:

2. he brought Mary on the long and difficult trip The journey south from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem was at least 80, maybe 90, miles. Because religious Jews didn't like going through Samaria, they customarily crossed the Jordan, traveled south on the far side and then re-crossed at the fords near Jericho. After that, came the 2,700 foot climb in elevation, up from river level to reach Jerusalem and, beyond it, Bethlehem. It took three days to make that journey walking, and because we can't even conceive of a full term pregnant woman walking from here to Harrisburg and fording a river twice, we can only imagine that Joseph walked and led Mary behind him on a donkey, though that is scarcely more comfortable. Picture him checking on her, helping her on and off to go the bathroom, offering her water, setting up camp each night, making a fire to roast a little grain, concerned with each hour that her time will come and the labor pains will begin. Imagine their relief toward evening on the third day when Bethlehem finally came into view. They thought, "Here we will find lodging; here we will have a normal meal. Here we can really rest tonight; we've made it." But it was not to be so; here something even worse happened:

3. he was forced to deliver Mary's child in a stable Because Joseph didn't know anyone in Bethlehem, they went to the one inn the town had, as all travelers would. But the inn of Bethlehem was nothing like the Holiday Inn of today with rooms and management. An inn in Bible times was often just an open building with some animal stalls below and rooms above where travelers could bivouac. The traditional site of Jesus' birth is actually a cave, a rock grotto, over or next to which a building for lodgers was built, while the animals stayed in the cave. The place was so full that they couldn't get in the door. The only space left was there in the cave with the donkeys and oxen. By the way, have you ever been in a barn? Do you remember what it's like, the straw, the cobwebs, the smell? And then the labor pains began! Joseph knew no one; he had no mid-wife ready to help, no doctor to call. Whether he got any help from women in the inn, we don't know, but it just may be that he had to do this delivery himself. That's enough to scare me! Have you forgotten what labor is like? The hours of pain, the contractions growing worse each time, the uncertainty of what may happen, the exhaustion. Lots of women died in childbirth in those days. How about the mess afterward? No running water, no clean bed, no nothing. This was no quaint little birth; this was their worst nightmare in real life. Wouldn't it be yours? And yet when it was all over, Mary took the cloth that she had brought along for this, carefully wrapped the baby in it, emptied out the animals' feed trough and laid him in it, so they all could rest after their ordeal. Yet even that was not to be! A short time later:

4. he pondered with Mary the news from the visit of the shepherds (16-19) They were soon awakened by this band of shepherds barging into the stable and asking, "Where's the baby? Is there a baby here who was born tonight?" Then they told the marvelous story of what had happened to them out on the nearby hillside and how an angel had told them the Good News that the Messiah was born that very night and they would find him in a manger and how the sky filled with angels shouting "Glory to God!" As the shepherds left, you can just see Joseph and Mary lying there pondering all of this. It's as though God is reassuring them, "I know this has felt like the worst night of your life, but I am here! I'm in charge, and everything is happening according to My plan!"

You know how you say in our marriage vow, *For better or for worse*? Well, when Joseph signed up and did what he didn't have to do, when he took Mary home as his wife, THIS is what that meant! Being a stepfather to the Son of God meant having the courage to care for Mary through a birth in the most traumatic circumstances you might imagine. Things did improve for the little family, though. In a day or two, Joseph did find them a place to stay as the census crowd was heading back home. Evidently, when they set out on their difficult journey, they had a plan of sorts. I'm guessing they knew Mary would never make the return trip, so they planned to have the baby there in Bethlehem after they arrived and stay until she was strong enough to travel, and until they could go up to the Temple more than a month after the birth and make the required sacrifices. You see, as Jesus' legal father:

II. Joseph Devoutly Did For Jesus Everything The Law Of The Lord Required The summary is in verse **(39)**. That verse, of course, leaves out some rather large details about their return and we'll save those for next week, but as we saw last time, Joseph was a righteous man, a devout man, and as a father, there were several responsibilities that he had to carry out for his new-born son. First of all:

1. he circumcised and named Jesus on the eighth day (21) Joseph did that. In **Gen. 17:12** God commanded that, *For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised*... It was the sign of entering into the covenant, the sign that this child was one of Jehovah's chosen people. It was also on this day that the child was officially and publicly given a name and Joseph obediently named him Jesus, as the angel had commanded both him and Mary. He was careful to do everything that God required. And that's why he did a second thing:

2. he presented Jesus in the Temple on the 41st day (22-24) It's hard to see in the text, but this visit had a two-fold purpose. The first was:

a. to pay for his redemption as a firstborn son God had said clearly in **Ex. 13:2** when He slew the firstborn sons of the Egyptians and spared the firstborn of Israel, that every firstborn male child belonged to Him and must be consecrated to Him. Later on in **Num. 18:14-16**, He spelled out that the way that was to be done was that when the son is a month old, a redemption price of five shekels of silver had to be paid to the priests. That's only about two ounces and I'm not sure how much it was worth, but I'm guessing that it might be comparable to a week's wages for us, so it was a significant sum and Joseph had saved it up and brought it along for this very purpose. However, instead of making two trips to the Temple, this payment usually waited and was combined with a third obligation Joseph followed, which was:

b. to offer the sacrifice of purification for Mary - Lev. 12 explains that after the birth of a son, a woman is ceremonially unclean for a period of 41 days. At that point she must go up to the Temple to offer a burnt offering and a sin offering. For poorer families who could not afford a lamb, these offerings were designated as a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons. So, on that 41st day, Joseph religiously took Mary up to the Temple in Jerusalem, paid the redemption money and bought the doves for her to offer. He was so careful to do for Jesus everything the Law required.

And it was in that very moment of obedience, that old Simeon came in and you know the story of how, when he laid eyes on Jesus, he knew he was the Christ child and publicly proclaimed it. And then old Anna came in and heard it and went out and told the whole city the news! It's like, once again, God is confirming to Joseph and Mary saying, "Everything I've told you is true! This child really IS My Son, the Son of God, the promised Messiah!" But my point was that, as his earthly father, Joseph had a spiritual concern for Jesus that shows clearly through carefully keeping each of these commands and it continues as:

III. Joseph Piously Parented Jesus Throughout His Childhood (40-52) It must have been a tremendous challenge, you know. Some years ago, Michael Card wrote a song called "Joseph's Song" to try to express some of the thoughts that must have gone through Joseph's mind. The lyrics go like this:

How could it be, this Baby in my arms,sleeping now, so peacefully?
"The Son of God," the Angel said. How could it be?
Lord, I know, He's not my own. Not of my flesh, not of my bone.
Still, Father let this Baby be, Son of my Love.
Father, show me how I fit into this plan of Yours. How can a man be father to the Son of God? For all my life I've been a simple carpenter, how can I raise a King? How can I raise a King?...

What a daunting task for anyone! How he actually did raise Jesus remains shrouded in secrecy, except for these few verses, but it seems that he simply did what every good father should do. First:

1. he set for Jesus a continual example of devotion to the Lord (41) His carefulness about obeying the things of God didn't peter out and stop when they eventually returned to life in Nazareth. I'm sure Joseph carefully kept the Sabbath when Friday night rolled around each week. Every time an appointed feast or celebration came, he kept it. Every year, he and Mary would go up to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened bread. I'm sure that he took Jesus to the synagogue weekly and that he talked with him about the Scriptures as they worked together in the carpenter's shop. Joseph was the kind of dad that every kid needs, not an athletic hero, but a spiritual mentor, a father who will show them what it means to walk with the Lord. He gives a true challenge for us fathers. What kind of mentor are we? How well are we modeling our faith for our kids; how well are we communicating it with them? That's what being a father meant to Joseph. Now, when Jesus was 12 and about to become a full-fledged "Son of the Torah", a man in that culture, Joseph took Jesus along with them up to Jerusalem at Passover for the first time. They traveled together in a group of friends and family from Nazareth and you know the story of how on the way home, they noticed that Jesus was missing from the company. Notice in verse 48 that Joseph:

2. he searched for Jesus in anguish when He seemed to be lost (48) That word *anxiously* isn't strong enough. The Greek word means to be in anguish, to be tormented, to be consumed with grief and sorrow. For three days Joseph searched, first along the road and then through the city of Jerusalem, street by street. Just think how you'd feel if your son was missing; each day the feeling of doom would grow worse, the worry that he'd been stolen or hurt somehow. Imagine the relief they felt when they took a swing through the Temple courts and saw religious classes in progress and there sat Jesus, talking with the teachers of the law! You know, those kinds of moments go with parenting, moments when your child is sick or in the hospital and you feel like their life is in danger, moments when you don't know where they are and what's going on and your heart races. My point is that Joseph didn't just do this job of being a father to Jesus in a stoic, detached sense. He loved Him, loved Him as His own, the same way he did all his other natural children! And there's an example for those of us who find ourselves in that difficult role of stepfather or stepmother. The child isn't "her son" or "his son"; he's YOUR son! You love him as your own! That's what being a father means. Third:

3. he carefully taught Jesus his trade of carpentry We only know this from **Mk. 6:3** where people call Jesus, "the carpenter". You see, there were no schools to send children off to. They learned in the home; they worked alongside their parents and learned to do what they did. And Joseph carefully taught Jesus step by step in on-the-job training

how to work with wood, how to make boards, how to build tables, to make joints and so on. He taught him a work ethic and about the importance of keeping promises and delivering work on time and doing a job of excellent quality and all of those practical lessons. What a shame that today most of us are so far removed from our children in our workplace that they seldom get to work alongside us and learn to do what we do, the way we do it. Yet those most important lessons of integrity and honesty and doing quality work must somehow still be taught. How are we doing? And finally, Joseph:

4. he instructed Jesus as a father in all areas of life (51) Joseph was a regular dad who got to direct Jesus the way we direct our kids: "Now you can go out and play for an hour." "No, right now I need you to take out the garbage and clean the shop." And Jesus was humbly submissive to his direction. He taught him the common things of life, how to buy things in the market, how crops are planted and harvested, how shepherds care for their animals, how God designed the natural world around them. All those things that parents do to shape their kids' worldview and the way they do life, Joseph did for Jesus and as a result of it, verse 52 says that He grew in wisdom. Are you explaining life to your kids or are they getting it at school from their peers or from a babysitter or off the TV and internet?

Parenting is a huge responsibility. Joseph knew that before he signed on, before he took Mary home and married her. He could have opted out, but he didn't. He chose to be a father to the Son of God, just by being the kind of good father any earthly father should be. *A man and his young son were climbing a mountain one day when they came to a place where the ascent was especially difficult and dangerous. While the father paused to consider which way to go, the boy called out trustingly, "Choose the good path, Daddy; I'm coming right behind you!"* When Joseph signed up to be a father, he chose the good path for Jesus to follow right behind him. I'm sure the Lord knew he would and that's why he entrusted him with the care of His Son. What about you? Your sons and daughters are following right behind you. They've been entrusted to your care. They will largely be a product of what you choose to let into their lives and model for them. Will you choose the good path like Joseph did?

"The Dad He Didn't Have To Be"

The Christmas Story Through The Eyes Of Joseph

A Protector To The Infant King - Mt. 2:13-23

"This is not how Mary and Joseph came into Bethlehem, but this is how you enter now. You wait at the wall. It's a daunting concrete barricade, three stories high, thorned with razor wire. Standing beside it, you feel as if you're at the base of a dam. Israeli soldiers armed with assault rifles examine your papers. They search your vehicle. No Israeli civilian, by military order, is allowed in. And few Bethlehem residents are permitted out--the reason the wall exists here...is to keep terrorists away from Jerusalem... Bethlehem is in the west Bank... it's a Palestinian city; the majority of its 35,000 residents are Muslim... The truth is that Bethlehem, the "little town" venerated during Christmas, is one of the most contentious places on earth." Thus begins the article, *Bethlehem 2007 AD*, in National Geographic magazine. I read it simply to give you a different image from the one we sing of in the carol, "O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie". I read it because the image it generates from today's world is actually much closer to:

I. The World In Which Joseph And Mary Lived than the quaint picture we sing about. The time in which Joseph took Mary to Bethlehem:

1. it was during the awful reign and, indeed, the final days of Herod the Great. From the time he was a young man, Herod served as governor of Galilee, but in 37 BC he was appointed King over Judea by the Emperor and for the next 33 years he ruled it with an iron hand. One writer says he became, *a Jewish Nero: a tyrant, who bathed his own house and his own people in blood. The demons of Herod's life were jealousy of power, and suspicion, its necessary companion. He was the incarnation of brute lust, which in turn became the burden of the lives of his children*. *[International Standard Bible Encyclopedia]* He himself had 10 marriages and 15 children. He murdered the only wife he ever appeared to really love and later murdered her two sons. His penchant for killing off his own family members led the Emperor Augustus to make a pun that has endured all these years, *It is better to be Herod's swine [Greek hus] than his son [Greek huios].* He robbed the Jewish people to pander to Rome, even plundering King David's tomb. Innumerable plots were made on his life, all of which he evaded and retaliation was swift and sure. The blood of thousands was on his hands. Toward the end of his life, he became increasingly ill with what Josephus calls "a loathsome disease" of which he, at length, died and this drove him almost insane with suspicion and jealousy to the point where the last comfort he found was in receiving permission to execute one of his sons who was contending for his throne, five days before he died. His last command was to summon by royal order and confine all of the nobles of Israel in the Hippodrome, with secret orders to his sister to slay them immediately upon his own death, so that the Jews' rejoicing over it would be turned to mourning. Fortunately, she didn't carry it out, but my point is that when Joseph brought Mary from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem in Judea, he was entering into the domain of this crazed evil villain and he was entering it less than three months before the time that Herod would actually die, when Herod was at the very height of his dying frenzy. If Jesus actually was born toward the end of December in the year 5 BC (and it's likely that He was,

despite those who want to say that Christians simply used the day of a pagan holiday to celebrate it), then it is no wonder that:

2. the public arrival of the Magi and mention of a King pointed Herod's wrath directly at Bethlehem and at them (2:1-3) It was the first days of February in 4 BC that Joseph presented Jesus in the Temple. And almost immediately, a public event rocked Jerusalem. A group of strangers (legend says three), magi, public representatives of a foreign government from the east, showed up in the capital city of Jerusalem and began asking people where the newborn KING of the Jews was. They had seen a star in the heavens that evidenced his birth and they had come expecting everyone to know of it. They wanted to bring tribute, to worship him. Well, not much in Jerusalem escaped Herod's notice, even though he was deathly ill, and they were soon brought before him to tell their story. His tormented mind had only one thought, "If the Jewish messiah has been born, I need to kill him! Nobody will have my throne!" Yet being much too cunning to lose an advantage, he decided to use these men, to use them and their obvious divining abilities to find this baby and put him to death. So, he quickly inquired of the priests where the Christ was supposed to be born and sent them on their way to Bethlehem with a smile, inviting them to return and let him know, so he could go and worship too, all the while, no doubt, secretly telling his soldiers to sharpen their swords and be ready for action. The reason that all of Jerusalem was disturbed, I'm convinced, is that they knew the very mention of the birth of a king would provoke some new round of bloodshed. Mary and Joseph lived "well below the radar" of Herod's awareness. They were just poor, common folk going about their everyday lives there in Bethlehem, blissfully unaware that their lives were about to change. But do you see that the arrival of these magi in Bethlehem and their actually finding Mary and Joseph and entering their house suddenly placed their lives in imminent danger? Now we're ready to read the story of how:

II. Joseph Protected Jesus Through A Nighttime Escape To Egypt (13-18) They didn't know they were in danger. The magi didn't know they were endangering the very baby they worshipped, but God knew it and late that same night:

1. God warned Joseph of the danger in a dream (13-15) Those last words must have struck terror into his heart, *Herod will search for the child to kill him!* As he heard them:

a. he faced the prospect of his own and Jesus' imminent death Those Herod sets out to kill, he finds and kills. Everyone knew that. It is like saying to a German in 1940, "Hitler is searching for you" or to a Chinese in 1950, "Mao is searching for you." It is like saying today, "your name is on a mafia hit list", only much more real than that feels to us. It is a sentence of death and it propelled Joseph into an entirely new role that he hadn't signed up for. To marry a pregnant virgin surely has its social struggles; to be a parent to God's son is surely a great weight of responsibility. But now, suddenly, his orders were to protect Jesus, the Infant King, from the most savage and ferocious military power, to deliver him from soldiers with swords and spears and chariots! This was not mentioned in the deal! How could he fight them? How could he run fast enough and far enough to get away from them? But fortunately, God did not leave that up to him; rather:

b. he was instructed to go to Egypt, to get up and leave immediately, in the middle of the night when no one would notice, and to set out on what amounts to a 175 mile journey that would probably take seven days, all the way south and west around the sea, through Gaza and out of Herod's jurisdiction into the Roman province of Egypt and safety. And go, Joseph does, without question, without hesitation. Can't you picture them for an entire week traveling as fast as they can, always looking behind them, never really greeting anyone on the road, shying away from strangers, wondering all the while when they might hear the sound of chariot wheels coming up behind them and wondering what they will do? But the week passed and they arrived safely and set about the task of finding a new place to stay, no doubt living off the money from the expensive gifts God had provided through the wise men. News did travel in the ancient world through caravans and traders and it wouldn't surprise me if within a few days Joseph:

c. he may have heard news of Herod's slaughter of the infants (16) God had also warned the wise men not to go back to Herod and in a day or so, he figured out that they had caught on to his scheme and weren't coming back. It made him furious, but instead of a careful investigation, he decided on a simple and quick means to make the problem go away. He ordered the immediate execution of every male child in Bethlehem, two years and under. Imagine it, soldiers descending on the little village, going house to house, spearing and stabbing babies. We'd call it a massacre. Dozens of innocent children ripped from their parents' arms and slain while they could do nothing to stop it. If that news got to Joseph, I wonder how he felt. Certainly, there would be great sadness for the tragedy that he had brought to this little town simply by deciding to stay there for a while. But likely it would increase his fear also. You see:

d. he lived in Egypt as a fugitive for more than a month Hiding. Not wanting anyone to know them or where they came from. Afraid to make friends or to be out in public much. Trying to disappear in the back streets of some Egyptian city, trusting in God to somehow keep them safe. Yet Matthew declares to us very clearly that:

2. God was in control of this entire event It didn't take Him by surprise! Indeed, He initiated it. He brought the wise men! And He used even Herod's insane wrath to fulfill His purpose. Matthew tells us that:

a. the stay in Egypt led to an ultimate fulfillment of Hos. 11:1 (15b) That phrase, *Out of Egypt have I called my son,* originally referred to Israel. At the exodus, He brought Israel, His son, out of Egypt. But Matthew says it meant more; its ultimate fulfillment was in His Son, Jesus. This terrible event sent His Son down to Egypt so that God could call Him out when the time was right and the Scripture could be double-fulfilled. Likewise:

b. the sorrow of Bethlehem ultimately fulfilled Jer. 31:15 (17-18) Rachel's tomb was near Bethlehem; "Rachel" weeping symbolically means the people of Bethlehem engaged in a great mourning and weeping over the loss of their children. This was true first in the day that Babylon conquered Judah 500 years earlier, but even that, Matthew says, was a picture of the great mourning that would occur in Bethlehem as God protected His Son.

The point is not to figure out why it happened, but simply to see that, even in these horrible events, God was in absolute control, fulfilling His Word, carrying out His plan. Even while Joseph and his family were living as refugees driven from their home, seeking political asylum in a foreign land, God was absolutely in control and His plan was on track. How many thousands of people in our world today are in that situation and could use that assurance? For perhaps a month, they lived in hiding, but at last, Herod was upon his final deathbed. In March of 4 BC, his body lay buried in a tomb in Herodium, near Bethlehem, his vengeance and wrath silenced forever. And that's when:

III. Joseph Led His Family In A Return To Nazareth (19-23) You see:

1. God instructed Joseph through two more dreams First, he was told that Herod was dead (even before the news had arrived in Egypt) and that he should return to Israel. This he bravely did, but as he was entering the land, he heard the news that Herod's son Archelaus had been appointed to rule over Judea. If you've heard the expression, *like father, like son,* you'll understand why Joseph was afraid when he heard it. Archelaus shared the same vicious, power-hungry, violent disposition his father had and history records that within a short period afterward he was responsible for the slaughter of 3,000 Jews in the sacred Temple itself. Judea was no safer for Joseph and his family under him than it had been under his father. So, God spoke to him for the fourth time in a dream to warn him and he skirted by Judea and headed back north to the hills of Galilee, to his home town of Nazareth once again, where Jesus would grow up to manhood. Now, even though Joseph is not mentioned very often in the Scriptural record, the thing that just jumps off the page at you every time he is mentioned is that:

a. he was immediately obedient to everything God ever told him God said, *Take Mary home as your wife*, and he got up and did it the next morning. God said, *Get up and take the child and flee to Egypt*, and he got up in the middle of the night and left. In Egypt God said, *Now go home*, and he packed their bags and left and when God said, *Don't go to Judea, go to Nazareth*, he pointed his donkey toward Nazareth. As soon as he knew what God had said, he obeyed immediately, without hesitation! That is the testimony and the legacy of his life for us. Oh, that we might be like Joseph and simply obey as soon as we know what God says to do, instead of holding back and trying to figure it out ourselves and making our own way! Does that mean Joseph was some kind of superman, a spiritual giant of some sort? No, the record makes it clear that:

b. he experienced the natural fears we all experience In the beginning, Joseph was crushed; he was planning on divorcing Mary. He was just like you and I. In verse 22 it says that he was afraid, just like we would be! Was that the first time? I doubt it. He probably had bouts with fear throughout this whole experience, just as you or I would. But he obeyed anyway! Whether he was afraid or not, he trusted God and did what he was told. And notice this:

c. his true protection lay in that obedience *Donald G. Barnhouse told the story of an incident that occurred in Zaire. The young son of a missionary couple was playing in the yard of the mission compound where they lived. Suddenly the voice of the boy's father rang out from the porch, "Phillip, obey me instantly! Drop to your stomach!" Immediately the youngster did as his father commanded, without asking a question. "Now crawl toward me as fast as you can!" The boy obeyed. "Stand up and run to me!" Philip responded unquestioningly and ran to his father's arms. As he turned to look at the tree by which he had been playing, he saw a large deadly snake hanging from one of its branches! At the first command of his father, the boy could have hesitated, as boys often do, by asking, "Why do you want me to do that?" Or he could have simply waited a few moments to respond as children do, but he obeyed immediately, and that simple act of obedience saved his life.* Joseph obeyed God immediately and without hesitation and that obedience is what protected him and his family. When you know what God wants you to do, the safest thing in the world is to do it, not to wait until you're sure you understand why and can answer every objection, not to put it off until you're ready or think you're more prepared to handle it. If God says to do it, do it now, no matter how you feel about it! That is Joseph's legacy of example to us! And, of course, you can see in the story how:

2. God used Joseph's obedience not only to protect His Son but to fulfill His plan Verse 23 says that because of Joseph's obedience, Jesus would grow up in Nazareth and be known as a Nazarene. He would be called Jesus of Nazareth. The Jews had derived not less than eight names by which the Messiah was to be called when he came. One of, if not *the*, most popular of these was based on Is. 11:1 and similar passages which talk about the Branch of David. In the daily liturgy of the time, they would pray, *The Branch of David, thy servant, speedily make to shoot forth...* The Hebrew word for branch is *netzer*, from which the village of Nazareth was named. To say Jesus *of Nazareth* was, in essence, to say, Jesus *the Branch (of David)*, to call Him by the most common designation of the Messiah. That title

declared who He was and He got that title because Joseph obeyed and went to Nazareth to raise Him. Joseph's obedience, again, accomplished what God wanted to get done.

So will yours and mine! *At nearly 80 years of age, Corrie ten Boom had visited some 60 countries to tell people about the Lord. One Sunday she spoke in a church in Copenhagen. She talked about presenting our bodies to the Lord as living sacrifices. She used herself as an example, saying that even as an old woman she was willing to do whatever Jesus wanted her to do, to go wherever he wanted her to go. After the service, two young nurses came up to Corrie and invited her to come up to their apartment for a cup of coffee. The offer sounded good. Corrie was very tired after speaking. She was finding that being on her feet for long periods was getting to be quite exhausting. So she gladly accepted their invitation. What she didn't know was that their apartment was on the tenth floor and there was no elevator. She complained silently to the Lord, "O God, I don't think I can make it." The young women were so eager for her to come that Corrie decided she had to try. By the time they had reached the fifth floor, her heart was pounding and her knees felt like rubber. There on the landing she spied a chair into which she gratefully collapsed. The nurses waited patiently while she rested. Corrie prayed again, "Lord, why all this stair-climbing after an exhausting day of speaking?" The answer came back: "Because there is a blessing waiting for you, a work that will bring joy to the angels." She looked up at the stairway and it seemed there must be hundreds more to climb, but if God said there was a blessing, then she had to go on. Corrie thought, as they trudged up another flight, that maybe the blessing was that she was going to die and go to heaven right then. When they finally reached the apartment, Corrie found that the parents of one of the nurses were there. They had already prepared a simple meal. As they sat down to eat, Corrie knew that she would not be able to stay long, so she didn't waste any time on small talk. She asked the mother how long she had known Jesus as Savior. The woman admitted that she had never accepted Christ. Corrie lovingly explained the gospel to her and then asked if she would like to pray. The mother said yes and prayed a beautiful prayer asking Jesus into her life. The father had been silent during this whole conversation. Corrie turned to him, and he said he wanted to make the same decision. He prayed, too. Suddenly the room was filled with rejoicing, and Corrie knew that the angels were standing around them, singing. As she descended the many flights of stairs, Corrie talked to the Lord. "Thank you, Lord, for making me walk up these steps, and next time help me to listen to my own words when I talk about being willing to go anywhere You tell me to go!" [Tramp for the Lord by Jamie Buckingham. Fleming H. Revell, 1974. Pages 141-143.]* If you and I will simply obey like Joseph did, God has eternal things that He will accomplish through our obedience. Are you willing to do anything He wants you to do and go anywhere He wants you to go?

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Life Lessons From The Real Christmas Story

Part 1: The Road To Bethlehem

It is just as true in spiritual things, as in the rest of life, that familiarity breeds contempt. The more often we hear something or do something, the more our brain kicks into autopilot and the less attention we pay to it. *Years ago, Dr. E. Schuyler English told of a visit to China by the Philadelphia Orchestra. In one city, the Chinese Philharmonic Orchestra performed Beethoven's Fifth Symphony for the visiting musicians. According to reports, it was not done very well. At the end of the first movement, the Chinese conductor passed the baton to the American conductor, Eugene Ormandy. What a transformation! You would have thought Ormandy had been conducting the Chinese Philharmonic for years. But as the members of the Philadelphia Orchestra listened, they were impressed in a new way with Ormandy's talent and genius. They suddenly realized that they had begun to take him for granted, and had lost sight of the greatness of their conductor.* The story of Christmas is like that. We have heard it over and over again, so much that we could quote the key passages from memory. We've sung carols about it ever since we can remember. We've seen it dramatized in Christmas plays in church and brought to "real life" on television. It is so familiar to us that when we begin to hear it, something inside us says, "Yeah, I know that" and kind of stops paying attention. We lose sight of the greatness of our God in His marvelous plan to redeem the world. So, I'm going to tell you the Christmas story one more time. Of course, it will have all the familiar elements, but my hope is to tell it in such a way as to make it real, to make it "live" in your mind's eye, to remind you of the greatness of God and draw out some practical lessons for your life. Now the story of Christmas really begins in heaven with:

I. God's Decision To Send His Son *John wrote, And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. - 1John 4:14* That decision was made before the creation of the world. It was revealed in the Old Testament and for hundreds of years, people of faith waited and looked forward with great anticipation to the coming of Messiah, the Savior. But at last, somewhere early in the year that we would call 6 BC, God said, "It is time." And He set in motion the events that would directly prepare the way for His Son to come to earth. Here are:

The Events: The first of these did not even occur in the land of Israel. It occurred 1,000 miles to the east in the land of Persia where:

1: God announces Jesus' birth in Persia to magi by a star They were astrologers, star-gazers, no doubt, royal advisors, but not kings themselves. Every king had his wise men, those he could consult about the decisions of his reign. On this particular night in February, **Mt. 2:2** says they saw a star there in the east, a star they recognized as

having particular significance. Somehow they knew it was the star that signified the birth of the long-awaited King of the Jews. And it impacted them deeply. They were moved with the need, of all things, to worship him, to bow down and pay homage to him, and so they began to plan an expedition to the land of the Jews. Verses **7** and **16** tell us that Herod asked them exactly when the star had appeared and that he based his decision to kill all the infants two years old and under in Bethlehem based on their answer. So, if you go back two years from the time of their arrival in Bethlehem, you see that the appearance of this star was the very first event in the Christmas story, before all the others. Then, the next event happened in a sleepy little town in northern Israel in the province of Galilee called Nazareth to two young people divinely chosen by God for His purpose. There, sometime later in that year of 6 BC, no doubt:

2: Mary is betrothed to Joseph - Lk. 1:27 It was more solemn and definitely more permanent than our concept of engagement. It was regarded indeed as "marriage, part 1", and even though many months or a year might intervene until "part 2" where the marriage was actually celebrated and consummated, it was an unbreakable commitment and pledge before God. Whether there was romance involved, we can only speculate; what we do know is that in their betrothal, God was at work well beforehand, creating the parents and the nucleus of the home into whose hands He would entrust the care of His Son on earth. Now in both of these events there is:

The Lesson: God's timing and our need for patience Gal. 4:4 says, *But when the fulness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman...* For God, every event, from the birth of His Son down to the mundane events of our own lives, has a proper time in His plan. And when that time is fully come, He acts and it happens. Not a minute before, nor a day late. Everything is exactly on time on His schedule and He misses nothing. That's why the star appeared to the wise men two years early, so that they would be there on schedule at just the right moment. That's why Mary and Joseph were brought together and betrothed in that year, so that everything would be in place for what God was about to do in the fullness of His time. Jesus told his own brothers one day, when they were trying to push Him into something, *...The right time for me has not yet come; for you any time is right. - John 7:6.* We want everything <u>now</u>. We want to be well <u>now</u>, when we're sick. We want to understand <u>now</u>, when we're confused. We want to have what's been promised <u>now</u>, just as the Jews wanted the Messiah to come in every generation for hundreds of years. They wanted Him <u>now</u>, but He didn't come until the fullness of time. God only acts when His time is fully come and we need to learn to be patient, to stop insisting on our own time and rest in His perfect timing, even when it's painful. Well, now our story moves to a whole group of events surrounding:

II. The Birth Of John the Baptist - Luke 1 Mary had an older cousin on her mother's side whose name was Elizabeth. Her husband's name was Zacharias and he was of the tribe of Levi and the line of Aaron, so he was a priest. They lived in a rural village somewhere south of Jerusalem and as a priest, Zacharias would go up with his course, or group, of priests to do his service in the Temple for one week of every 24. Zacharias was now probably more than 60 and there were two things that, to this point, he had been denied in life. First, he and Elizabeth remained childless after all the years of their marriage. And second, never in all his years of serving as a priest had he been selected by lot for the high and holy honor of offering the incense on the golden altar in the Holy Place. A priest could only be chosen for this privilege once in a lifetime and he was afterward considered "rich" (or maybe "fulfilled" in our terms), for he had approached as close as possible to the presence of God. But God so ordered it that on this particular day, about the first week of October in the year 6 BC, that the lot was cast and it fell for the first time ever on Zacharias. What a sense of awe and reverence he must have had that morning as he laid the incense on the golden altar and it began to burn. As he was about to utter a prayer and back away in reverence, on the right side of the altar there stood an angel:

The Events:

1: an angel announces John's birth to Zacharias and he reacts (5-23) It was Gabriel, the archangel, sent directly from God to give him this message in verses 13-17. "God has heard the prayer you've prayed so many times. You WILL have a son! And not only that, but this son, John, will be a man of God, a prophet who will impact the entire nation and prepare them for the Lord." What a promise! The cry of his heart, both personally and for his nation, will be answered. Yet even though an angel is standing there telling him this, he can't bring himself to believe it and voices his doubt in verse 18. Look at Gabriel's reply in verses18-19. Imagine that; in his heart he doesn't believe God's words, even though they were delivered by an angel! And now, every time he goes to talk, his tongue sticks to the roof of his mouth and he can't get the words out. But God's word did come true. After he went home to his village:

2: Elizabeth conceives John and hides it five months (24-25) She stayed in the house and didn't tell anyone, not because she was ashamed, but probably because nobody would believe her at her age! It must have been awfully lonely that fall and winter with a husband who could only grunt to communicate! Meanwhile, as March of the year 5 BC rolls around, back in Nazareth some 80 miles north:

3: an angel announces Jesus' birth to Mary (26-38) Gabriel comes again, this time to Mary, who is living in her parents' home and looking forward to the day of her marriage. And He tells her the words found in verses 30-33. God has chosen her for the highest and holiest privilege in all of womanhood, to be the mother of Jesus, the

promised Son of God and Messiah. Her mind naturally questions this and she asks a natural question in verse. However, her response is different from that of Zacharias. His was a response of doubt; hers a response of faith. And when told that it would be a miraculous act of the Holy Spirit, she responded humbly in verse 38. She believed God's word and submitted to His will. Now, the angel had told her about the other miracle, that her cousin Elizabeth was in her sixth month of pregnancy. So immediately, before she has any way to physically tell that she is now pregnant, and without telling them of the angel's visit, she asks permission of her family and Joseph to go and rushes off to visit her cousin.

4: Mary visits Elizabeth (3 months) and finds assurance (39-56) When she arrives, as soon as she walks in the door, the Spirit of God comes upon Elizabeth, who exclaims the words of verses 42-45. Note those words, *Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!* If only Elizabeth's own husband had done that! But Mary did, and when she heard it, she herself was filled beyond measure and breaks out in praise to God (we call it the Magnificat) saying the words of verses 46-49. Her faith is clear; God has done what He said and He will do what He said. She stayed with Elizabeth for three months, until June, when the time came that:

5: John is born (57-58) and then she returned home to Nazareth. On the eighth day when it was time to circumcise and name the baby, everybody wanted to name him after his father. But when they gave Zacharias a scroll, he wrote something that meant, "Now I believe what God said..."; he wrote "His name is John". And immediately:

6: Zacharias' tongue is loosed (59-80) He can talk again and out pours a beautiful stream of praise to God for all He has done and of confidence in what He is going to do. Now, in all of these events, it seems to me there is a second lesson for us:

The Lesson: God's truthfulness and our need to trust and submit It is summed up well in ***Prov. 30:5****, Every word of God is flawless; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him.* What God says is true. If He says you're going to have child after 60, you're going to. If He says you're going to have a child and you're a virgin, you're going to. If He says your sins are forgiven and you have eternal life, then you are and you do! Every word of God is flawless, true, trustworthy. He doesn't lie. And in every situation where God speaks, you have a choice. You can believe the circumstances, doubt Him and make Him have to teach you this lesson, or you can trust what He says, act on it and take refuge in Him. *Ed Montgomery tells about the first time he ever went skiing: "When I arrived at the ski resort, I decided to tackle one of the more advanced slopes. Boy, did I receive a rude awakening! After tumbling down a large hill several times, the ski instructors finally escorted me to the 'bunny' hill, but I soon regained my confidence after going through the new skiers class. While riding up the mountain on a chair lift, I saw something I could hardly believe. Small children--about 5 or 6 years old--were skiing effortlessly down a rather steep slope. I asked the ski instructor, 'How long have those kids been taking lessons?' 'About a day,' he replied. 'How could they learn so fast when so many adults--like me--take so long just learning to get down the bunny hill?' 'Because they believe the words of the instructor and expect those words to work.' [Charisma, Mar. 1994. Pages 46-47.]* That's the lesson God is trying to teach us; we need to believe the words of our Instructor, to trust Him and do what He says, no matter what our circumstances seem to say. We must expect His words to work, because they are true! Well, now we turn back in our story to:

III. Mary and Joseph in Nazareth - Mat. 1:18-25 It begins with the inevitable:

The Events:

1: Mary returns and Joseph doesn't believe her Mary came home from her visit with Elizabeth down in Judea in June, three months pregnant. Needless to say, this did not sit well with Joseph. I'm sure she tried to explain and told him about the angelic visit. But he can't bring himself to believe in a virgin birth. His heart is broken. Mary has betrayed him with someone else. Yet he loves her. He can't bring himself to hurt her or expose her to public disgrace. The only thing he can think of to do is to quietly divorce her, break their betrothal, leave her in her father's house and go away. He is almost ready to do that when an angel appears for the third time in this story:

2: an angel announces Jesus' birth to Joseph (20-21) The angel reassures him that Mary truly is still a virgin and that this is a supernatural miracle of God sending His Son into the world to save His people. But the reassurance comes with a command, "Take her home as your wife." That sounds simple, but imagine what it means in that little town of Nazareth. One can't keep such a thing a secret (even if Elizabeth did manage to do it for a few months!) Eventually it will be evident and there will be a baby and what is everyone going to think? They will live in the shame of being pregnant before marriage, the stigma of not waiting, but violating both God's law and cultural norms. Everywhere they go, there will be the glances, the looks, the whispers, the snide little comments, the feelings of embarrassment and shame, and maybe of anger, because, after all, who is going to believe them. Nevertheless, Joseph doesn't hesitate:

3: Joseph takes Mary home to his house as his wife and for six months, they live together that way. From June to December they live a fairly normal life, except in one area. They are careful to have no sexual union, even though the world around them thinks they already have. Yet gradually, family, relatives and friends get used to the

idea. They're married and a baby is coming. She keeps house the best she's able as her pregnancy comes to term and he works long hours in his carpenter's shop, perhaps even attached to the house. They plan and prepare for the day when Jesus will arrive in their home. However, sometime that fall, news comes:

4: the decree of Caesar for a census - Luke 2:1-3 They were part of a captive people who had been conquered by Rome. And somewhere a thousand miles away, Caesar had decided that all his citizens should be counted and taxed. The method was that people who lived in the country villages had to be registered in the town of their birth or the town which was the ancestral home of their family line. Both Joseph and Mary were of the tribe of Judah and were of the family line of none other than David, and David's hometown was Bethlehem. And the time chosen could not have been more inconvenient. At the very time when Mary should have been safely home awaiting her delivery with the help of trusted loved ones, she and Joseph were forced to set out on a 70 mile foot journey:

5: the journey to Bethlehem - Luke 2:4-5 The way was long and weary, probably at least three days, perhaps with Mary alternately walking and riding upon a little donkey while Joseph led, carrying whatever meager necessities they could, camping at night on the cool earth by a small fire. They were headed to a little village crowded with strangers, with no reservations, with no friendly faces or help available, no guarantees of safety, where there will be no room for them in the inn and the only place they can find to stay will be a stable. And why? So a greedy emperor could be sure to get his tax money? No, there is a greater reason that no one in this story had yet thought of. God had spoken through the prophet Micah, *But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times*. - *5:2* Even the chief priests and teachers of the law knew that Messiah must be born in Bethlehem according to the prophet, or so they told the wise men later. You see, it was the hand of God and His divine plan that brought them into this suffering and there is a final lesson here for us:

The Lesson: God's sovereignty and our willingness to suffer It's expressed very clearly in *1 Pet. 4:19, So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.* Saying yes to God's will does not always lead us on a rosy path. It often leads us where we'd rather not be. Whether it is the emotional suffering of the scorn of others who count us as evil or misguided or at the least, foolish, or whether it is the suffering of being cold and tired and hungry and delivering your baby in an animal stall, instead of the warmth of your own home, obeying God and following His plan often leads to suffering. And our part, like theirs, is to commit ourselves to His faithful keeping and continue on as He leads us. *Within a century of Mary and Joseph's time, over in Rome where Caesar was, crowds by the tens of thousands would gather in the Colosseum to watch as followers of their son Jesus were torn apart by wild animals. Evangelist Paul Rader made this comment when he visited this famous landmark, "I stood uncovered to the heavens above, where He sits for whom they gladly died, and asked myself, `Would I, could I, die for Him tonight to get this gospel to the ends of the earth?' I prayed most fervently in that Roman arena for the spirit of a martyr, and for the working of the Holy Spirit in my heart, as He worked in Paul's heart when he brought him on his handcuffed way to Rome."* As we read of Mary and Joseph on that road to Bethlehem, it puts us in the same kind of place. We stand uncovered before the One for whom they gladly suffered in the center of His will. And maybe we should be praying, "Lord, give me that spirit of submission they had; work in my heart as you did in theirs, so that I will always trust your timing, always believe what You say, always submit myself to be your willing servant, even in the face of suffering." Put yourself in their shoes and pray, "Search me, O God and know my heart today!"

Life Lessons From The Real Christmas Story

Part 2: The Birth Of Our Savior

If you were paying attention last time in Part 1 of this study as we looked at the events on The Road to Bethlehem, you might have noticed something interesting. Jesus was not born in the year 0 on our calendar, as one might expect, since after all, for 15 centuries the world has divided history into BC and AD by the occasion of His birth. Of course, that's obviously not because Jesus came early! The Romans counted years from the founding of Rome. If they were still ruling, we would be calling this year 2754 instead of 2002! But about the year we call 527 AD, a Roman Abbott proposed the idea of counting years from Christ's birth instead, and he reckoned that Christ was born on March 25 in the year 754 of Rome and he called that year 1 AD, in Latin, *anno domini*, which means "in the year of our Lord", Jesus Christ. Unfortunately, it turned out that he reckoned wrong! Moreover, by the year 1582, the Catholic church noticed that the Roman Julian calendar (named for Julius Caesar) had not calculated the exact length of a year correctly and Easter was now starting to fall almost in summertime, so extra days were inserted to correct it and the calendar we use today, the Gregorian calendar (named for Pope Gregory XIII), was adopted in Europe. At any rate, it was probably late in December (if not actually Dec. 25, when we celebrate it) in the year we today call 5 BC when:

I. Jesus Is Born In Bethlehem - Luke 2 Mary and Joseph arrived late in Bethlehem after their three day journey from Nazareth. Because they were travelers and didn't know any relatives or friends to stay with, they went to the inn as

travelers would, but alas, it was full with all those who had come to town to register for the census. The only spot where they could find shelter was in the cave against which the local inn was built, where the animals were kept. So here are:

The Events:

1: Jesus is born in a stable (6-7) There Mary, weary and exhausted, both from the three day journey and the birth, wraps him in baby blankets she had brought, just in case, and lays him in the soft straw of a donkey's feed rack, a manger, to sleep. Think of the irony of it, the Son of God lying in a manger. So lowly; so humble. And yet, at the very same time, on the hillside outside Bethlehem:

2: angels announce His birth and identity to shepherds (8-14) In the fields to the east of Bethlehem toward Jerusalem were pastures. There the flocks for the temple were kept. The lambs used for the daily sacrifice were born and pastured there all year round, even in winter, by special shepherds chosen for this important task. Near them was a stone watchtower called Migdal Eder, "the watchtower of the flock," and it was from Migdal Eder, according to Jewish tradition, that Messiah was to be revealed or announced. Look how it was done in verses 9-12. The angel appeared with the very *shekinah* glory cloud of God and told them that the promised Savior, the Christ, had been born that very night, right there in Bethlehem, and they would find him when they went to look. Note the contrast. Born in a stable, but announced by a heavenly spectacle grander than any the world had ever known. And the shepherds are greatly moved by it in verses 15-16. They ran to Bethlehem:

3. the shepherds find him and tell the town (15-20) No homeowner would put their newborn babe in a feed rack in a stable. There could only be one place to look, the inn where the travelers stayed. And only one baby was born there that night and his birth, I'm sure, was already the talk of the inn, if not the town. So, in they came, awestruck, to tell Mary and Joseph what had happened to them out in the fields. But the punchline is in verse 17-18. They were so filled with joy that they had seen the Savior that they told the whole town. Verse 20 tells us they went back to their flocks that night like true Pentecostal brethren, with their hands in the air and their voices raised, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen and especially because what the angel had said to them, they found to be true. Well, the night passed. But Joseph needed to find somewhere more suitable for Mary and the baby to stay and it seems he did. Whether someone took them in or they found a house they could rent is not clear, but even with all the strangers in town they still found one. And it was there in that house that eight days later, in the beginning of January of 5 BC, that:

4: Jesus is circumcised on the eighth day (21) and officially and obediently given the name Jesus, the name the angel had said Joseph was to give him. However, there were two other rituals that needed to be performed at the Temple, so Mary and Joseph evidently decided to stay in Bethlehem and wait for the appropriate time to go up to Jerusalem, rather than taking the long journey home to Nazareth and then coming back again to Jerusalem later. According to the Law, the firstborn male child of every household was to be presented to the Lord at the sanctuary and redeemed by paying the redemption price of five shekels of silver. This could only be done when one month had passed since birth. On top of that, the Law stipulated that any mother who gave birth had to offer a sin offering and a burnt offering for her ceremonial purification and for that she had to wait 40 days. So, it was in early February of 5 BC that Mary and Joseph went up to Jerusalem and:

5: Jesus is presented at the Temple on the 40th day (22-24) The wealthy would offer a dove for a sin offering and a lamb for the burnt offering, but the law stated that if the woman was too poor to afford a lamb, that she could offer two doves or two young pigeons instead. And this is what Joseph and Mary did. Again we see that the Son of God was not born into wealth or royalty, but into a poor and humble family, too poor to afford a lamb. Yet note the contrast. Imagine their surprise there in the Temple, as immediately up comes this elderly man named Simeon and:

6: Simeon prophetically confirms His identity (25-35) Simeon has never seen them or their baby before, yet by the Spirit of God he knows that this is the Son of God. He breaks out in praise that He has seen the promised Christ, the salvation of Israel. And as he is standing there filled with joy, the same thing happens again. An elderly woman named:

7: Anna enthusiastically declares His identity (36-38) Like the shepherds, she rushes out filled with joy to tell all her godly friends who were waiting for Messiah like she was, that He had arrived! Now, buried in the contrast of these stories is a lesson for us:

The Lesson: His humility and the compulsion of our witness - 2 Cor. 8:9*, For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.* A popular carol asks, "*How should a King come? Even a child knows the answer of course, In a coach of gold with a pure white horse. In the beautiful city in the prime of the day, And the trumpets should cry and the crowds make way. And the flags fly high in the morning sun, And the people all cheer for the sovereign one. And everyone knows that's the way that it's done. That's the way that a King should come."* That's the way we would expect God to send His long-awaited Son into the world. But how did He send Him? *On a star filled night into Bethlehem, Rode a weary*

woman and a worried man. And the only sound in the cobblestone street, Was the shuffle and the ring of their donkey's feet. And a King lay hid in a virgin's womb, And there were no crowds to see Him come. At last in a barn in a manger of hay, He came and God incarnate lay. For our sake, He humbled Himself. For our sake, infinite almighty God took the form of a frail human being and was born as a baby. For our sake, the Lord of all the riches of glory became poor and was born in a stable and laid in a feed rack. For our sake, the Savior of the world was born to a poor peasant couple who could only afford two pigeons. For our sake, the promised King humbled Himself and became obedient to death, even the death of the cross, so that everything He is and has might become ours, so that we are made eternally rich beyond measure! And what is our response to this? So often, instead of modeling His humility and following His principle that it is the last who will be first and we must be the servants of all, we exalt ourselves and live self-serving lives and pray self-serving prayers. We want our own way instead of His. But did you notice the reaction of the shepherds and again of Anna? The glory of His simple birth literally propelled them out to share the good news with their friends and relatives and throughout the whole town where they lived. When we truly comprehend the glory of what He did, we give our lives to telling the story of what He did! The love of Christ compels us to become His witnesses.

Now Matthew picks up and continues the story as he tells us about:

II. The Coming Of The Wise Men - Matthew 2 How many of them there were, we don't really know. And we're not exactly sure where they came from, but their journey was hardly less than 1,000 miles and could have been considerably more. It was a long, hard journey that had, no doubt, taken months. They had seen that special star at its rising, or first appearance, two years earlier. For how many days or weeks it appeared, we don't know. Why they took so long to set out, we don't know either. What we do know is that one day, probably in late February of the year 5 BC when Jesus was around two months old, and just after His presentation at the Temple, these Magi, along with an entire caravan and servants arrived:

The Events:

1: Magi from the east arrive in Jerusalem (1-2) The star did not tell them the place of His birth. So, they naturally came to Jerusalem, the capital of the Jews, expecting that everybody there would surely know about the birth of the long-awaited "King of the Jews". But alas, no one did! It was not long before word of their question got to Rome's appointed King, Herod, and he was not a little bit unnerved by it. His reputation was that he ruthlessly killed anyone who was a danger to him and his rule and even if he considered this a rumor, it was enough to make fear rise in his heart. The only thing he could think to do was to ask the Jewish leaders where the Christ was supposed to be born. Of course, they remembered Micah's promise that the ruler of Israel would come out of Bethlehem, so:

2: Herod sends them to Bethlehem (3-8), hoping to have them do his dirty work of finding the child, so he can destroy him, but all the while innocently pretending that he too would want to pay homage to such a king! So, it was to Bethlehem they set out that night and as they left Jerusalem, another miracle occurred:

3: the star re-appears to guide them to the house (9-10) When the star, which they had not seen now in perhaps all of two years, suddenly reappeared, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy. They knew God was confirming their journey. And somehow the star gave to them the impression that it was going before them, leading them to Bethlehem. I've never been able to tell that any star that I've seen was over anything in particular, have you? This was surely no ordinary star. In whatever supernatural manner, the Lord allowed it to have the sense of movement and to have the sense of being directly above Bethlehem, if not above the actual house itself. And even if they did need to inquire as to which house that special baby was to be found in, it was surely not long until they knocked at the door of Mary and Joseph. Imagine their surpise that night, as Joseph opened the door to a caravan of strangers, and the tremendous shock it must have been when:

4: the Magi present gifts and bow before Jesus (11) They came before him and knelt down and bowed low, touching their foreheads to the ground. Now, this was not exactly worship as we think of it. They, no doubt, did not comprehend that they were seeing God incarnate. Rather, they were servants showing allegiance to a Sovereign, and just as anyone coming before King Herod or Caesar himself would bow down in a humble show of allegiance and offer the gifts they had brought, so now they bowed before God's newborn King and presented Him with the best things of their own country, gold and frankincense and myrrh. And here again we might pause to ponder a lesson.

The Lesson: His worthiness and the necessity of our worship - Phil. 2:9-11 says that having humbled Himself to become a human being and having become obedient to death on the cross, *Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.* Having humbled Himself for us, He is worthy of our worship and the Father's intent is that every single human being should do what the wise men did, bow their knee in worship and confess Jesus as their Lord and Savior. These magi were the first representatives of a great multitude from every tribe, tongue, people and nation who will fall before Him and cast their crowns at His feet. Christmas is not primarily about decorations and presents and beautiful music, as

lovely as those things are. It is about the very Son of God humbling Himself to become a man to save us and it is a call to every one of us to come and fall before Him, declare Him our Lord and worship Him with our hearts.

Marie L. Olson expressed it so well in her poem:

They opened their treasures, the wise men of old, And prostrate they fell on the ground; Exultant in spirit, they worshiped the Lord, For Jesus, the Savior, they'd found!

The treasure of Heaven in Bethlehem lay, Incarnate was God from above; No wonder their treasures they opened to Him-- Their feeble expressions of love!

We may not have treasures of glory or gold, Nor perfume to pour at His feet;

Though if we but knew the true worth of Christ, We'd give Him our homage complete.

Our treasured desires let us open anew, Our secrets, our dreams, and our all; We offer as incense our praises to Him, Adoring before Him we fall!

This Savior from Heaven is worthy indeed; And things of this world become dim! But joys everlasting in Jesus are found! Now open your treasures to Him!"

Ponder that, will you, even though we're going to continue on. The visit of the wise men which was intended purely to honor Jesus had an unintentional side-effect. It incurred:

III. The Wrath Of Herod - Matthew 2 It is likely that they stayed only that one night in Bethlehem after their long journey, but as they slept:

The Events:

1: the Magi are warned in a dream and leave by another route (12) God clearly showed them they should not go back to Herod. So they packed up their camels and left as swiftly as they had come, by another route, a country route avoiding the city of Jerusalem. They were long gone by the time Herod realized it. The night after they left, another warning was given:

2: Joseph is warned in a dream to flee to Egypt (13-15) This time the intent was made clear, "Herod will try to kill Jesus". It was a night flight; they got up, gathered all their belongings, likely told no one, and left town. This was a longer journey than the one from Nazareth, perhaps 10 days to cover more than 200 miles to Egypt, far from Herod's clutches. Yet even as they have been walking that dusty road but a few days:

3: Herod is angered and orders the slaughter of infants (16-18) When the wise men don't show up in several days, Herod realizes he's been found out and they aren't coming back. And he doesn't like it at all. But he has a plan, "The wise men said they had seen the star nearly two years ago; I'll just kill all the baby boys two and under in the whole town and that will take care of that!" The cruelty of it is hard to imagine, infants and toddlers ripped from their helpless parents' arms and impaled on spears or stabbed with swords. Now, judging from the size of the town, it couldn't have been more than 20 or 30 infants at the most, not even significant enough among Herod's cruelties to make it into the history books. To most people, it was just another one of Herod's frightful excesses, but God takes note of such things. And do you want to know what happened? Within four weeks of this dreadful deed, Herod was dead.

4: Herod dies and Mary and Joseph return to Nazareth (19-23) At this time, Herod was over 70 years old and completely stricken with disease. Josephus writes of Herod's last few weeks, *...the distemper seized upon his whole body, and greatly disordered all its parts with various symptoms; for there was a gentle fever upon him, and an intolerable itching over all the surface of his body, and continual pains in his colon, and dropsical turnouts about his feet, and an inflammation of the abdomen, and a putrefaction... that produced worms. Besides which he had a difficulty of breathing upon him, and could not breathe but when he sat upright, and had a convulsion of all his members, insomuch that the diviners said those diseases were a punishment upon him for what he had done...* His last official act was to have his son Antipater killed, and five days later he breathed his last. You can't help but see there's a lesson here.

The Lesson: His sovereignty and the futility of our resistance A wise rabbi named Gamaliel advised his friends who wanted to persecute the Apostles in ***Acts 5:39***, *But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God.* Herod found himself fighting against God and couldn't win. In the centuries to come, Jewish leaders, Roman governors and even Emperors, dictators and the Communist Party, would follow in his steps, killing and persecuting the followers of Jesus in hopes of stamping out His Name, only to find themselves fighting against God and unable to win. For in our generation Jesus has more followers than in all the centuries of history put together. He is Lord and no one can fight that.

But it's funny how people still try. They push Him away from their lives. They say, "He will not be my Lord; I will not follow Him. My life is mine and nobody will rule over me; I will not bow my knee to Him as my Savior and Lord." But remember

the Scripture, *One day at the name of Jesus EVERY knee will bow* - even yours. You can't fight God and win; you can only lose. God has declared that there is no other name under heaven whereby we can be saved than the name of His Son and you either bow before Him now as a loving Savior, or you'll kneel before Him as your Judge one day and be lost forever. Won't you come before Him today and give Him your heart?

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"Mary, Did You Know?" - Lk. 1:26-45

What Mary Knew About Herself

A few years ago, Mark Lowry and Buddy Greene were wondering what it must have been like for Mary, a young lady from Galilee to be approached by an angel and told that she would bear God's Son, what it was like to deliver that son in a stable and have a troop of shepherds come in and bow down to worship the baby, telling of a sky full of angels on the hillside nearby. Luke tells us that Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart as she tried diligently to understand the full import of all that God was doing. And they sat down and wrote a new Christmas song, "Mary, Did You Know?" It's a song full of questions like, "Did you know your baby boy would one day walk on water? Did you know your baby boy will give sight to the blind man? Did you know he'll calm a storm with His hand?" The answer to many of these would be no. Mary didn't know all that the future would hold. She didn't fully comprehend every detail of all that was happening to and through her. But there were some things that Mary DID know and on those I'd like to concentrate. Today I'd like to focus on what Mary knew about herself and next time on what she knew about her Son. Let's begin in Luke 1 by thinking about:

I. Who Mary Was (26-28) We don't know much about her, really. Just a few basic facts. We don't know what she looked like, whether she was tall or short, heavy or thin, beautiful or homely. We don't know what she liked to eat or how well she could do math or whether she liked to laugh. We don't know anything about her parents or her brothers and sisters (if she had any) or the home she grew up in. We only know that she lived in the town of Nazareth in Galilee. However, the few facts we do know are very important ones. First:

1. she was young The term virgin carries a double connotation. She was a daughter so young she had not yet married. And since marriage in ancient cultures normally occurred earlier than we're used to, it would be very likely that she was perhaps only 15 or 16, maybe 17 years old. Picture that for a moment. We're all concerned about ministering to our teens and helping them to mature; this teen was about to minister to the world and was already more mature than most of us, as you'll see in a moment. Then, in our technical sense of the word:

2. she was a virgin In verse 34 she makes it plain that she has literally never known a man, has never been sexually intimate with any male. She was pure and holy and in her mind and culture, destined, determined and dedicated to know only one man ever, the husband that she would have for life. That's a standard we need to get back to in our culture for young women and for young men to honor the purpose and plan of God for our lives. She's an example of sexual purity. Then we read that, at this time:

3. she was betrothed It's easy for us to read that as "engaged" in our modern sense of the word. We picture her and Joseph shyly noticing each other, quietly meeting and laughing together and a romantic proposal and all of that. But it's not very likely. In that culture, marriages were most often arrangements made by parents or by the man himself. Often, the man might be older, sometimes much older. Judging from the fact that Joseph seems to have died long before Jesus was 30, he may well have been significantly older than Mary and established in the community. Or if a man was younger, he might ask his parents to approach hers to arrange a marriage for him. While it is likely that in such a small town as Nazareth the two did know each other, there is no indication of how they felt about it. Joyful or not, an arrangement had been made. And it was firm as concrete. Betrothal was the year or so of preparation for marriage and was so permanent that a divorce was actually required in order to break it. Mary was under full obligation to Joseph, and he to her, to allow no other person to enter their lives, and both understood that. She would one day soon be the carpenter's wife. And finally, we read that:

4. she was named Mary That's the English pronunciation. The Greek name is *Mariam* which comes from the Hebrew name Miriam. In Jesus' day, there are Mary/Miriams all over the place; I think if you stood in the marketplace and yelled, "Hey Mary!", half of the women there would turn and look. Yet in the Old Testament there are only two. One is somebody's daughter in a genealogy in Chronicles, but the other, whose name occurs a dozen times, is Miriam, the sister of Moses. And what was she known for? She rebelled against God by rebelling against Moses' leadership and was punished for it. In fact, the name Mary or Miriam means *rebellion*. Of course, that doesn't tell us anything about Mary's actual character, but it will enhance what you will learn in a few moments, so keep it in mind. Now let's look at:

II. What Mary Was Told (29-37) That special day, the archangel Gabriel himself appeared to her to deliver an important message from God and before we look at it, I want you to notice that:

1. it was not a request, but a statement of fact There is no, "Would you please? Is this OK? God would like you to..." Instead, it was a declaration, an order, a decree, "You <u>will</u> be with child...you <u>will</u> give birth...you <u>are</u> to give him the

name..." It's a demand, an order, a statement of what will be, from the Sovereign God. We're not used to that; we don't like that much. We're taught that it's impolite, prideful, assuming. And it goes against that self-centered flesh of ours. We're Miriams, aren't we? When somebody gives us an order, something in us wants to rebel, to stand up and say, "No way!" The only realm we relate to where this is normal to us is the military. The ranking officer gives the orders and everybody else says, "Yes sir!", like it or not. No other response is acceptable. That's exactly the situation with Mary. Now look at:

2. what she was told First:

a. she was assured of God's complete grace toward her (28) The NIV "Greetings!" just doesn't cut it. The word is literally, "Rejoice!" It's the imperative command, just as it is in Phil. 4:4, *Rejoice in the Lord always and again I say, Rejoice!* It's like the Christmas song, "Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel..." Why? "You are a person who has received grace!" It is repeated in verse 30. You have found grace from God, that is, you have been extended grace by God. You've been received and accepted by Him through nothing of yourself. God has chosen to extend to you complete acceptance, forgiveness, favor a love that you could never deserve. That's a good way to start off an order, isn't it? By the way, isn't that what we have? John 1:16, *For of His fulness we have all received, and grace upon grace.* We have complete acceptance and favor with God; we have nothing to fear from Him and we received that standing when we received Jesus Christ. Secondly:

b. she was reminded of God's continual presence with her *The Lord is with you!* There is no verb in the phrase in the original; it's assumed. He IS with you now. He HAS BEEN with you in the past. He WILL BE with you in the future. His presence is continual. Isn't that what Jesus told us? *Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age!* That's the platform from which our orders come; they are not from a distant, uncaring commander, but from One who has lavished His grace upon us in Jesus and who is with us always! Now here are the orders:

c. she would conceive, carry and deliver a son for God (30-32) She would become pregnant, carry a baby boy to full term and deliver Him. She would do it for God; He would God's Son. The Father needed a human vessel for the Incarnation, for His Son Jesus who dwelt with Him in glory to be wrapped in human flesh and come forth as a human being to save the world. That's the part she didn't fully understand. She simply knew she would carry and deliver a child and name him Jesus, and here's the hard part:

d. it would happen solely through the Holy Spirit without a man (35) Think about it in the natural. She was already engaged. Who would mind going ahead, being married and having a child who would be claimed by God as His Son? But this birth was to be a virgin birth. There was to be no human father. The Holy Spirit would do a Divine miracle. A baby would be conceived in her without sexual intercourse, without a man. It would just happen for the first, last, and only time in all history -- to her! Think about:

3. what that meant Who on earth is going to believe her story? No one! They would see her story about an angel and a miracle as a lie, a cover-up for immorality, for unfaithfulness. She would be pregnant while unmarried. Today, our western society is pretty accepting of that, but in her day and culture, this news demanded of her the **willingness to lose everything in life at God's demand**. It meant the loss of:

a. her reputation and acceptance in the community Is the town going to believe in a virgin birth? No, she would be seen as a loose woman and scorned for it. It could have meant the loss of:

b. her primary relationships and family She still lived at home with her mother and father. How could she come home pregnant? Would they help her or cast her out? Would they shelter her or thrust her away from them for good for dishonoring their names? Most of all it impacted:

c. her impending marriage and fiancé Would Joseph believe her? No, and actually, he didn't! Matthew tells us that when he found out, he was thinking about divorcing her, breaking the betrothal. He was a righteous man. They hadn't slept together; he knew the child was not his. He believed she had been unfaithful to him and could not bring himself to marry her any longer. If God hadn't sent Gabriel to him also, this news would have ruined:

d. her entire course of life and life itself Her marriage and future, her home and family and their love, the acceptance of her community, everything she loved and treasured and wanted, all of it could be gone in a moment through this act of God. In fact, though it wasn't practiced much, she could very well, according to Old Testament law, have been stoned to death for such a thing. It could have cost her life. Obedience meant being willing to lose everything near and dear, even life itself. That was the demand God placed on this teenager. However, lest we think only about Mary, let's consider:

4. the similar demand that is given to us - Luke 9:23-24 That's what being a follower of Jesus means. Every day we make a choice. We choose to die to self, to what we want, to our plans and dreams and expectations, to accept that HE controls our lives and cooperate with what HE wants. Jesus repeated it again even more strongly in **14:26-27, 33**.

That's the demand with which Jesus comes into our lives, "I saved you. I gave you all the fullness of My grace. You are an heir of everything I have and have planned for eternity. I am with you every moment in every situation. You'll never be alone. But here is my demand. Love me more than anyone and anything else in life, more than father or mother or child or husband or wife, more than life itself. Give up your rights to everything you have; yield everything to me, to my control. I am Lord." That's what the central confession of Christianity means, Jesus is Lord. I surrender all right to anything concerning myself to Him. That's what was being required of Mary. God said, "I'm claiming My right to control your life" and here's:

III. How Mary Responded (38) What beautiful words! First note that:

1. she understood her identity as a servant of God *I am the Lord's servant.* We don't understand that. We don't know what a servant is. We've never been a servant; we've never had a servant. But Paul understood. He wrote, *Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ...* James wrote, *James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ...* Peter wrote, *Peter, a servant of Jesus Christ...* Jude wrote, *Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ...* The word servant means a slave, one who has no choice, no will and no right, but that of the Master. Jesus put it like this in Luke 17:7-10, *"But which of you, having a slave plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come immediately and sit down to eat'? But will he not say to him, 'Prepare something for me to eat, and [properly] clothe yourself and serve me until I have eaten and drunk; and afterward you will eat and drink'? "He does not thank the slave because he did the things which were commanded, does he? So you too, when you do all the things which are commanded you, say, 'We are unworthy slaves; we have done [only] that which we ought to have done.'"* So much of the time, we think God is here to serve us. He's here to answer our prayers, to fix our problems, to do what we want done or think we need done, to make our life the way we want it to be. The focus is on us and our feelings and our needs. But we are not our own! We were bought with a price, the precious blood of the Son of God, who became a servant to us and died on the cross for our sins. And now we have but one role, one purpose, to glorify Him with our bodies, in the actions of our lives. That's how Mary saw herself, and without a moment's hesitation:

2. she yielded in an attitude of submission to God *May it be to me...* She didn't rant and rave and kick and scream and cry and wail and complain. She didn't say, "You're unfair; you're unjust!", and rebel against Him. She reversed her name; she died to her own flesh and she willingly submitted. You see, I'm a willing servant; I'm not a slave who obeys because he has to, because he was kidnapped and beaten and is too afraid to disobey. I have a loving Master who sacrificed His all for me. Now I call Him Lord and I say, "Have thine own way Lord" in my life, because that's who I've chosen to be. I yield without thought and without question to His will and purpose. I give my all to one goal, that His Name and Kingdom might come throughout the earth. And whatever He sends my way, I say, *May it be to me...* And then Mary added, *according to your words*:

3. she acted out of faith in the Word of God Though she couldn't understand how it could be possible or how she would survive it all, she believed what had been told her, because it was the Word of God. Look what her cousin Elizabeth commented in verse **(45)**. Mary had no way of verifying that she was pregnant at that moment, but she believed it because God said so. When Jesus is Lord, you do what He says, because He says so and you believe what He says, because He says so, whether you can see it with your eyes or not.

Very few occasions in our lives are as momentous as this one was for Mary; only rarely do those moments requiring drastic obedience with far-reaching consequences come, yet they do come to us. When I was 19 God told me what He wanted to do with my life and my rebellious flesh resisted for six months before I finally fell on my knees and surrendered my life for His use in the ministry. I told Him I was His and He could do whatever He wanted to with me and it changed absolutely everything in my life. If you know Jesus, there will be, perhaps, a couple of those dramatic, life-changing moments in your life too. Yet nearly every day of our lives, the Lord comes to us right where we are with His demand for what He wants to do with us in the circumstances of our lives. He may speak to us about the attitude He wants while we're in line at the grocery store that we don't feel like displaying. He may instruct us to give away some of His money in our account to a need when we don't want to. He may demand that we forgive someone who has hurt us when it's the last thing we want to do. He may order us to give up or let go of something or to endure something that's really painful for us. *Alice Smith writes this testimony: "In the spring of 1989, the Lord began to deal with me about taking a sabbatical from selling real estate. At the time, I was a successful real estate agent in Houston, Texas. I had experienced a financially profitable year. In the fall of 1989, I went away for a weekend to spend time with the Lord. I knew in my heart He was going to ask some difficult questions of me. As I lay praying on the floor of a hotel room, the Lord spoke to me with such clarity I had never heard before. He said, `Alice, will you give up your real estate business in 1990 and do nothing but minister to me and pray?' I could feel my body tighten as I groaned for an answer. `Lord, I love my work, and I am so good at it,' I answered. Sadly, I could feel a resistance that surprised even me. Again, as He repeated the words, waves of love seemed to roll over me. I cried bitterly to think that there was possibly anything more important to me than Him. He revealed how I was finding my significance in my real estate success. Unsettled, I wept as never before. Then with an indescribable love, He gently said, `I gave everything for you; won't you give this to Me?' The dam of resistance inside of me broke and submission flooded my heart. Absolute surrender was my answer that evening. I spent the next two months closing down my real estate business. In 1990, my assignment was simple: PRAY!" [Beyond the Veil by Alice Smith. SpiriTruth Publishing, 1996. Pages 140-141.]* When God comes with His demand, your answer will depend on who you think you are. That's why you need to

settle that now like Mary did, *I am the Lord's servant; may it be to me.* I trust that will be your answer too in every circumstance of life. I guarantee it will be worth it. Just think:

IV. How Mary Was Rewarded First:

1. through meaningful participation in the program of God (32-33) She bore the Son who would reign forever. Through her came the salvation of the world and the Kingdom of God. Through submission she was given the joy of participating with God in bringing you and I and billions of others to heaven by bearing the Son who would save us. When you submit, you have the joy of participating with God in the building of His Kingdom. And then she was rewarded:

2. through joyous recognition by the people of God (48) We sit here 2000 years later calling her blessed because of her submission and so has every generation in between.

What will your choice be? Or better yet, Who are you? That's a question worth thinking about and applying to every moment of your life. The rewards are eternal.

"Mary, Did You Know?" - Lk. 1:26-45

What Mary Knew About Her Son

The popular song "Mary, Did You Know?" asks some questions which deserve answers. Did Mary know her baby boy would walk one day walk on water? Did she know that He would give sight to a blind man or that he would calm a storm with His hand? No, there were a myriad of details Mary couldn't have even imagined about the life her son would live. But did she know what His mission was, why He was born? Did she know that He would save our sons and daughters? Yes, I believe she did. And did she know His identity, who He really was? Did she know that when she kissed her baby, she kissed the face of God? Yes, I believe she did! And did she know His destiny? Did she know that He would one day rule the nations? Again, yes, I believe she did. She knew three things, the three most important things the song mentions and they are the three most important things that you and I must also know about her Son. First:

I. She Knew His Mission: She knew that **He Would Be The Savior (31)** The angel gave her word straight from God and told her that:

1. His name was to be Jesus That's how his name is written in the Greek language of the New Testament. But Mary didn't speak Greek; she spoke Hebrew and in Hebrew, the name would be Joshua, pronounced Yeshua, as our Messianic friends say it today. And Joshua is the shortened form of Jehoshua, or Jehovah-jashah, which means **Jehovah-salvation** or Jehovah saves. His very name means salvation; it is the name of a Savior. And why did God choose it? Certainly not for the reasons we choose names! We're not left to wonder. Look at **Mt. 1:21**. When the angel appeared to Joseph, he spelled out the reason. He was named Jehovah saves because HE himself was going to be the means by which Jehovah would save people. But save them from what? Well, God makes it very clear:

2. He would save his people from their sins - Mt. 1:21 Now that's not what most of us think we need to be saved from. We'd like to be saved from our problems. We'd like to have someone save us from sickness and aging. We'd like to have someone save us from our pile of bills or the awful drudgery of our job. We'd like to be protected from criminals and terrorists or delivered from the hostility of our ex-husband or wife. The Jews thought like that too. The Jews wanted to be saved from the Romans who had conquered them and were oppressing their country. But God knows we have a bigger problem than that. Jesus was not sent to save us from our circumstances, but from the thing that was really killing us, the thing that was separating us from God, the thing that would kill us eternally. Isaiah wrote in 59:2, *... your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you...!* Paul wrote the same thing to us in Rom. 3:10-12, *..."There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away...there is no one who does good, not even one."* And in 3:23, *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,* That's our root problem; we are all sinners, separated from a holy God, and we need a Savior. That's why Jesus was to be born! Then later, when Mary and Joseph took the baby Jesus to the Temple to dedicate Him, God added to her information through the words of an old man named Simeon whom she met there. When he saw Jesus, he told her:

3. His salvation would extend to the peoples of the world - 2:29-33 He was not just to be the Savior of Israel, but the Savior of all the peoples of the earth. Aren't you glad? That means His salvation is for you and I too! But she was also told that:

4. His mission would involve rejection and pain - 2:34-35 This is the part of which Mary had only this hint. This is how His salvation would come. He would be despised and rejected by men. He would bear our sins and carry our sorrows. His soul would become the offering for our sins. He Himself would bear them in His own body on the cross. He would die in our place that we might live, and standing there watching Him save us that way, Mary's very soul would

be pierced through with pain. That's what it would take to save us. She didn't know how much it would take, but she did know that her baby boy would be the Savior to save us from our sins! And also:

II. She Knew His Identity: He Would Be The Son Of God Back in chapter 1, the angel told her:

1. He was to be great: the Son of the Most High (32a) He was to be no mere man. He was not to be an ordinary, common human being. He was to be *megas*, great. He was *huios hupistou*, son of the Most High Being in all the universe. And that is why He was not to be born in an ordinary manner. Verse **35** says:

2. He was to be, literally, **holy**-born, born of a virgin, born without the sinful nature of humanity being passed on through the creation of his body as it was to ours. He would be **the Son of** God. This was not an ordinary baby; this was God being born as a man. This was God's only begotten Son, who shared the glory of heaven with Him from all eternity, now made incarnate in a baby's body through a virgin's womb. She didn't know all the details, but she knew this son of hers was not hers. He did not come from her; He was not created by her. His body was created in her womb by a miracle of God and when she kissed His tiny human face, she kissed the face of God! She knew it, but do you? He was not just a wise man, a great teacher, a prophet of God. He was not just a figure of history or a mythical person whose birth we celebrate. He was God come down to earth in human flesh and delivered through a virgin's womb to die for your sins and mine! And then:

III. She Knew His Destiny: He Would Be The Messiah (32b-33) That language doesn't mean much to us, but it sure did to Mary. Long ago, God had made a covenant with King David in 2 Sam 7:16, *Your house [offspring] and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever.* However, as the years went by, it became clear that that promise was not going to be fulfilled through Solomon or his son or his grandson or through any of his descendants who sat on the throne of Judah. Rather, the prophets began to speak of a special One who would come from David's line. Micah predicted in 5:2, *But you, Bethlehem, ...out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.* That Coming One was referred to as the Messiah, the Anointed One, and through the centuries of living under foreign domination, the hope of Israel began to focus more and more on the expectation of His coming. Every Hebrew girl hoped one day to be the mother of the Messiah. So, what Gabriel is telling Mary about her son is that:

1. God would fulfill His ancient promise to David through Him He would be the Messiah, the One to fulfill all the prophecies and promises, that:

2. He would rule over the Kingdom God promised, a kingdom that would include Israel, but would extend to the ends of the earth, a kingdom that would be known as the very Kingdom of God, the reign of God in righteousness and justice over all the world. And:

3. His kingdom would be eternal in nature Once set up, it would never end!

That is what Mary knew about the destiny of her son! The missing part, which we know, is the outline of the timing. He <u>first</u> had to die for our sins. Then, on the third day He rose up bodily from the grave and He ascended to heaven to reign in exaltation from there and wait until the day appointed for His return. But those ancient promises are still good and the Bible says that one day this same Jesus will come again to judge the world and to set up His eternal Kingdom that will never end. Paul explained it like this in Acts 17:30-31, *...God now commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead."*

In December 1903, after many attempts, the Wright brothers were successful in getting their "flying machine" off the ground. Thrilled, they telegraphed this exciting message to their sister Katherine: "We have actually flown 120 feet. Will be home for Christmas." Katherine hurried to the editor of the local newspaper and showed him the message. He glanced at it and said, "How nice. The boys will be home for Christmas." He totally missed the big news -- man had flown! Many people today make the same mistake... Our telegram reads, "Unto you is born this day a Savior which is Christ the Lord. Find the baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." And so many of us think, "How nice, a baby lying in a manger!" And we miss the big news: we have a Savior! Jesus is not just a cute little baby in a manger, a lovely story for a special season. Jesus is God's very Son. Jesus is the Only Savior who can save us from our sins. Jesus is God's appointed King, who is coming back one day to rule the world. And God has given one command to all men (which includes you and I), that we must repent, that we must quit trying to save ourselves by being good, and place all our trust in the living Jesus to save us from our sins and invite Him to come into our life.

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One Night In Bethlehem - Luke 2:6-20

The Angels Who Announced The Good News

The Christmas story is made up of several parts, or we might say, several scenes. But for our Christmas series this year, I would like to focus on just one of them, that tremendous scene that happened on a hillside, "One Night In Bethlehem". There is no more familiar portion of the Christmas story than this one where the "First Noel", the first announcement of the Good News, was made by an angel to "certain poor shepherds in fields where they lay". This scene is so familiar and we have heard the story so often that we can probably repeat it line by line from memory. That is supposed to be a good thing, but it's a bad thing if we let our very familiarity reduce it to just a bunch of words and fail to ponder what the Scripture is telling us. There are two main sets of actors in this scene, angels and shepherds. Today we'll consider the angels and next time, the shepherds. And I would be remiss if I didn't give credit where it is due by saying up front that the inspiration to think about this familiar scene in new ways came from a little booklet put out by Radio Bible Class in their Discovery series, titled *Angels and Shepherds: Worshiping the Newborn King*, written by Bill Crowder. Now let's turn to Luke chapter 2 and read about that night in Bethlehem in verses **8-14**. Never before or since has anything like this ever happened that we know of; no other human beings have ever experienced such a thing, the sky above their heads suddenly and literally filled with angels shouting in joy. John saw multitudes of angels, but it was in a vision, in heaven, not on earth. This was a real event that happened to real people like you and I, in a real time and place, "One Night in Bethlehem". The first thing to consider here is:

I. The Good News About Angels Themselves (9-14) Sadly, it's probably necessary to say this up front:

1. they are real beings So many people in our educated, modern society would dismiss this story as ancient fiction. They are like the Sadducees, of whom **Acts 23:8** says, *The Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, and that there are neither angels nor spirits*... As a dear mentor of mine used to remark, "How SAD, you see!" How sad that today so many people refuse to believe in things they cannot see or have not personally experienced. Well, the Bible says angels are real, therefore God says angels are real beings and if you don't believe it, you'll just have to take it up with Him. They exist. Then, on the other end of our society are people that do believe in angels in weird wacky ways. Some believe that people turn into angels when they die. I think that's been promoted by the cartoons we watched as children more than anything else; some character dies and in the next scene is sitting on a cloud with wings, strumming a harp. But that's a lie. Angels never have been and never will be people. They are a separate order of created beings. In fact, they were created before God ever created the world that we know and the Bible says that when He made it, all the angels shouted for joy! (Job. 38:6). They were created first, but they are not material beings like we are:

2. they are spirit-beings who can choose to appear to us in visible form, as in verse **(9)**. The angel suddenly appeared before the shepherds and then a whole sky full of them appeared in verse 13. Like God, they are spirit beings that have no material body. They can be present anywhere, at any time, but we are unable to see them with our human eyes unless they choose to make themselves visible. And when they do, they can even take the form of human beings if they choose, like the two angels who ate with Abraham along with the Lord Himself in Genesis 18 before He destroyed Sodom. And that must not be the only instance of it, because **Heb. 13:2** cautions us: *Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it.* Maybe you have! But almost all of the time, they remain invisible, at work behind the scenes without our knowledge. Now I also need to warn you that there are a bunch of people in our society who DO believe in "angels". They try to communicate with them, to get information from them, but the angels they're contacting and interacting with are really demons, angels who fell by rebelling against God before creation, servants of Satan. When people talk about having and knowing their own personal angel, their own "spirit guide" who talks to them or maybe "inhabits them", or about worshipping or praying to angels, there are none of God's angels involved at all, simply demonic spirits masquerading as angels to entice gullible people into false ways of worshipping and away from Christ. Never seek after angelic spirits! But angels ARE spirit-beings who serve God. Then, from verse 13 we learn how many of them there are:

3. there are a great multitude of them In fact, they are a host, **a heavenly army (13)** and God is its Commander. Although the translators of the NIV elected to translate it erroneously as *Sovereign Lord*, dozens of times throughout Scripture God is called *the Lord of Hosts*, the Commander of the angel armies of heaven. Those that appeared in the sky that night in Bethlehem are only one company, dispatched for this purpose. When John saw them in Revelation 5, he said that there were *ten thousand times ten thousand and thousands of thousands.* If that's literal, it's at least 100 trillion! There are too many to count, but where are they? Well, it appears that:

4. they are headquartered in heaven and sent out from there because in verse **(15)** when their celebration was done, they left and returned to heaven. They appear before the Lord and are constantly being sent out to duties and assignments all over the earth and, no doubt, throughout the universe. They are at work all around us in our lives. If our eyes could be opened as Elisha's servants were that day when he saw the hills literally full of horses and chariots of fire surrounding Elisha, we would see that there are angels at work everywhere, all around us, all the time, all over the world. But what do they do? Well, primarily two things. First of all:

5. they are messengers that God uses to deliver His Word In verse **(10)** the angel says, *I bring you good news...* The word *angel* in Greek means *messenger.* Angels are God's messengers; they deliver important messages that He wants delivered to His people. Of course, you see that all through the Christmas story. It begins when:

a. an angel announced John's birth to Zacharias - Lk. 1:11, 19 He was a priest and it was his turn to be in the holy place in the Temple offering incense, when suddenly the angel Gabriel appeared to tell him that he was to have a son and to name him John, because he would prepare the way for the Christ! Zacharias was dumb enough not to believe an angel and ended up tongue-tied and unable to speak until after the birth! Then:

b. an angel announced Jesus' birth to Mary - Lk. 1:26-27 Gabriel came to her also, to tell her that she was going to miraculously conceive and become the mother who would bring God's Son into the world. That was important news, but this time it was her fiancé who didn't know what to make of it, so then:

c. an angel announced Jesus' identity to Joseph in a dream **- Mt. 1:19-20** He told him that this baby was the Son of God and that He was literally "God with us", Emmanuel. That angel saved a marriage with his news! And then, of course, in our text:

d. an angel announced Jesus' birth to the shepherds He brought them Good News. That phrase, *bring good news*, is actually one word in the Greek and it is the prefix that means *good* attached to the verb from which *messenger* or *angel* comes. We know it as the verb *evangelize*, to bring good news to people. That's what angels do! They announce good news from God to people. Of course, sometimes they can announce bad news also, as a warning, but one of their two primary functions appears to be to personally deliver important news from God to people. They are messengers. And:

6. they are servants that God sends to help His people - Heb. 1:14 muses, *Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?* God sends them out from heaven to serve us. You know how in this very Christmas story:

a. an angel warned Joseph in a dream to protect him and Mary and the baby Jesus on the night that the wise men arrived **- Mt. 2:13**. So they fled to Egypt and after some weeks:

b. an angel appeared to Joseph to direct him to come back to the land of Israel again when it was safe **- Mt. 2:19-20**. Angels are always serving us. They are always protecting us, always involved in directing us, even though we can't see them. During Jesus' life on earth, they strengthened him in the desert after His temptation and in the garden during His agony. How many times do they strengthen us and intervene for us and we don't even see them! In the book, *The Heavenly Man*, Chinese Brother Yun tells how, during a time of prayer, he had a vision of an evil ugly creature trying to choke him and close his mouth, but a strong angel carried him away to safety. The very next day, security officers burst into his room and arrested him. He was choked and bound with a rope. They pulled a wooden cross off the wall and tied it on his back and paraded him through the streets for half a day. That night they took it off and left him alone for a few moments inside a big compound. He used his mouth to open the door and walked to the toilet compound. There he loosened and removed the rope, but the compound was surrounded by an eight foot high cement wall that had sharp pieces of glass embedded in its top and he saw no other way out. He writes, *What happened next is not possible from a human perspective, yet God is my witness that it is true... First I pulled myself up onto the wall as high as I could manage. I looked over the top of the wall and saw that on the other side was a ten foot wide open septic tank. As I hung grimly onto the side of the wall, all of a sudden I felt as if somebody hoisted me up and threw me over! I jumped so far that I even cleared the septic tank!... I believe the same angel I had seen in my vision helped to lift me up! [The Heavenly Man p. 60-65]***.** Listen, God's angels are at work on our behalf, unseen, all the time, just when we need them! And this night in Bethlehem, God needed them to announce good news, so they appeared to the shepherds. But now let's look at:

II. The Good News Which The Angel Announced What a familiar statement in verse 10, *I bring you good news, good tidings of great joy...* In English that sounds to us like "news that is going to make you happy," but in Greek, the news is not about the feeling they were going to have when they heard it; it is news about an event that had already happened. Literally:

1. it was news of a great joy (10) The event itself is the "great joy". *On Nov. 12, 1918, the New York Times printed an article with these headlines: NATION REJOICES AT WAR'S END; CITY IS JUBILANT; All America, With Pealing Bells and Parades, Celebrates Germany's Defeat. SHUT COURTS AND SCHOOLS Exchanges and Offices Close and Workers by Thousands Acclaim Victory. CITY IS ABLAZE AT NIGHT Salvation Army Holds Solemn Service at Library Steps--Mayor Leads City Employees Demonstration. NATION REJOICES AT WAR'S END Sirens Carry the News. Schools and Offices Closed. Mayor Heads Municipal Parade. Judge Lets Prisoners Go.* You see, World War I was such a painful war. The American and European people had paid such a high price and had longed for its end. The ending of that war was itself "a great joy" and the news of it ignited tremendous celebration wherever it spread. The news the angel brought was that kind of news, news of a great joy, news of an event that is so wonderful, so marvelous, so joyous, that it will spark celebration wherever it goes. In fact, the angel said:

2. it was news of a great joy that is to be for all people Not just for those few shepherds keeping watch over their flocks in that field outside Bethlehem, but for ALL people. For all the people of Bethlehem! For all the people of the province of Judea. For all the people of Israel, the Jews. But not for them only. It was a great joy for wise men 1,000 miles away in Persia when they got wind of it. It was a great joy for a Roman centurion at Caesarea and a jailor in Philippi when they heard it. It is literally for ALL PEOPLE, for the whole human race. It is news that affects every one of them and God wants all of them to hear it. That's why He sent the church to go into all the world and evangelize, to announce the good news to every creature, to every human being. A great joy has happened and it is for them, all of them! And what is it?

3. this joyous event was the miracle of the Incarnation Look what the angel says in verses **(11-12)**:

a. a Savior was born for us A savior is a deliverer, a rescuer, someone who is going to come to our aid and rescue us out of the dire situation that we are in. Roman emperors and other kings often took this title to themselves as the protectors and defenders of their people. But the Savior who was born that night in Bethlehem is not a political leader or a conquering general. The angel explained to Joseph why Jesus was born, saying, *He shall save His people from their sins!* Oh listen, that night a Savior was born, a Savior for all of us, for all the people of the world. Not a Savior who will remove us from all of our difficulties and save our physical lives, but a Savior who will rescue us from the penalty of our sins, who will rescue us from eternal death, from the punishment of hell that stands written over us! We are all guilty; there is not one of us righteous, not even one! And the penalty for sin is death. The whole world, all of us, stood on death row throughout life, awaiting eternal execution without any appeal, without any hope. But good news! A SAVIOR is born for us, one to rescue and save us from our awful fate! And further, this one who is born:

b. He is the Christ, the Messiah, the One God promised His people long ago to send, David's greater Son who would set up His Kingdom and rule the nations of the earth in righteousness. And further, He is **the Lord**, the Master, the One in charge, the one before whom all must bow and whom all must obey. Peter later put it like this, *God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ."* **- Acts 2:36**. He was more than a man, more than another one of us with superior strength. He was God's own Son, the heir and ruler of all things, but:

c. He was born as a human baby in Bethlehem They could go find him and see him and know that the angel's words were true. They would go look and find there in the town a real baby, wrapped up in baby clothes like any other newborn, and lying in a manger, a feed rack in a stable, as his crib! This Savior, this Lord and Christ, this Son of God, would be a real human child. We call it Incarnation; God the Son took on flesh and became one of us. Look with me at how the angel explained this to Joseph over in **Mt. 1:20-23**. Emmanuel! He will literally be *God with us* as one of us and that's how He will rescue us by ultimately giving His life for us!

What awesome news to announce! What a great joy to be told of, God becoming man to save us all! No wonder the next thing we see is:

III. The Effect Of This Good News (13-14) Suddenly the sky fills from horizon to horizon with angels, not singing, but shouting glory to God! Imagine how loud it must have been, how the sound must have rolled across that quiet hillside louder than any thunderclap could be. Why? Because:

1. angels are awed at God's work of salvation even though they don't experience it. It is not FOR them, yet they are astonished at it. **1 Tim. 3:16** summarizes Jesus' life like this, *Beyond all question, the mystery of godliness is great: He appeared in a body [at His birth], was vindicated by the Spirit [at His baptism], was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory.* His life, from incarnation to resurrection, was *seen by* angels; it was beheld and gazed at by the angelic hosts with great awe and wonder. 1 **Pet.1:12** says about the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus which was preached to us, *Even angels long to look into these things.* Adam Clarke says, *[The Greek phrase] means to stoop down to - the posture of those who are earnestly intent on finding out a thing... [they] stoop down in order to examine all the parts... Even the holy angels are struck with astonishment at the plan of human redemption and justly wonder at the incarnation of that infinite object of their adoration. If then these things be objects of deep consideration to the angels of God, how much more so should they be to us!* The truth is that:

2. we should join all of heaven in giving supreme glory to God God gave the shepherds a gracious glimpse, a visual object lesson that night, of what all of heaven was doing, shouting, "Glory to God! Glory to God!" Millions of angels shouting "Glory, glory, glory!" because God's Son became a man to save us! And when we hear it and believe it and comprehend it, our cheering should be louder than theirs, because it is US that He saved by doing it! That great joy is OURS and we should be filled with awe and wonder and thanksgiving and celebrate like all of heaven did. Glory to God! But the angels also shouted of another affect it would have:

3. on earth we should have tremendous peace We should be at rest. All our fears should be gone and our souls at ease. Why? Because in the birth of this baby, God's favor has been shown to rest upon us. In other words, **He is**

pleased to save us! He wants to save us, to rescue us! It is His good pleasure not to leave us perish in our sins, but to send His Son into the world to save us. He is not our enemy, not our Judge. He is our Pardoner, our Rescuer, our Savior. If we believe the News and accept the Savior as ours, we have what all men desire more than anything, peace with God. We are at one with Him. We rest in Him secure forever.

Charles Spurgeon wrote, "If for the first time you had heard of the visit of the Incarnate God to this world, you would be struck with a wonder which would last throughout eternity. This is the heart of the Gospel--the incomparable fact of the incarnation of the Son of God, His dwelling upon the earth, and His presentation of Himself as a sacrifice unto God for the sins of mankind." Author Philip Yancey says: *"It is almost beyond my comprehension, too, and yet this is the key to understanding Christmas. I believe that we live in parallel worlds. One consists of lakes and barns and politicians and shepherds watching their flocks by night; the other of angels and sinister forces and places called heaven and hell. One night in the cold and dark, those two worlds came together. God, who knows no before or after, entered time and space... it is a story like no other... Little wonder a choir of angels broke out in spontaneous song, disturbing not only a few shepherds, but the entire universe." [Servant, Wint 1996. Page 7.]* What's your reaction today?

One Night In Bethlehem - Luke 2:6-20

The Shepherds Who Received The Good News

We turn our attention again this morning to that special scene that occurred "One Night In Bethlehem". Last time, we focused our attention on the Angels who announced the Good News of Christ's birth. Today we turn our attention to the Shepherds who received that Good News. And again, I want to acknowledge up front that that the inspiration to think about this familiar scene in new ways came from a little booklet put out by Radio Bible Class in their Discovery series titled *Angels and Shepherds: Worshiping the Newborn King*, written by Bill Crowder. Now think first about this; if you had good news of a great joy that was intended to be heard by the whole world, how would you plan to announce it? Marketing people think about stuff like this all the time. If you want to announce a new product or the opening of a new store, two things are usually considered, the means and the audience. You want to use the greatest, most effective, impressive means and direct it to the widest, most important, target audience, right? Well, God certainly did use an impressive means to make the grand announcement of His Son. He filled the night sky with angels from horizon to horizon and glory shining brighter than any fireworks show, with more sound than any electric amplifier. The means was magnificent! But His target audience was "to certain poor shepherds in fields where they lay." That doesn't make near as much sense to us. Why the shepherds? Let's first ponder together:

I. The Circumstances Of The Shepherds' Experience (8) Why here? Why not in Jerusalem, the Holy City? Or even in Rome, the capital of the world? Well, it will help us if we understand that:

1. there were two deeply held expectations about this place that were in the heart of every Jew for generations. The first was a solid prophecy that:

a. the Christ would come from Bethlehem - Micah 5:2, *"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, [Though] you are little among the thousands of Judah, [Yet] out of you shall come forth to Me The One to be Ruler in Israel, Whose goings forth [are] from of old, From everlasting."* Every Jew knew that. When the wise men showed up later on, looking for the newborn King, Herod called together the chief priests and teachers of the law and demanded of them where the Christ was to be born and they didn't bat an eye. They replied instantly, "In Bethlehem of Judea for thus it is written by the prophet..." and they quoted this verse. Everybody knew it! Israel's greatest King, David, was born in Bethlehem and when the one who will rule over the house of David forever comes, He will be born in Bethlehem too! God was keeping an age-old promise He had made. But there was another belief about the Messiah, the Christ, that was also prevalent in that day which was that:

b. he would be announced from Migdal Eder There was a place, a spot about a mile outside Bethlehem on the road to Jerusalem, where a small tower stood. It had been there a long time. Genesis says that Rachel was buried near it. In Hebrew, its name was *Migdal Eder* which means "watchtower of the flock". It was **a shepherds' watchtower near Bethlehem**, a stone tower where shepherds could rest or find refuge, but also where they could stand up high and watch over their flocks out in the acres of open pasture on the hillsides. And **Micah 4:8** says, *As for you, O watchtower of the flock [Migdal Eder], O stronghold of the Daughter of Zion, the former dominion will be restored to you; kingship will come to the Daughter of Jerusalem."* Over the years, the Rabbis had interpreted this to mean that the Messiah would be revealed or announced, heralded, from this very ancient tower outside Bethlehem. And they had taught it to the people. Everyone knew it. So, it was at that very spot that the angelic announcement was made! A hillside full of sheep, a few sleeping shepherds and at least one watching from the top of an old stone tower. That's the grand place God chose to make the announcement of His Son's birth. Why? Because He had promised to do so! He was saying in a way that no Jew could miss, "This baby is MY Christ, MY SON!" But why shepherds? Well:

2. there were two contradictory facts about these shepherds First of all:

a. they were regarded as ceremonially unclean people They lived out in the fields. They worked with animals. They were often dirty and unwashed and had contact with blood and dead animals. They had no opportunity for ceremonial cleansing and purification that Jewish tradition had come to require and they could not leave their flocks for weeks at a time to go up to the Temple. So, they were regarded as perpetually "unclean", sort of "spiritual outcasts" to the religious elite of their day. And yet, strangely enough:

b. they were entrusted with providing unblemished lambs That's why they were watching over them, even through the four watches of the night by turns. Instead of bringing them into a fold at night, the sheep were out on the hillside day and night too, being watched so that no accident, no fight, could mar them, no wolf attack and scar them. Why? You see:

3. there was a very special purpose for these flocks In these fields between Bethlehem and Jerusalem, were the flocks that belonged to the Temple. Every morning and every evening of every day, a single spotless lamb had to be offered in sacrifice. On the feasts and holy days, unblemished lambs were offered in sacrifice. One source estimates that more than 250,000 sheep were offered every year during the Passover celebration alone in this time. Where did all these thousands of sheep come from? Almost all were born and raised in the shepherds' fields near Bethlehem and taken up to Jerusalem for sale.

a. the lambs in these flocks were destined for sacrifice in the Temple These poor, simple, unclean shepherds produced spotless lambs that covered the sins of the entire nation. Every male lamb born here was born to die, born for sacrifice. So it is no accident that:

b. it was in this place, to these people, that God's Lamb who would take away the sins of the world **was born and announced**. Unclean people need a spotless Lamb to take away their sins. Peter wrote, *For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed... but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. – 1 Pet. 1:18-19*.

A Lamb was born in Bethlehem that night, a Lamb born for a world full of unclean people, sinners every one. A perfect Lamb without any blemish or spot, with no hint of sin, who would offer Himself as a sacrifice on the altar of the cross for the sins of the world. The shepherds might not have understood it that night, but for us who know the whole story, God's symbolism couldn't be more clear. Now let's look further at:

II. The Event Which The Shepherds Experienced (9-10) Picture it in your mind, a hillside full of scattered sheep, lying down, grazing. A handful of shepherds fast asleep somewhere. A couple of them perhaps up in the tower taking their turn keeping watch, struggling to keep their eyes open. Honestly, can you think of anything more boring than watching sheep sleep? In the dark in the middle of the night? I can see myself dozing off, fitfully waking and looking and my eyes creeping shut again. But their sleepy night was interrupted by:

1. the sudden appearance of an angel and an intense bright light all around them. You know, it's still dark in the mornings sometimes when it's time to get up and if I'm in bed and my wife suddenly turns on the light, that suddenness makes it seem SO bright. I think of those bright banks of lights that light up Citizen's Bank Park if they all came on suddenly at once without warmup on a pitch-black night, what an effect that would be, and this must have been far brighter than that. And in the midst of the blinding shining light, as they squint their eyes to see, there stands an angel. No wonder:

a. it produced in them a great fear Literally, they feared a great fear! They were terrified. They shook; they huddled together. They probably fell to the ground, maybe hid their faces. We would too! No doubt they thought death was only seconds away, but:

b. the angel comforted them His first words were, *Fear not!* "Do not be afraid! I'm not here to destroy you but to announce good news to you!" Wow, that must have gotten their attention! You can bet they were listening! But there's a second thing they experienced here that we usually read right past:

2. the sight of the glory of God *...the glory of the Lord shone around them*. All around them in every direction was this glorious bright light they had never seen before, but they knew what it was! It was the *shekinah*, the glory-cloud of God's presence, "the brightness of the perfection of the all-sufficient God". It has been described as "the sum total of the attributes of God combined together to create brilliant perfect light". It had been seen by their forefathers coming down on Mt. Sinai. They saw it at the dedication of the Tabernacle when, *the glory of the Lord appeared to all the congregation*, in Numbers 16. It was seen when Solomon completed the Temple, *...the cloud filled the temple of the LORD. And the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled his temple. The whole house was filled with the glory-cloud of God's presence and no one could enter! - 1Kings 8:10-11*. It was Israel's great privilege to have the visible presence of her God appear in her midst. However, Israel fell deeply into idolatry through the centuries and at this point in time:

a. the *shekinah* glory had not been seen in Israel for 600 years. The last to see it was the prophet Ezekiel and that was in a vision where he saw the glory depart step by step, first from the temple, then from the city of

Jerusalem itself and, when he last saw it in chapter 11, it stood, interestingly enough, above the mountain east of the city, the Mt. of Olives. Then it was gone. Centuries went by and it did not appear again, that is, until this night, until the shepherds:

b. they beheld God's glory returning to Israel His Presence was here once more; He had come back among His people! And we know how; the baby whose birth the angel announced was Emmanuel, God with us, God in our midst as one of us! John described it this way, *The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. - John 1:14.* God's presence was coming into the world; His glory was descending to earth in this little baby born in Bethlehem that night and the shepherds experienced the visible manifestation of it, just as their forefathers had in the wilderness, in this glorious light that shone all around them. Oh, how awed they must have been! It was a "Take your shoes off; you're standing on holy ground!" moment! And in that moment, they heard:

3. the Divine announcement of the birth of the Savior, the grandest announcement that has ever been made, *I bring you good news of [a] great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you*... It was the greatest news the world has ever heard, God announcing to the human race, "Today I have sent you a Savior!" An announcement so grand and glorious that it filled the sky with angels shouting, "Glory to God! Glory to God!" But think about it:

a. it was given <u>to</u> these humblest of people, to these few poor, despised, unclean shepherds in a lonely field at night. By rights, the whole world should have been assembled there to hear it! All the kings and queens in their array, all the emperors and governors, all the leaders and generals and important people of the earth should have been present to bow the knee. But God did not choose to announce it to any of them! He chose "certain poor shepherds in fields where they lay!" Why? I think part of the answer lies in **1 Cor. 1:27-29**. When God wants to do something, He often chooses the weakest, lowliest, least likely people to do it through, so He gets the glory. When He wants to set His people free from slavery, He sends an old man with a staff; when He wants to slay a giant, He sends a shepherd boy with a sling. When He wants to feed a multitude He uses a boy's lunch of five loaves and two fishes! And when He wants to announce the Savior to the human race, He uses a handful of poor shepherds in a field! Why? So that He gets all the glory! So that everybody knows the power is of HIM, not of the instrument! Oh, this night, this is just like God, to make the greatest announcement to the least of people and trust them to share it by His power! You see:

b. it was given <u>to</u> them <u>for</u> the whole world It was not intended for them alone. This announcement was for ALL people! And these shepherds were to be His witnesses to testify to the whole world of the birth of the Savior, so the world would know that the Savior was born this night. Well, how did He use them? Let's look at:

III. The Effect Of Receiving This Good News What did the shepherds do with this wonderful experience they had been given? Three things. First:

1. they believed what the Lord had told them (15) They didn't say, "Let's go see IF this is true..." but rather, "Let's go see WHAT HAS HAPPENED!" They KNEW it was true. They went to look for the baby in **FAITH**, believing the angel's words that a Savior had been born that night. And that is also to be our first response when we hear the good news of the Savior. We are to believe the words of the angel as the very Word of God: This Jesus is YOUR Savior. Believe it! You are not asked to examine and see for yourself; you are called to FAITH, to believe what God has said about His Son and act in accordance with it by acknowledging Him as YOUR Savior. Then second:

2. they shared what the Lord had told them (16-18) They went out of that stable and shared the good news with everyone they met. Their response to finding the Savior was **WITNESS**; they were the first witnesses to Christ and that is what we who have found the Savior today are! He said, *But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." - Acts 1:8.* The shepherds are a mini-picture of the mission of the church; because our lives have been so touched and so changed, because we have experienced the Glory of God in Christ, we will naturally take the news of that grand announcement to the very ends of the earth! And finally:

3. they rejoiced in what the Lord had told them (20) Oh, what a meeting there was in the shepherds' camp that night! All the way back to the field they kept shouting, "Glory, glory to God! Hallelujah!" and all night long they shared their amazement and wonder and prayed. Their response was **WORSHIP** and so should ours be, to fall before His feet in wonder and amazement with thankful hearts, to sing with all our hearts His praise, to shout with our voices His glory, because God has sent His Son to be our Savior!

Have you ever thought about the fact that we would never know about that night, about that grand announcement, except for the shepherds' response of believing, going to see the baby and then being witnesses to everyone. No one else was there. No one else saw that grand sight. No one else heard the Divine announcement, not even Mary and Joseph. No one else could have told the story, but them! *G. L. Chappell once preached a sermon titled, "When the Angels Were Gone,"*

and in it he gives this illustration. He sets up a hypothetical situation in which the shepherds respond quite differently. Instead of going to Bethlehem to see, they simply sit around their fire in the field discussing the brightness of the angelic appearance and the wonder of the message. Some 40 years later, one of the shepherds is telling his small grandson about that eventful night. The youngster asks, "But Granddaddy, was what the angels said really true?" The shepherd continues telling him what he has heard about Jesus and his life, even the reports of His resurrection. But when the lad keeps asking, "But Granddaddy, was what the angels said really true?", all the elderly shepherd can do is shake his head and say, "I don't really know. I never went to see." Praise God, that night in Bethlehem these shepherds believed and bore witness to us! Yet many people are like that hypothetical shepherd. They have heard moving sermons about Jesus. They have heard others tell of the changes Christ has made in their lives. They can even repeat the angel's words. But they have never believed them and come in faith to Christ themselves. *Well known author Jill Briscoe says that she was in college before she discovered what Christmas was all about. It was then, she says, that "God became a baby for me! He came to earth because He knew I needed eternal life; the Christ child was the only way to the Father. I reeled in horror at the realization of how our family's benign neglect must have offended Jesus. I knelt, then lay flat, face down in my college dorm room, crying, `Jesus, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. Help me make good those 18 years!'" [Christian Reader, Nov/Dec 1997. Page 92.]* Have you understood that grand announcement was for you? Have you placed your FAITH in the angel's words? Have you fallen before Jesus in sorrow for your sins and taken Him as your Savior? And if you have, are you so taken with Him that you are a WITNESS to others, that you live to bring Him glory by sharing that announcement with others? And is your heart filled with WORSHIP, celebrating continually what God has done for you?

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The Characters Of Christmas

The Christmas Angels

Did you ever notice how many of the carols we sing are about angels? Most all stem from that one scene with the shepherds outside Bethlehem. What struck me as I looked over these familiar stories again, was how many times God used the ministry of angels in the events surrounding the birth of His Son. Yet they go almost unnoticed by us, except when the whole sky is full of them. Isn't that how it is with our lives too? Here is a whole race of spirit-beings that are involved in our lives moment by moment and we never notice it! Some have even entertained angels unawares. But God designed it that way; they are His servants who do His bidding, who are assigned to minister to the saints, without credit or reward. We are strictly forbidden ever to worship them and we are never admonished even to thank them. Yet we certainly ought to be thankful to God for their ministry. If we look carefully at the stories in Luke and in Matthew, we can really see in a nutshell the whole ministry of angels toward us. It is three-fold:

I. Their ministry as messengers (Luke 1) The word *angel* means *messenger* and indeed, it is also used at times when a human being-type messenger is meant. The name of the last book in the Old Testament, Malachi, means "my messenger" or "my angel". Malachi and other prophets were God's messengers; they spoke God's message to their people. That is also the primary function of angelic beings; they are named for their function. Now notice the ministry of one special angel, Gabriel. His name means "mighty man of God" and he appears on four occasions in Scripture, twice in visions to Daniel to explain to him God's plan of history, but 500 years later, we find him twice in connection with Jesus' birth:

1. they give people the messages of God (11-20) Note especially verse 19. He stood regularly in the presence of God and was sent out from God's presence to carry God's word to Zechariah. We see angels doing this in various places in the Scripture, such as at Christ's tomb and at the ascension. It is the most common ministry of angels and it was especially necessary to the work of God before the Scripture was completed, before we had God's word in written form. In three places, the Scripture says the Law was put into effect by angels; some of the things given to Moses on Mount Sinai were given by God through angels. They played a part in the writing of at least part of the word of God! God had to have a trustworthy means of communication and angels were His trusted couriers.

2. they prepare people for service to God (26-38) Six months later, Gabriel made another visit, this time to a young lady named Mary, whom God had chosen out of all the Hebrew women to become the vehicle by which He would send His Son into the world. Note in these verses how he explains exactly what God is going to do and how He wants to use her in it. Then verse 38, Gabriel's appearance and explanation prepared Mary to understand and believe God's plan and therefore, to be used of Him. Imagine what could have happened if Mary had found herself pregnant without this visit! Because of it, she was prepared and ready to serve. This is another that ministry angels have; an angel bailed Peter and other apostles out of prison in Acts and told them to go stand in the Temple. An angel sent Philip down toward Gaza to meet the eunuch; an angel even told Cornelius to send for Peter so he could get saved. I wouldn't doubt that angels have played a real part in preparing you to serve God in quiet, unseen ways through some of the things we'll see later.

II. Their ministry as heralds (Luke 2) In olden times, when a messenger was sent by an important person and carried an importantt message, he would also function as a herald. That is, he would cry his message aloud for all to hear. For example, if a king declared a tax on figs, there was no mailing out a notice, but rather, a public crying out of the news in the

city square or marketplace. This seems to be another function of angels and that brings us to that wonderful night on the hillside near Bethlehem, where the shepherds were sleepily watching their flocks. But note two things about the angels:

1. they announce the works of God (8-12) An angel appears to the shepherds to tell them God has sent His Son and where they can find him. Here's where the Book of Revelation rolls back the veil on heavenly operations and we see angels hard at work. In the events of the end time, in the Tribulation period, angels will be used to announce the work of God to the world again, the fall of Babylon, the everlasting Gospel, God's "Woe, Woe!". They will be God's heralds to let the world know what's going on. But note also that:

2. they advance the worship of God (13-14) This is a major part of their heavenly function through all time, to shout the glory of God. Again, Revelation shows us a glimpse of heaven and what do we see time and again? An innumerable company of angels, ten thousand times ten thousand and thousands of thousands, literally 100 trillion! And what are they doing? Falling down in worship and shouting the glory of God, "Holy, holy, holy". Angels are going to play a large role in your future when you're in heaven with the Lord. They'll help you worship the Lamb!

III. Their ministry as servants (Matthew 1-2) Heb. 1:14 says that angels are sent to minister to or serve believers. This is their major role with us today. In Matthew we see how God used angels in the early life of His Son on earth. They do the same things for us every day of our lives, only unseen. Note three things:

1. they prevent us from making mistakes (1:18-20,24) Here you have Joseph about to make a big mistake. Mary has been away visiting cousin Elizabeth for three months and comes home to tell him she's pregnant with this wild story about an angel and the Messiah. It's hard to believe, beyond anything he can accept, so he, being kind, is going to divorce Mary privately, even though he's crushed. But God uses an angel to convince him she's telling the truth and because of the angel, he obeys God. I wonder how many times angels have kept us from making serious mistakes. Were you ever about to do something, but another circumstance prevented you and you were later glad, because it would have been wrong? Maybe it was something you were going to say, but didn't get a chance, something you had your heart set on doing, but weren't thinking straight, yet something intervened. You give God the credit and rightly so, but perhaps He worked through the ministry of angels in arranging these things!

2. they protect us from impending danger (2:13-14) Joseph is warned in the middle of the night to flee, and none too soon, for shortly, all of Bethlehem was weeping for its children. Satan's attempt at slaying the Son of God was foiled by an angel. I wonder how many times you have been protected and shielded from harm by angels. How many times on the highway would you have been dead, except angels were with you and held you up a bit or got you moved over and kept you from harm. Maybe you did some wrong things, but somehow never suffered the awful consequences you could have. Perhaps you did something really foolish, like lighting a match near an open gas can, but it never exploded. Maybe you were in a potentially serious accident and received hardly a scratch. One time our daughter fell down the stairs and I had a profound sense that the angels had a part. Angels came and strengthened the Lord Jesus on critical occasions after the temptation and in Gethsemane. Angels are assigned for our protection and defense.

3. they guide us into God's will (2:19-23) Now Joseph is told it is time to leave Egypt and go back to Israel, but upon returning, he hears that Archelaus is reigning in Herod's place and is warned to go elsewhere and ends up in Nazareth, their home town. In the process of angelic guidance, two Old Testament prophecies were fulfilled, "Out of Egypt have I called my Son" and "He shall be called a Nazarene". Through the guidance of angels, Joseph found himself in God's will. I wonder how many times you have been guided into God's path by angels and didn't even know it. How many times were they involved in arranging the circumstances of your life that brought you to understand and follow the will of God? I wonder if it was an angel that helped get my wife off of work the night we met?

Oh, be thankful for the Christmas angels! They arranged the Savior's birth. But be thankful for the ministry of angels in your life also, as they minister to you moment by moment!

The Characters Of Christmas

The Christmas Couple

Here's another aspect of the Christmas story that we don't think of very much. It is brought out in Gal. 4:4, *When the fullness of time was come God sent forth His Son, made of a woman...* For literally thousands of years, God's people had been waiting for God to send the promised Messiah who would crush the serpent's head. I think Eve had that expectation when she bore her first child and said, "I have gotten a man from the Lord". Every Jewish mother had the hope and desire to be the mother of the Chosen One. In Daniel 11 there is a reference to Christ and He is called the "Desire of Women," referring, of course, to the great hope that Jewish women had. Now, out of all the thousands of Jewish women that lived and died with this hope, God singled out a virgin of the tribe of Judah named Mary. Her cousin Elizabeth expressed her privilege in Lk. 1:42, “Blessed are you among women and blessed is the child you will bear!". Why did God single out Mary to bear His Son and why did He choose Joseph to be the foster-father of the Son of God? The full answer, of

course, lies within His sovereign omniscience, but there is a practical answer from the human side and you can see it, if you look. Mary and Joseph were so greatly used of God in this way because they had a quality that is rare among believers, absolute surrender! Note carefully that there is one key verse about Mary and one about Joseph:

I. The Submission of Mary (Luke 1:38) Oh, what a wonderful reaction to the message she had received! "Lord, I am your humble servant; do with me as you will!" There is a lot of meaning in those few words of submission and we must see it all if we are to imitate it! First:

1. she believed God's Word (34-38) This was no easy thing in itself. The angel told her she was going to have a child and her natural reaction was, "How can it be? It is physically impossible." The angel's answer is that it will be a supernatural act of God who is omnipotent, and she accepted that at face value. How do we know? Look at verses 45-48. She has only just conceived; she has no physical way to know she's pregnant, but she believed God's Word. Submission means believing God's Word above all circumstances and people!

2. she trusted God Of course, it's one thing to believe God for yourself, but that is no guarantee that others will! By submitting, Mary puts herself in a pretty precarious position. Verse 27 tells us she was a virgin and engaged to be married! What will Joseph do when she turns up pregnant; what will family and society do? She puts herself in a position where she has to trust God:

a. with her husband Compare Mt. 1:18. Remember, when she heard the news, Mary went to visit Elizabeth for three months. What would you think if your fiancé came home pregnant after three months? Would you keep the engagement? Verse 19 shows that, at least at first, Joseph didn't buy her story and who could blame him? But she had to know this would happen when she said, "yes". She trusted God to change him.

b. with her reputation (27, 34) The record makes it clear that she was a virgin who had not known a man. She knew it would have to become obvious to everyone that she was expecting. What will they think? If Joseph sides with her, they will accuse them of premarital relations; if he doesn't, they will call her a harlot. Oh, how that thought must have troubled her heart, but she said “yes” and trusted God with it, even with her life! I remind you that she didn't live in modern day America with its moral freedom. Engagement was considered as fully binding as marriage; divorce was required to break it. To be unfaithful during this time was adultery and in Israel, adultery was punishable by death under law, though perhaps that was not always enforced. Saying “yes” meant trusting God with her very life!

Oh, to submit to God means you have to trust Him! You have to take His Word and believe it and act on it and trust Him to care for the circumstances.

3. she yielded up her life to God Think of all the changes that "yes" would bring to her life:

a. she yielded up her plans (27) She was engaged to be married. You ladies know what that's like, all the plans and dreams you have, the beautiful wedding where all has to be just right, the new home, the joy of being together and then of starting your family. For Mary, there is no more wedding; Joseph takes her home, period. There is no being together physically and the first child will arrive before the marriage is consummated! “Yes” meant yielding all of that to God.

b. she yielded up her comfort (2:6-7) Perhaps she didn't know it at the moment, but it became obvious. “Yes” meant a rough ride to Bethlehem in the ninth month of pregnancy, having a baby in a stable and laying him in a crib full of hay. It’s not what most mothers have in mind, but it was part of saying “yes”.

c. she yielded up her home She lived in Bethlehem and then in Egypt; she spent the first months of her marriage as a stranger, away from family and friends. Yet she didn't complain, because in her "yes," she yielded up her very life.

Do you get the point? Submitting to God means yielding to Him the right to control your very life, lock, stock and barrel, your circumstances, your future, your desires and dreams!

II. The Surrender of Joseph (Matthew 1:24) Mary was not alone in this; she said "yes" to God, but Joseph also had to yield to God. Hers was a passive submission, Joseph's an active surrender. Notice that:

1. he believed God's Word The Word came to him also by night in a dream. Here is:

a. his former thinking (18-19) At first when Mary came home pregnant with the story about the angel, he could not bring himself to believe it. Would you? But he loved Mary and was planning to simply divorce her quietly. But then God's Word came to him and he had a choice, to believe God or not. He did and we see:

b. his belief expressed in obedience We hear not a word from his lips, but see a deed. His belief was expressed by obeying what God told him to do. This is the thing that strikes me about Joseph; every time God sends him a message, he rises up and does it without hesitation or delay! Now, what exactly did he do?

2. he did what God commanded him to do

a. he took Mary's reproach (24b) He took her home as his wife. He knew what the public would think they had done, but he did it anyway. The public shame she had volunteered for, he shouldered with her. Can you hear the comments in the synagogue and in the carpenter shop?

b. he took a position of chastity (25a) Perhaps this was the hardest of all. She became his wife, but he knew he could not be with her until the baby had been born, so there could be no doubt cast on the miracle God was doing here. But oh, how tough on a man looking so forward to marriage!

c. he took the role of father(25b) Think about it; this was not his son, but God's. In taking Mary as wife, he took Jesus as his son and assumed full responsibility to raise him as his own, on behalf of God! That was no light thing to ask!

d. he took the circumstances that God led him to (2:14, 21, 23) He left the carpenter shop in Nazareth to make a home in Bethlehem, fled Bethlehem in themiddle of night to live in Egypt, and just as they were getting settled there, left for Nazareth. We hear no complaints, simply that, "he got up...he got up...he went". He was fully surrendered to the Lord's will in his life. Surrender to God has two components, You have to say "yes" to God in your heart, fully understanding what that entails, fully willing to accept whatever He sends, and trust Him for the outcome. But you also have to say "yes" by your actions, do what He tells you to do, no matter how hard it is or what sacrifice it may require. That's why God, who can see the heart, chose Mary and Joseph and if you want to be used of God, you have to be like them, submitted and surrendered.

A young man went into a church and started praying. He was so anxious to find God's will for his life that he took a piece of paper and wrote down all the things that he was going to do for God. Then he started to pray that God might reveal to him whether these promises were acceptable to Him. Suddenly he heard a voice speak to him saying, "This is not the way I want you to find My will. All I want of you is to sign your name and leave the paper for me to fill." Rom. 12:1 says*, I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.* Are you surrendered to God?

The Characters Of Christmas

The Christmas Child

The hymnwriter asked, *"What child is this who laid to rest on Mary's lap is sleeping, whom angels greet with anthems sweet while shepherds watch are keeping?"* Then he answers, *"This, this is Christ the King, whom shepherds guard and angels sing. Haste, haste to bring him laud, the babe, the son of Mary!"* We are convinced that this is more than the birth of another baby. It is a special act of God. Have you ever noticed the titles and names assigned to this baby during the Christmas narratives? If we study them carefully, perhaps we can realize more fully what God was doing that night and just who this Child is.

I. Jesus - His Purpose (Mt. 1:21) Here is His personal name, the sweetest name, the name we love. It is the Greek form of the Hebrew name Joshua and the meaning of it is spelled out by the angel. He was not named after a relative or loved one. Nor was He named Jesus because it was a popular name in that day (which it was). He was named for His purpose in coming into the world. Jesus means “Jehovah is salvation”. His very name tells us He came to save His people from their sins. It is the name of salvation! This child is the Savior, as the angel said to the shepherds, "Unto you is born this day a Savior". This baby is God's salvation plan for the world. He is God's means of redeeming the human race from the sin into which it had fallen. This child will grow up to die on a cross for the sins of the world and bear them in His own body on the tree, so that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have everlasting life.

II. Immanuel - His Humanity (Mt. 1:22) The angel went on to say that this child was the fulfillment of the promise God made through Isaiah the prophet 750 years earlier that a virgin would conceive and bear a son and that son would be Immanuel, which means “God with us” or "with us (is) God". This is not a personal name to be given Him, nor a statement of His purpose, but a statement about His nature, what He is. The emphasis here is on the "with us" part, on the humanity of Christ. This child is God the man, the eternal Word made flesh. Just what does it mean for God to be with us?

1. it means we can know God John put it this way, *The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us and we beheld His glory...no man has seen God at any time but the only begotten Son has revealed Him*. Here was the transcendent God, whose essence no one had ever seen, now physically present with men in a body. He could be touched, seen and heard. Men can know Him, because He has become a man.

2. it means God can know us You might say, "But God knows us anyway; God knows everything." Yes, but there were things God did not know by experience. For example, God knows all about sin, but God does not know what it is to sin by participation. There is an element of knowing that goes beyond rational knowledge and must be experienced.

So now God could now know human beings by participation. This is what makes our Jesus such a Great High Priest and Intercessor for us today. Hebrews tells us that *we don't have a high priest who can't be touched with the feeling of our infirmities, but was tempted in every point like as we are, yet without sin*. It means there is a man in the glory now, so we can come boldly to the throne of grace and find understanding!

III. Christ - His Office (Lk. 2:11) Here the angel reveals two more of Christ's titles. Savior is covered in the personal name, Jesus. But He is also Christ. Despite the fact that the world treats “Christ” like it was Jesus' last name, it means "anointed one” or “chosen one" and is the Greek form of the Hebrew word *meshiach* or Messiah. That is the office Jesus held as He came into the world. We who are Christians and Gentiles often forget that Jesus did not come to us directly. He came into the world as a Jew, to the Jewish nation as their long-awaited Messiah. He was sent first to the House of Israel. He was the One that God had chosen to sit upon the throne of David and establish his Kingdom over all the earth! He was the One chosen to bring to pass all the hundreds of prophecies given beforehand in the Old Testament or, as the hymnwriter said about Bethlehem at his birth, "The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight". In this baby was the offer to Israel of all that she had ever hoped and prayed for, yet she rejected Him. But He is still the Christ, still the One God has chosen to rule the world and at His Return He will do so!

IV. Lord - His Deity (Lk. 2:11) Here's a word we use all the time without thinking of its meaning. Its Greek root means "supreme" or "the supreme one" and in earthly terms, means “master.” It is even a term of address, like “Mr.” or “Sir.” But the angel meant it differently. Compare verses 9, 15, 23. *Lord* is God, THE Supreme One. When the angel said the babe is Christ, the Lord, He was emphasizing His Deity, the fact that He was God! Think of it. There lying in that tiny manger was not merely God's Son, but God THE Son, God Himself. The same God who dwells in heaven and created all things and sustains all things was humbly lying in a cattle stall! Jesus was not a godly man; He was the GOD-MAN! Hence, it was God that astonished the teachers in the Temple, who walked and talked and did miracles among the thousands of Israel. That's why He accepted the worship of the freed demoniac, forgave the sins of the man let down through the roof, walked on water, and raised the dead. In the end, that's why they crucified Him, for claiming to be God! And in the very end, that's why His death on the cross is sufficient to pay for your sins and mine and for the sins of the world, because the eternal God died on the cross for us.

Oh, this is no ordinary child; this no ordinary birth. This Child is God become a man to be with men to save them from their sins. That's why His is the only birthday celebrated the world over for nearly 2000 years. One author put it thus: *He was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He worked in a carpenter shop until He was 30. Then for three years He was an itinerant preacher. He never wrote a book. He never held a high office. He never had a family or owned a house. He never went to college. He never traveled over 200 miles from the place where He was born. He never did one of the things that usually accompany greatness. He had no credentials but Himself. He was only 33 when the tide of public opinion turned against Him. His friends ran away. He was nailed to a cross between two thieves. When He was dead, He was laid in a borrowed grave through the pity of a friend. 19 centuries have come and gone and today He is the Central Figure of the human race and the leader of the column of progress. I am far within the mark when I say that all the armies that ever marched, all the navies that ever sailed, all the parliaments that ever sat, all the kings that ever reigned put together have not affected the life of man on earth as has THIS ONE SOLITARY LIFE!*

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The Costs Of Christmas

The Cost Of A Miraculous Conception *OR The Risk Of Obeying God*

Christmas is such a wonderful time of joy and celebration and rightly so. It is a time when we rejoice in the wonderful gift that God has given us in sending His Son. And you know, every year it is a challenge to think of a new and interesting way to look at that glorious event. But this year the Lord laid it on my heart to think about the people involved in it and how they saw and experienced it. Sure, for the shepherds, it was a great evening, seeing angels in the sky, and for the wise men who arrived, it was the fulfillment of a dream. But what about Mary and Joseph, the couple that God chose to care for His Son? What was it like for them? They were just two young people, younger than most of us adults are now, yet just like us. They were two people who loved God and loved each other, who were engaged to be married. Joseph was a carpenter and spent his days building furniture or houses or whatever carpenters did in those days. Mary lived at home with her parents and spent her days caring for the household, making meals, shopping in the market and whatever else young women did. They were no different than we are. Yet one day, God invaded their "normal" lives and said, "I have a plan for your lives that I want you to accept". It was very different from anything they had planned or imagined. But God called them to say "yes" and obey Him and they did, and when they did, it cost them a great deal. For the next three weeks I'd like to talk with you about the costs of obeying God and saying "yes" to His plan in YOUR life. And I want to begin by thinking about:

I. The Great Miracle Produced By Obeying God - Lk. 1:29-37 It resulted in the Virgin Birth, God's Son conceived by a miracle and what a wonderful miracle it was, a child conceived without a human father. It is the greatest miracle in the Bible, next to the Resurrection, because of what it accomplished:

1. it provided a sinless Savior - *"the Holy One"* Because there was no human father involved, the One who would be born would be HOLY. That was important. The Virgin Birth is the tool God used to keep the sin nature of Adam from being passed to Jesus, so that He could be conceived as a human being without being born a fallen, sinful human being like the rest of us are. It was this great miracle that gave us a sinless Savior who was qualified to be the perfect sacrifice for our sins. Mary and Joseph's "yes" was part of allowing that to happen! Their obedience was used of God in this process. Secondly:

2. it proved the power of God - *"the power of the Most High"* Think about it. When, in all of human history, has it ever happened that a woman had a child without sexual union? A few years ago, there was all kinds of talk about the process of "cloning", of being able to take a human egg cell and cause it to multiply itself and form a human being all by itself. I'm not sure what happened to that, but the news reports all died out. And I'm sure that it's because it didn't work. The Virgin Birth is a miracle that only Almighty God can do! It is to all the world a demonstration of the absolute power of God. And Mary and Joseph's obedience made that demonstration possible. And thirdly:

3. it certified the plan of God - *"He will reign..."* God gave Mary a promise, “This child WILL reign. He is the Messiah, the King. He will sit on His throne over the entire world and reign forever.” And the Virgin Birth is the first assurance of that; if God can cause a virgin to conceive and bear a son, then He should surely have no trouble setting that Son up as the King over the world! His act in this conception certifies and assures His plan for the world. And Mary and Joseph's obedience played a role in providing that certification.

Surely, to be involved in such a great miracle was a great privilege. But now take a minute and think from their perspective about:

II. The Great Obstacles Present To Obeying God As great as the miracle was, as great as the opportunity to be involved was, there were also great obstacles that lay before them. First was:

1. the obstacle of personal trust - Lk. 1: 34 "How shall this be?" She had never heard of such a thing before and certainly had no idea that God wanted to do such a thing in her life. You see, when God calls you to obey Him, especially when what He's asking of you is out of the ordinary:

a. you may not understand what God is doing or why You may have no idea how God is going to get you through it or provide for you or whatever. A pastor my age once called me and we were talking. He said he was as sure as he had ever been of anything in his life that God was calling him to leave the pastorate and give full-time to ministry as an evangelist. He had no idea how God was going to provide for his needs. He only knew he had to be obedient! Young couples and even older couples get called by God to leave their jobs and their homes and go to the mission field. They have to raise huge amounts of money and have no idea how God is going to provide. The obstacle is that of trusting God, isn't it? But then, you may not be like that young pastor:

b. you may not be certain what God wants of you Sometimes it's not as clear as an angel appearing or the certainty this fellow has. You may not be absolutely sure what God wants and you're questioning whether or not He wants you to change jobs, for instance, or to marry this particular person or not. Nevertheless, the obstacle remains the same. It's hard to trust God, isn't it? And then there is a second major hurdle:

2. the obstacle of precious relationships - Mt. 1:18-24 You see, that is what stood between Mary and obeying God, “What will Joseph think? What will my parents think? What will happen to my life and my marriage? Will I end up rejected and alone?” Indeed, you'll notice it says that Joseph WAS thinking about divorcing her! He didn't believe her at first. It took a visitation of God to convince Him of the truth of what had really happened. The relationships you have in life are very precious to you and sometimes, saying "yes" to God threatens them. There is:

a. the reaction of your spouse "If I obey God and give that gift to the Lord that I know He wants, what will my wife do? If I say yes to His call, to make some major life-changing decision, will he or she stand with me or against me and worse yet, will they still love me?” And then you add to that:

b. the reaction of your family and friends Can you imagine what Mary's parents thought? We never read about them! Can you imagine her brothers and sisters and Joseph's parents and siblings? None of the people that loved them were going to understand, were they? Who would believe such a thing? You know what they all thought. And sometimes when God calls you to a thing, there is a great price to pay there. Your family and your close friends think you're nuts, that you've gone off the deep end. Sometimes they desert you or even try to oppose you and keep you from doing what you know God wants you to do. You feel called to go to Africa and your parents stand in your way. You leave your good-paying job because God leads you to take a position in a ministry where you get half as much and your friends give up on you. You spend thousands of dollars paying for your kids to attend a Christian school because God has led you to do it and everybody constantly tries to get you to take them out.

Relationships really are often an obstacle to obeying God and so is:

3. the obstacle of public opinion Joseph, once he believed Mary, immediately took Mary to his house as his wife. The wedding was called off. You know what the public thought. You can't hang a sign on your door and say, "God has chosen me for a Virgin Birth". In fact, if the Jewish culture had not become so liberalized, Mary should, in their view, have been stoned. Outside of those closest to you, there is precious little hope of the people around you understanding the things God has called you to do; like the cross, those things are foolishness to them. So, if it matters to you what other people think or how they relate to you, that can be a huge hurdle.

You see, what I really want to talk about is:

III. The Great Risk Involved In Obeying God There is a cost to obeying God. There is a price you must pay for it. To obey God in an out of the ordinary way involves a great risk. First:

1. you must experience the loss of personal control Saying "yes" to God when He calls you to obey Him means you're no longer in charge. You can't direct or control what happens or people's reactions to it. It means letting go of all your personal dreams and plans and preferences and fears. It means trusting God completely with all these things to care for you. That is perhaps the scariest thing of all, deciding that you will trust God for all these things, instead of leaning upon yourself to make it all turn out right. Imagine Mary and Joseph's feelings. “What about our wedding? Our dreams and plans? What does being the parents of the Messiah entail? Can we live here or will we have to move away? Can we really trust God with all these things?” That was what they faced and so do you. Then, to obey God:

2. you must risk the support of those who love you You must squarely face the fact that your spouse and your family and your close friends may not understand and they may not stand with you. They may even oppose you. To obey God, that's a risk you have to be willing to take. You must decide that your relationship to God is more to you than all those things and pleasing Him is more important than pleasing even the dearest that you have on earth. And finally:

3. you must risk the acceptance of the general public You must squarely face that fact that you'll probably be misunderstood, you'll have your motives questioned, you'll be seen as weird or different. You may even be shunned by people who once stood by you. That's the risk you have to take in obeying God.

Now put yourself in Mary and Joseph's shoes. Would you choose to have that child, to risk being rejected by your fiancé, your parents, to give up your wedding and all the dreams and plans you had for starting life, to live knowing that everybody around you was just going to think you couldn't wait and were less than the righteous people you appeared to be when you were in the synagogue? Would you accept that cost? How do you make such a decision when God calls you in your own life to something out of the ordinary or even IN the ordinary for a Christian? Well, let me just point out two things about:

IV. The Great Choice Involved In Obeying God

1. the choice involves deciding who you are - Lk. 1:38 Mary knew. She said, *I am the Lord's servant*. You see, this is not really my choice to make. Christ paid the price for me; I belong to Him. If I choose to serve myself rather than Him, then I'm denying who I am! You and I need to decide who we are! It's the old question of Lordship. He is my Lord, but sometimes I don't choose to let it turn out that way. I'd rather serve self than Him. Whose servant are you? And then:

2. the choice involves deciding to accept the cost - Mt. 1:24 Joseph did what the Lord commanded. He said, "Yes sir!" and straightway went and took her home with him. In his actions, he showed he was accepting the cost. You can either say, "Not me, the price is too high. The risk is too great; I can't trust You that much". Or you can say, "Lord, whatever the cost of obeying You is, it pales in comparison with the cost You paid to save me; I accept the cost, not even knowing the bottom-line total in advance. I obey."

Maybe you're facing some choice, big or small, in your life today. God is asking you to obey Him. If you're not right now, some day you will be. What will you choose? Will you accept the cost like Mary and Joseph did?

The Costs Of Christmas

The Price Of A Divinely-Ordered Birth *OR The Cost Of Obeying God*

The story of how anyone is born is pretty significant, I guess. And we all have ours. I could tell you the story of how we almost had our daughter Amy on the steps at home. I heard of one of us mention they had one of their children in the car many years ago. I bet that was fun! But most of us had our children in a very organized, prearranged fashion. “Prepare the room at home, make the prescribed number of doctor visits, time the contractions, go to the hospital, do the breathing you've been trained to do, have the baby, stay a day, go home with the baby in the new outfit you bought, and life goes on. Yet sometimes that lovely plan gets disrupted, doesn't it? The story of the birth of Christ shows a great deal of

planning, but of a different sort. I'm sure Mary and Joseph had a similar plan in mind for the birth of the child entrusted to them. I'm sure they had the clothes ready and the midwife arranged and all that. But then, all of a sudden, everything goes haywire. Caesar passes a new law and they are forced to travel away from home, just at the time Mary is to deliver. The birth comes upon them suddenly, just when they are hoping it will NOT happen, and without proper circumstances at hand. It's rather bizarre when you think of it. Yet as you read the record of His birth and the subsequent happenings, you can see very clearly:

I. The Glory Of God Displayed In Christ's Birth As you look at the record in Matthew's gospel, you can't miss:

1. the glory of seeing prophecy fulfilled What Mary and Joseph were involved in was a tremendous set of events that had been predicted centuries before by God's prophets. Three times Matthew reminds us that everything that happened in the birth of this child was an act of Almighty God working out His will and plan:

a. Mat. 2:6 - ***"But you, BETHLEHEM...out of you will [He] come"*** Mary and Joseph didn't live in Bethlehem; they lived in Nazareth, some 60 miles to the north in Galilee. They didn't have relatives in Bethlehem (obviously, or they wouldn't have had to stay at the inn) and they had no reason to go to Bethlehem. But God had made a plain statement in Micah 5:2 that the Messiah, the real Ruler, the Christ, would come out of the town of Bethlehem. And there are many ways God could have gotten Mary and Joseph there, maybe with a new job offer or a chance to vacation in the ancient City of David. But no, He decides ordinary means are not enough. He moves the emperor of the known world to declare a census for tax purposes with the rule that each man had to return to the city of his ancestors for registration! So, the whole world is moved into action. What for? So that Mary and Joseph will go to Bethlehem on just the right day, so that God's son can be born there! What a glorious thing! Then they decide to stay and live there in Bethlehem for a while and give Mary and the Baby some time to recover, and lo and behold, three wise men show up. Why is that? Because we're told in:

b. Mat. 2:15 - ***"Out of EGYPT have I called My Son"*** The prophet of old had said that Israel was a picture of Christ, and just as God called His Son Israel out of Egypt many years ago, He was going to call His Son Jesus out of Egypt. So, Mary and Joseph and the baby had to go to Egypt. Now how was God going to get them there? Well, you or I might have tried some more mundane methods, but God sends a star to appear to some magi over in Persia 1,000 miles away and has them show up in Jerusalem and ask a few questions, which causes Herod to get upset and try to find and kill Jesus, which forces Mary and Joseph to flee to Egypt and stay a while to avoid his jurisdiction. And then God kills Herod and sends an angel to call Joseph back out of Egypt and there you have it*, Out of Egypt have I called My Son!* Doesn't God have class, the way He goes about things? What a privilege to watch the glory of God be displayed in the birth of your child that way! But God isn't done yet. Matthew quotes yet another Old Testament prophecy:

c. Mat. 2:23 - ***"He shall be called a NAZARENE..."*** Notice that the couple that God picked to parent His Son just HAPPENED to be from Nazareth! And it was only natural that they will want to return home as they can. But before this, it wouldn't have done any good. Herod ruled over the whole land. However, when Herod died, his jurisdiction was split up among his sons. His favorite and worst son, Archelaus, who was as or more vicious and cruel than he was, got Judea and Samaria, but Galilee went to Antipas, a son who was far less likely to be worried about some wise men inquiring about a supposed baby Messiah. So, it was safe for Mary and Joseph to return to Nazareth and Jesus grew up there, so that He was indeed known as Jesus of Nazareth or the Nazarene! Bingo, God's glory shines again!

There's no question that this was a Divinely-ordered birth. What a story to be involved in! But if you stop and think about it, Mary and Joseph, more than anybody else, also got to experience:

2. the glory of seeing God's Person revealed Through the events of this birth, God revealed much about Himself:

a. in the Child being born of a virgin they saw His POWER Only God could cause a virgin to conceive and bear a child and they experienced it directly. By the way, after last time, somebody handed me a recent Time magazine with a cover article on "Cloning Humans". They have done it. But all they have been able to do is to split an already-fertilized embryo, just as you would naturally get twins or triplets. They also clone cattle, but even there they must have cells from an already-fertilized embryo to transplant. The article said that although the information needed to form a complete human body is present in every cell in the body, we still don't have the secret of what it is that causes a cell to choose its one specific function out of all the programming in the DNA inside it. I'll tell you why! God holds the key! There has never been another virgin birth. Only the incredible power of God can do it. Then:

b. in the King being born in a stable they saw His HUMILITY They knew this was God's Son, the promised Messiah who was to rule the world. They had been told so directly. And they saw that child be born in a cattle stall and laid in a manger of hay. *How should a king come?*, the song says. *He should dine upon summer strawberries and milk and lie upon bedclothes of satin and silk!* Not on a rough bed of straw. They saw with their eyes God stooping down to man in humility, not saying to the world, "I am Lord of all; obey Me," but humbly inviting all men to believe. Even his choice of a poor young carpenter's home confirmed this humble approach God was taking to the world. And then:

c. in the Son of God being born as a man they saw His LOVE The little baby who was God's son did not come out as some supernatural being, but as a normal human baby, a real human child, needing nourishment and care and love. They saw with their own eyes God laid in a manger and they held Him in their arms! And in that, they experienced His love. Not merely in that God would enter the world; He had done that many times. But in that He would become one of us, a real human being, in order to redeem us.

Such was the glory God displayed in this Divinely-ordered birth to Mary and Joseph. But what we never think about is:

II. The Price Of Being Involved In Displaying That Glory Joseph and Mary willingly paid a great price to be involved in God's plan for His Son:

1. it disrupted their life - Mt. 1:24-25 This was an engaged couple in love with each other. They planned and had probably set a date for their marriage, but:

a. they gave up their wedding Joseph just quietly took Mary to his home and the wedding was called off. No celebration, no joy, no presents, no housewarming, no nothing. All gone. But that's not all:

b. they gave up their union as man and wife. Joseph declared Mary to be his wife and took her home, but for the first 6 months or so of their marriage, though in every other respect he was her husband, he could not touch her until Jesus was born! That was not easy!

You see, obeying God disrupted their lives; they had to let go of their own plans and pleasures, call off things near and dear to them, and then:

2. it deranged their circumstances - Lk. 2:6-7 We repeat that phrase so glibly every Christmas. But think about what being involved in God's plan meant for them:

a. they left their home and family When they left for Bethlehem, they were thinking, no doubt, of a few days' stay, long enough to register and get home before the baby's birth. They had said, "Goodbye, see you next week" as they walked out of town. And they couldn't come back for at least three months, maybe six months or a year or longer. We don't know how long they stayed in Egypt. Obeying meant they had to be separated from their loved ones. But that's not all they left:

b. they left their comfort and security They had nothing but the clothes on their backs and maybe a few things in an "overnight bag". Their house was left standing vacant. Joseph's carpenter's tools and his customers, the midwife or relative who would deliver the baby, everything they had was left behind. All their comfort, all their security, everything they counted on, was gone. All they had was God, alone and in strange new places.

When He invaded their lives, God knocked all their circumstances out of kilter, He asked them to give up everything for Him, though they may not have known it at the time. And the hardest part is:

3. it demanded their Son - Lk. 2:34-35 When they dedicated Jesus at the Temple, while they were still living in Bethlehem and before they had to flee to Egypt, Simeon spoke these difficult prophetic words, "This child is destined for great opposition (actually a cross) and your own heart will be pierced when you see it." Oh, just imagine her standing by that cross watching her beloved son die in torment, her heart torn in two. The child she loved, that she had borne and nursed and raised, now suffering the pain of death on a cross in God's plan! Saying "yes" to God meant losing her own son!

You see, that's what I really want to talk to you about today:

III. The Cost Of Obeying God There is no more wonderful thing than being involved in the Divinely-ordered plan of God for your life. There is nothing more exciting than saying "yes" to each thing God asks of you and watching Him at work. A friend called me and said, "I just had to tell you what God did today. There was something I really wanted, but didn't have the money for. I cut up my credit card a few months ago because God convicted me that I was overusing it and I couldn't afford to do it. But I was so tempted to just use the numbers off the bill and get this one thing. I wrestled about it and finally said, 'No, God, I'm going to trust you and do what I know you want me to do!' Then I went out and opened the mailbox and there was this Christmas card with exactly the amount of money I needed in it." Isn't that exciting? Listen, God ALWAYS has something wonderful going on. The Christian life is really a great adventure if you look for what God is doing in every circumstance and really trust Him. But it costs something for you, just like it did for Mary and Joseph:

1. you must surrender control over your plans All of them. Everything you have laid out for your life. Your future, your marriage, your relationships, your career, all your hobbies and the things you like to do. All of them laid down for the Lord. Now I'm not saying that He will always take all of them away from you. He may well GIVE them to you. But the control over them has to be laid down. When I broke up with the girl I went with just before LuAnn, God and I had a battle. I was at that age where being married was just about the most important thing in the world and God had this girl break up with me and He began to convict me that He wanted me to surrender all rights that I had to be married, to promise that I would serve Him whether or not He allowed me to marry, in short, to surrender control of this entire area of my life to Him and leave it there. It took some wrestling, but He won. I got on my knees and surrendered it to him.

And just look at the lovely wife I got from Him when I gave control to Him! That's the cost of obedience. And along with that:

2. you must surrender control over your circumstances Where you'll live, where you'll work, the lifestyle you'll have. These things aren't yours to control anyway; they belong to God. To be involved in His exciting plan for your life and obey Him, you have to surrender these things and let go, so that HE can order the circumstances of your life with your cooperation to use you the way He wants. That's the cost of obedience. And so is this:

3. you must surrender control over your children just like Mary and Joseph did. Obeying God means letting God do with your kids what He wants, make them what He wants them to be, choose what He wants them to do and where He wants them to live and even to choose to take them home to Himself, if He chooses. Boy, that's hard, isn't it? To tell God He can do whatever He wants with something so precious to us as our kids. But that's the cost. A few weeks ago, we had with us the parents of a teenager named Bill who was killed two years ago in an auto accident in the Souderton area. How great it was to listen to them humbly testify that they were not mad at God, that they knew He had done what was best and had surrendered that to Him!

Oh my friend, the risk of obeying God is that nobody will understand and stand with you. You may be all alone in it with God. The cost of obeying God is surrendering everything in life, surrendering all your rights, your plans, your circumstances, your possessions, even your children, surrendering everything to His control. *General Charles Gordon was a British soldier and a man of God. The English government tried to reward him for his service in China but he refused. After much coaxing, he accepted a gold medal with his name and accomplishments inscribed on it. After his death, no one could find it and it was learned that one day he had sent it to Manchester during a famine to be melted down and sold and used to buy bread for the poor. In his diary, he wrote, "The only thing I had in this world that I valued I have now given to the Lord Jesus."* That's what He wants. Everything you value. Everything. That's the cost of obeying Him and being involved whole-heartedly in His glorious plan. I know a young couple who willingly paid it and were used to bring the Messiah into the world. Will you be like them? Who knows? It has yet to be seen what God will do with you if you are willing!

The Costs Of Christmas

The Price Of A Magnificent Birth *OR The Pain In Obeying God*

There are very few truly magnificent events that most of us get to witness in our lives. For many of us, the birth of our child is one of them. It is rightly called the miracle of birth. It is a magnificent thing. But the birth of Jesus went far beyond any ordinary birth in this regard. I want to try to convey for a few moments the splendor of:

I. The Magnificent Events Surrounding Christ's Birth as Mary and Joseph and the others involved must have perceived them. It all began in the quiet fields outside the city of Bethlehem where the flocks for the Temple were kept. It was there that we read of that magnificent sight of:

1. the worship of the angels - Lk. 2:8-14 Just imagine these poor shepherds sleepily dozing and watching their flocks in the dark, when all of a sudden, the sky lights up and in front of them is nothing less than an angel of God! He is lit up supernaturally by the glory of God, glowing in the dark. When was the last time YOU saw an angel? What would your reaction be? They were TERRIFIED! Literally, they feared with a great fear, a mega-fear! They huddled together, maybe fell on their faces, and the whole purpose of the angel's appearance was simply to announce to them that Jesus had been born in Bethlehem. And when he did, the sky was filled with angels, all of them bright, all of them shouting, "Glory to God..." And you used to think the fourth of July was neat with all the fireworks filling the sky! Imagine a whole army of glowing angels filling the sky. And then hear them speak. And listen folks, when angels speak, they don't speak softly like you do when you read a responsive reading. They bellow it out. Imagine hundreds of angels filling the sky and shouting, "Praise God, Glory to God!" as loud as fireworks! This must have been truly magnificent. Imagine the awe in the shepherds' hearts. But then go ahead of them into the town of Bethlehem for a moment, where Mary and Joseph are, and see:

2. the worship of the shepherds - Lk. 2:15-20 It's late by this time and Mary and Joseph are exhausted. They've just been through the ordeal of birth. The baby is asleep in the hayrack and Mary and Joseph are, no doubt, lying exhausted in the straw themselves. And the door pops open and in come all these shepherds who are so excited. They''ve just seen a sky full of angels and they say, "Look, there He is! There's the child! It's just like the angel said!" And they fell down and worshipped Him, no doubt. And then they told Mary and Joseph the exciting story of the sky-full of angels. And they ran to all the other guests in the inn and to all those in the streets, telling everybody what they'd seen and they shouted *Hallelujah!* all the way back to the pasture! Everyone who encountered them was amazed and I assume that includes Mary and Joseph. What an amazing thing! Just picture yourself there in the hospital room with your new baby and all of a sudden, the whole nursing staff bursts into the room and says, "There he is. Angels appeared all over the entire hospital grounds to tell us of his birth!" That's what Mary and Joseph experienced. It was

truly an extraordinary night and God chose a very magnificent way to announce to the world the birth of His Son. but that's not all. Some weeks later there was:

3. the worship of the magi - Mt. 2:9-12 Can you picture it? There's a knock at the door one evening. Joseph opens it and looks out and here is this entire caravan of camels and servants. And at the head are several (we don't really know how many) obviously wealthy and important foreigners and there is a special star above the house casting its rays directly down. Imagine the feelings Mary and Joseph must have had as these men came in and told their tale of how they had seen the star months earlier in Persia 1,000 miles away and had come on th thatis long journey to find the child. Imagine the hush as they bowed down and worshipped the infant child and then brought out precious treasures such as a poor family would never have seen, gold, frankincense, and myrrh. What a magnificent event! If it happened to you, you would never forget it! But their passing through Jerusalem had not gone unnoticed. They had told their story about the star heralding the birth of the Messiah to the whole city. It had gotten to King Herod, who himself had dealt with them and tried to use them to point him to the baby King. And verse 3 says he was DISTURBED and all Jerusalem with him! In fact, he was so disturbed that he decided that he had to find this child, this baby Messiah, and kill him quickly! As magnificent as God's announcement of the birth of His Son was, think about:

II. The Pain Which Those Events Brought Mary and Joseph - Mt. 2:13-18 Now put yourself in Mary and Joseph's place again. God has announced the birth of your son by delegations of angels; all Bethlehem knows about that. Then He has announced it grandly by the arrival of these wise men and the supernatural star. And now God clearly announces to you in a dream that Herod is going to search for your child and try to kill him and you have to leave this very night and run down to Egypt to save your lives. In one moment, you have gone from being the most blessed couple on the face of the earth, the parents of the promised Messiah, to being fugitives! They experienced a great deal of pain in this process. First of all:

1. they were confused - Lk. 2:19 We don't know about Joseph, but Mary, at least, was a thinker. She looked at each of these things and mulled them over repeatedly in her heart. She tried to figure out what they meant. “What could all this mean? How could it all work out? If this child was the Messiah, what am I doing here in Egypt in exile?” They were confused; they had to be. Even though later on they may have figured out that God was fulfilling prophecy, at the moment there was only the pain of confusion. And on top of that:

2. they were afraid Wouldn't you be? Their hearts knew terror all the way to Egypt. And even while they were there, they had to be afraid that someone would find them out or that Herod would send some private assassin to do the job. Most of us have never been afraid for our lives, but there have been those moments of fear we have all known. It is no fun to be afraid, is it? It hurts to be afraid.

3. they were hunted You can bet they didn't stroll leisurely down to Egypt. They hurried. They passed others on the road with barely a nod of the head. They looked over their shoulders. The sound of hoofbeats approaching made them nervous. And when they got lodging in Egypt, I wonder if they used their real names. Do you have any idea what that's like? To be a fugitive whose very life is in danger? To not be free in any sense to live a normal life. You see:

4. they were hurt They suffered through this whole event in a number of ways. They were hurt:

a. physically That's maybe not the right word, but I couldn't think of one that was. They weren't injured, but they were forced to flee home, to live as strangers in a strange place, to travel in rough conditions by night, to find means to survive, and so on. Their lives and circumstances were hurt by these things and they were also hurt:

b. emotionally Fear, stress, tension, worry, insecurity, and a hundred other feelings flooded them. Their sense of confidence and awe at the magnificent things they'd experienced in recent weeks and months was all shattered. And then think about this:

5. they were mistreated All this wasn’t right. They hadn't done anything wrong, anything to deserve it. All they had done was have a baby. In the mix of feelings in their hearts, one of them must have been the feeling of indignation at the unfairness of the suffering they were forced to endure. But one of the things that I think hurt them the most had to be that:

6. they brought about the death of the children Word had to have gotten down to Egypt about the death of the children in Bethlehem. It was infamous. No ruler had ever done that, to kill all the boys two and under in an entire town, babies ripped from their parents arms and stabbed, little toddlers run through with lances. You can be sure word traveled far. And when it got to Mary and Joseph, what would they think? "We're responsible for that! If only we'd left right away and not stayed in Bethlehem, the Wise Men would never have found them and this wouldn't have happened!” Even though it was not their fault, you can just sense the guilt and responsibility they must have felt.

You see, what I really want to talk to you about today is:

III. The Pain Of Obeying God If you surrender your life to the will of God as Mary and Joseph did and determine to obey Him, you will experience many magnificent moments. There will be wonderful answers to prayer when God moves heaven and earth to see that your needs are met. God did that for us just over the holiday. We had been praying that our school tuition bill would be met by Jan. 1. And He did it to the very dollar by a special gift! There will be tremendous moments when God works in the lives of people to bring them to Christ or to restore them. There will be magnificent mountaintop moments for you, just like the angel-filled sky and the wise men at the door. But along with them will come moments when you have to pass through Egypt, moments of great pain. The path of surrender to God not only brings the risk of standing alone and the cost of allowing God total control over all your life and circumstances to arrange at His will, but it will also likely bring a lot of moments of pain when things that look and feel bad happen to you. You may lose a loved one; you may lose a job. You may become ill or have an accident. Tom Kelly, our missionary in Mongolia had a terrible motorcycle accident just before furlough one summer in which he was badly hurt and spent weeks recovering! Corrie Ten Boom surrendered to God and sheltered Jews from the Nazis in her home. The price of obeying was the pain of years of suffering unspeakable horrors in concentration camps. Now please don't let me paint the wrong picture for you. I'm not trying to say that if you obey God your whole life will be filled with pain. I'm simply saying that along the way there will be seasons of pain, just as Mary and Joseph spent their time in Egypt . Ever since the Exodus, Egypt has symbolized the iron furnace of affliction and suffering for God's people. And each one of us will pass through there from time to time. And when you do, you will experience pain. There will be:

1. the pain of confusion You will have all these mixed up, crazy, conflicting feelings and thoughts. You probably will not understand why you are suffering at that moment and will ask **"...why is this happening".** There will be times, for instance, when your church burns down in the middle of the night just when things were going well and you don't understand why. Do you remember all the confusion and questions that brought? Now I don't know about you, but I don't like to be confused. I like to understand what's going on and what God is doing. When what you expect to happen doesn't or when what you don't expect to happen does, it is confusing and confusion hurts. And with it there will be:

2. the pain of fear - You begin to wonder **"...what's going to happen to me"** and to fear what might happen next. I can't help but think of our missionary friend Chuck Walton who was kidnapped in the Philippines. Hundreds of Christians prayed and he was released, but can you imagine the fear he must have known as they dragged him away, "Will they hurt me, kill me? What about the work? What about my wife?" Most of us will never be kidnapped, but there will be times when you are afraid, and fear hurts! And sometimes there will be:

3. the pain of animosity There will be times when people oppose you and try to hurt you or say bad things about you for no reason, for simply obeying God. And you begin to wonder **"...why don't they like me"** It hurts to be disliked, to know that someone holds animosity or even hatred toward you. I have a friend in the ministry who served seven years in a church where the leadership opposed every godly thing he tried to accomplish. It finally put him out of the ministry. I don't know what I'd do, how I could function if I had enemies who wanted to hurt me right here in our own body. To be the target of animosity is a painful experience, but you are liable to have it if you obey God. Just go stand on York Road with a sign that says "Abortion Kills Children" like we've done and watch it come out of the car windows! And I'm sure all of us know:

4. the pain of suffering I see it all the time, people who love the Lord and have surrendered fully to Him right here in this church and they get sick or suffer with some disease. Or they suffer emotional pain because of some loved one that dies or some tragedy that occurs. Some friends of LuAnn's sister, committed Xtians, had a grown daughter disappear enroute home from a visit. The car was found with blood in it but she has never been seen again. Sometimes in the Egypt God causes us to pass through all we know is **"...this hurts"**. And depending on what happens to us we may feel:

5. the pain of injustice What's being done to you or to someone else is just not fair or should never be done and your mind says **"...this is not right"** Everything inside me bristles when I think about all those little children in Bethlehem. We are built with a sense of justice and right and there is a real pain when you see injustice done to you or to others and there's nothing you can do about it. It hurts. And finally, sometimes you will know:

6. the pain of causing others hurt You did what was right, what God wanted you to do. You obeyed and the result is that somebody else got hurt and you think **"...look what I've done"**. You told the truth and somebody lost their job or got in trouble for it. You went where God told you to go and now your family doesn't get to see you. You place your elderly mother in a home because it is the only possible way you can provide for her care and you love her and are trying desperately to do what God wants and meet her needs, but she is angry and chastises you for doing it every time you visit because she's not happy there. You know you're hurting her, but you have to. Or maybe you shared with somebody the truth from God's Word about salvation or about their life and now they're crushed and hurt or even turned off and you feel terrible, but you know you were obeying God. Sometimes you will know the pain of hurting other people along the way.

Now listen carefully. I'm not saying that your life will be filled with pain if you obey God. It probably won't. But there will be times when you pass through Egypt, and when you do, God will be there with you to give you grace to bear the pain, just like He was with Mary and Joseph. They didn't quit. They kept on obeying. Every time a new order came, they said, "Yes, Lord!" And that's what I want to encourage you to do. Corrie Ten Boom's famous quote is, ***"There is no pit so deep that God is not deeper still!"*** Yes, if you obey God there will be some pain in it, but God will be with you in the pain to sustain you and to grow you in ways that you would never imagine. So, you have a choice to make. You want to be involved in the magnificent things God wants to do with your life, but are you willing to trust God and obey Him, even if it means experiencing pain? Are you willing to trust Him to carry you through whatever He allows to come your way? *David Brainerd was born in 1718. When he was 21, he was converted to Christ and trained for ministry. At age 24, God called him to be a missionary to the most neglected people group of that time, the Indians who lived right here in the Delaware and Susquehanna valleys of PA, NY, and NJ. On the very first night, when he came near the Indian Village at the Forks of the Delaware and made his own little camp, a party of Indians surrounded his camp to kill him. They found him on his knees praying for them and decided to wait. Hours passed and he did not stop. Finally, the Indians watched as a rattlesnake crawled into the clearing, raised its head at the praying man and crawled on past. To them it was a sign and they slunk away into the night. This grand act of God opened the door for him in the village. Yet during the entire five years of his ministry there, he was sickly, suffering repeated weakness and illnesses of various sorts and even depression. On top of that, he drove himself mercilessly, often praying for hours on his knees outdoors in the cold, even in the snow. At the end of five years, he was able to gather a regular audience of perhaps 95 who would listen attentively, yet only 15 made actual public profession of their faith. He died of tuberculosis at age 29. The cost of obeying God for him was 6 years of pain and suffering. The effect was, at the moment, small. Yet Jonathan Edwards, his friend, took his diary and published it after his death. It is still in print. And over the years many have been propelled into the service of God by the words, the example, and the heart of this young suffering missionary. Thousands will be in heaven because of him.* I have no idea what God wants to do with you. But I know that sometimes it will mean passing through Egypt. Are you willing to say "Yes" and obey Him anyway?

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The Gifts Of Christmas – Mat. 2:11

Gold: The Gift Of Homage To Jesus Our King

"...they bowed down and worshipped Him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of frankincense and of myrrh."

The one thing that is on everybody's mind at this time of year is gifts. At Christmas we give gifts to each other, to those we love and are close to. The root of that tradition goes all the way back to the Bible. There is an event connected with the birth of Christ that is most unusual and even incredible. Mt. 2 records that at the birth of Christ several wise men from the East arrived in Jerusalem to find Him because they had seen a particular star in the sky. They had set out from their native land and traveled over 1,000 miles of desert to find a baby and to fall down and worship Him and give Him gifts. And find Him, they did. And when they did, verse 11 says, *On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of (frank)incense and of myrrh.* Gold and frankincense and myrrh. The gifts of Christmas. The gifts that were given to Jesus, once long ago. And in our thinking, that's all there is to it. But it isn't! I would submit to you that Christmas is not just a time to give gifts to each other; it is more properly a time to give gifts to Jesus. And the same three gifts the wise men gave Him, we too can give Him. Oh, I doubt that any of us has a bar of gold or a jar of frankincense or myrrh handy, but the things which they symbolize we all have and can give to Him. First of all, let's see:

I. What We Can Learn From The Scriptures

1. about the meaning of gold Gold was one of the first metals known to man. It became an object of value early in human history because it was fairly rare; it could be used in its pure state without smelting, it never tarnishes which gives objects made from it almost infinite life, and it was extremely malleable and could be hammered into thin strips and delicate objects, even thread. Almost from the start, though, because of its value, gold:

a. it is the stuff of kings - 2 Chron. 9 tells us how important gold was to King Solomon. Read verses **13-20**. He exacted taxes of gold, he received presents of gold, he traded for gold, he sat on gold, he put his feet on gold, he ate off gold and he decorated with gold. Gold fairly shouts "royalty". Common people ate off clay and sat on wood. Kings alone had gold in any quantity, outside of an occasional ring or piece of jewelry. So it has ever been through history. Until the advent of radioactive materials, gold was the most valuable gift one could give, a gift you gave to a King. Further as we study the Old Testament, we find that:

b. it was used by God in the construction of His dwelling place. **Ex. 25** tells us that every article in the sanctuary was gold. The bottom chest portion of the ark was overlaid with gold and the mercy seat, where God's presence dwelt on top of it, was made of solid gold with two cherubim molded on either end. The table for the bread and the poles that carried it were overlaid with gold. The lampstand was solid gold and the altar of incense was overlaid with gold. Even the boards of the inner sanctuary were overlaid with gold. If you stood in the holy place, literally

everything you saw all around you was gold! And Hebrews tells us that these things are pictures of God's dwelling place in heaven. It seems to me that God is making a statement about Himself. Royalty! He is the King. He has a royal throne. All about Him is royalty, the finest, the best. That is who He is, the King. A gift of gold is a royal gift. Now let's look in Mt. 2 and learn:

2. about the wise men First I want you to notice that:

a. they came looking for a King (1-2) They were not looking merely for a prophet or a teacher who was born, but a King, the King of the Jews, the long-expected Messiah who would rule Israel! And look why they came? It wasn't to ask Him questions or to negotiate a deal or to ask for something. They came to worship him, to throw themselves down at His little feet! Even though they were most likely Persians and had their own king, they came to acknowledge their loyalty to this new King, to place themselves at His disposal. And so, when they arrived at the house:

b. they bowed down to Jesus as to a King (11) Literally, they *fell down* before Him; they prostrated themselves on their faces at the sight of Him, upon coming into His presence. And they worshipped Him. Among the orientals and especially the Persians, that word means to bow and touch your forehead to the ground. Have you ever watched the news and seen Muslims in a mosque kneeling down and bowing over and again to Allah? That's what we're talking about. We read over this sentence so easily, but it means so much. Bowing down:

(1) it was an act of loyalty to His person The English for centuries had a feudal system where a bunch of feudal lords owned all the land and each one of them had vassals under them who promised them allegiance and loyalty in battle in return for use of the land. The king was the greatest of the lords and they were all his vassals; they swore their personal loyalty to him. And they did it by falling down and saying, "My Lord" or "My Liege". It was an act of allegiance. Doubting Thomas, when Jesus finally appeared to him, was so stunned he forgot to fall down, but he got the words out, *My Lord and my God.* That is, “I acknowledge my loyalty to you; I own you as my King!” That's what they were doing and because of that:

(2) it was an act of submission to His authority With allegiance comes submission, *I'll do what you command; I acknowledge your authority over me!* You can see it in the wise men. Herod, the current king had commanded them to return to him and let him know where the "new king" was so he could "worship" him too. He wanted to worship him with a sword! But God warned the wise men in a dream *not* to go back to Herod. He commanded them for the child's sake *not* to obey the king, to disobey him. That was a dangerous thing. They were on foreign turf and there was no protection. To acknowledge another king than the current one was treason and to disobey him put your life and freedom in jeopardy, especially when you've got a king who thinks nothing of murdering helpless infants! But they didn't think of all that. They had sworn allegiance to Jesus and they would protect Him, even at their own risk. And they would follow His command, even at the risk of their lives! They had pledged submission to His authority. And then notice:

c. they presented gifts to Jesus as to a King They opened up their treasures, their casket of valuables, their treasury, and presented to him gifts, royal gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. That's how you approach a king. When the Queen of Sheba came to King Solomon, it says, *she gave the king 120 talents of gold (4 metric tons), large quantities of spices, and precious stones. There had never been such spices as those the queen of Sheba gave to King Solomon.* You always bring gifts when you approach a king and the quantity and quality of the gifts are some indication of your esteem, or at least taken that way! The wise men gave gifts fit for a king, the best they could find.

Now let's think for a moment about what the Scriptures teach:

3. about the giving of a gift If something is a gift, three things are true:

a. it is given without compulsion We're talking about motives. Nobody made those wise men come and give gifts. They came of their will and freely bowed down and paid homage and gave their gifts. **2 Cor. 9:7** tells us that we are to give freely and without compulsion because God loves a cheerful giver. So, a true gift is one given because I want to, not because I have to. Secondly:

b. it is received without performance The Wise Men didn't come expecting any reward, expecting the new King to do anything for them. You don't have to do anything in return for a gift. A true gift has no strings attached. It is an act of grace. And **Rom. 11:6** tells us, *if [it is] by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace.* If you have to do something in return, it is no longer a gift. It is absolutely free to the receiver. And thirdly:

c. it is usually given at a cost to the giver Unless the giver gives something which he happens to have that he doesn't really care about, there is always a cost involved to the giver. And after all, if I give you a nickel out of my pocket, it may be given freely and received freely, but it's hardly a gift unless it means something to the giver! True

gifts have value to the giver! They represent a sacrifice to some degree, great or small. Traveling over 1,000 miles of desert, giving months out of your life and the best gifts you have, represent a sacrifice for the infant Jesus.

Now with all of those facts in our minds, let's try to make some application to our lives. Paul talked about Jesus Himself as being God's unspeakable gift to us. The wise men gave gifts to the newborn King, but the King Himself there in the cradle was the greatest gift of all. So let's talk about:

II. The Royal Gift Jesus Gave To Us: He Became A Servant

1. He took the very nature of a servant - Phil. 2:6-8 He was *in very nature* God but He voluntarily became for us *in very nature* a servant. What King would do that? What King would switch places with His servants? But Jesus did! He who was Lord and Sovereign of all fell down, as it were, and became a servant. And what's more:

2. He became a servant to us He made this graphically clear in the Upper Room when He, the Lord and Master of the disciples, took the place of a household slave and washed their feet. **Jn. 13:12-15**, *When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.* He was Master and Lord, but He became a servant to them and to us. He laid down the best gift of all, the gift of His own life in our place. He swore loyalty to death to us and served us all the way to the cross. He became obedient unto death! For us! And in the process:

3. He demonstrated for us what servanthood means He gave us an example of what it means for us to serve Him as our Lord and King. It means to lay down our very all for Him, even our very lives, and to lay them down day by day for Him by serving others.

Friend, we can do what the wise men did. There is a gift of gold we can give to Jesus as our King.

III. The Royal Gift We Can Give To Jesus: Homage just as the wise men gave. We can bow down in our hearts and:

1. we can give to Him our unwavering loyalty We can say, "Jesus, you are my Lord. You are #1, King of my life. Nothing and nobody will have your place; I am yours. You have my loyalty and allegiance, even till death." And with that:

2. we can give to Him our unhesitating submission We can say, "Lord Jesus, I submit myself to your authority. I will do what you command. I will obey what you direct. Not my will but Thine in everything. All to you, Lord, I surrender; all to You I freely give!" Absolute surrender. No strings attached. Not out of compulsion. Laying your life at His feet. And with that:

3. we can present to Him all our treasures We can open the treasure chests of our lives and give to Him everything we count valuable. We can lay everything we have, our families, our skills, our possessions, all of it at His disposal and say, "Here Lord Jesus; I give these, all I have, to you my King."

General Charles Gordon was a British soldier and a man of God. The English government tried to reward him for his service in China, but he refused. After much coaxing, he accepted a gold medal with his name and accomplishments inscribed on it. After his death, no one could find it and it was learned that one day he had sent it to Manchester during a famine to be melted down and sold and used to buy bread for the poor. In his diary, he wrote, "The only thing I had in this world that I valued I have now given to the Lord Jesus." He literally gave his gold to Jesus. But he first gave Himself. So should you. You have true gold to present, your homage, everything you are and have, to Him. Will you bow at His feet this morning and hand it all to Him?

The Gifts Of Christmas – Mat. 2:11

Frankincense: The Gift Of Worship To Jesus Our God

"...they bowed down and worshipped Him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of frankincense and of myrrh."

When you travel 1,000 miles in a camel caravan, a lot of which is through desert and wilderness, you can't take very much with you. Provisions for the journey, of course, take first priority. And if the purpose of that journey is to deliver gifts, the gifts themselves would have to be small in size, yet of great value. A bar of gold or even an object made from gold certainly seems like a fitting thing to bring. But the other two gifts that the wise men brought to Jesus are different. They are spices, frankincense and myrrh, perhaps an urn or a ceramic jar full of each. It couldn't have been much in quantity because Joseph carried them down to Egypt that night all by himself, along with Mary and the infant Jesus and whatever belongings he could get on the family donkey. Why on earth would learned men journey that far and risk their own lives to deliver a jar of frankincense to a baby? It doesn't make much sense to our 20th century minds but let's see:

I. What We Can Learn From The Scriptures Frankincense is a resin that comes from the Boswellia or "incense" tree which grows in India, Africa, and Arabia, not in Palestine. It is collected by cutting into the bark and exposing the white milky sap (the word root itself means "white"). When it oozes out and hardens into yellowish transparent tears of gummy resin, it is gathered. It is nauseating to the taste and inedible, but it is very fragrant and especially so when burned. Tree sap. Why does that have value? Well, we who live in a world where everybody wears perfume, or aftershave, and deodorant and has the opportunity for daily baths and showers with real soap and has enough clothes to wear them one day and throw them in the wash, have a hard time understanding that the world, by and large, has been a pretty smelly place down through the centuries! Common people had few clothes and wore them for extended periods. There was no indoor plumbing nor bathtubs nor underground sewers. It's quite understandable that people who couldn't do as much to remove bad odors from their lives were quite heavily into covering them with good odors! And that's why spices were so valuable. Something that would give off a long-lasting, sweet-smelling fragrance was a valuable thing. And because most of these substances were not from plants native to Palestine or most other areas, they very early became valued articles of trade. That's why we read that the Queen of Sheba (Arabia) brought spices to Solomon and that no one had ever seen such spices as she brought! They were gifts fit for a King as much as gold and silver! Now, as we look through the Scriptures, we can learn some things:

1. about the uses of frankincense First of all:

a. it was used as a perfume due to its sweet smell - Song Sol. 3:6 says, *Who is this coming up from the desert like a column of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and incense made from all the spices of the merchant?* Now I should explain that the NIV, and even the KJV, uses the word *frankincense* and the word *incense* interchangeably in many places, although they are two different original Hebrew and Greek words. The word *incense* is a generic term that refers to <u>any</u> fragrant substance which is burned, usually in sacrifice. It does not denote any one particular substance, but was often compounded from a mixture of several spices. On the other hand, *frankincense*, which is the Hebrew word used here, was a particular substance which could be burned as incense. But it was also used as a personal perfume. It was, no doubt, pulverized or mixed with something and rubbed on the skin. Solomon's bride wore it and the smell of it excited Solomon in chapter 4. It was to the ancients what an expensive imported perfume would be to us today. But frankincense also:

b. it was burned as incense with the grain offering - Lev. 2:1-3 Frankincense was mixed with the grain offering of fine flour, but only with the portion that was actually burned as an offering to God. All of it had to be on that part and not on the part eaten by the priests, since it was inedible. When that part was burned, it produced a sweet aroma which was pleasing to the Lord. Without taking time to study in detail the Levitical offerings, let me just tell you outright that the grain offering was the only offering which did not involve death; no animal was killed. Since every offering pictures Christ, the grain offering was ***a symbol of Christ's human life pleasing to God***. He Himself was the Bread of Life. Bread was the symbol He chose to represent His own body. The life He lived in that body on earth was a living sacrifice. He always did the Father's will and in Him the Father was well pleased. The pleasant smell from the frankincense was a noticeable reminder of God's pleasure with what was offered, as much as the voice from Heaven at Jesus' baptism! And the grain offering was not usually offered by itself. It was offered along with other offerings, with the burnt offering and the peace offering and also with the lamb that was offered every day, twice a day, as a burnt offering. So the smell of frankincense was continually in the Tabernacle as a reminder that God was pleased with the life that had been offered to Him. Why was that? Well, in case you've never thought of it, the killing, skinning, and burning of animals is a smelly thing! It stinks! Just visit a slaughterhouse or even try gutting a freshly-killed animal yourself. The smell of death is foul, yet Christ had to die. It is necessary. But the frankincense covered it so the priests could stand it and indicated that the by the foulness of death, God was pleased because His righteousness was satisfied. Now frankincense also:

c. it was used with the Bread of the Presence - Lev. 24:5-7 The 12 loaves that were set out on the table had frankincense placed with them and it was actually burned, not eaten. Those 12 loaves symbolized God's people who were always before Him, always in His presence, and the smell of the frankincense was the reminder that God was pleased with His people. So, it is ***a symbol of our lives offered to him***. God is pleased as we do like Jesus and offer Him our lives each day as a living sacrifice. Now notice one final thing:

d. it is connected with the offering of prayers - Rev. 8:3-4 The word *censer* is a special word, used only here, which comes from the word frankincense. It means a receptacle for offering frankincense and the incense being burned here is frankincense and the smoke and aroma of it ascended to the very throne, to God's own nostrils and it was mixed with the prayers of God's children, the saints, a way of saying that the rising of incense is a symbol for the way our prayers rise to God's ear and He is pleased when His children talk to Him, when they pray, when they bow before Him and offer their prayers. Now let's look quickly at what the record says:

2. about the wise men - Mt. 2 Notice what they tell Herod when they arrived:

a. they came to worship Jesus (1-2) There are other words to say, "We have come to pay him tribute" or "bring Him gifts." But they said *worship* and when they came into the house, verse 11 says:

b. they bowed down and worshipped Him (11) While that had all the tremendous meaning I talked about last time, acknowledging their loyalty and submission to Him as king, it also has a further meaning. Let's talk:

3. about the meaning of worship

a. the word indicates an act of adoration It comes from a root which literally comes from the concept of a dog licking his master's hand. You've had a dog, haven't you? You know how they can love you. And they show it by kissing you, by licking your hand or whatever they can reach. It's an expression of adoration and it came to have that meaning for human adoration. Worship is more than bowing down and acknowledging someone's authority over you. It is an expression of reverence and adoration. Now if you check all the places it's used:

b. the word is usually directed toward God or at least toward an idol or something being worshipped as god. It is not normally used toward a human being, unless he is demanding worship falsely, as though he were God. So when the wise men worshipped Him, they were doing more than bowing before a Sovereign. They were expressing reverence and adoration for His person. It was not just an act of state; it was a religious act. They knew that He was more than just an earthly king. They knew that this Messiah, the Son of David, King of the Jews, was somehow of and from God, that he was more than a man, that He was worthy of worship! And notice also that:

c. the word is often connected with a verbal expression Many times the expression reads, "and they worshipped him, *saying...*" followed by a verbal expression of adoration. Worship is more than just the physical act of bowing down. It is an expression of the heart through the mouth to God. Usually, what people who worship say in the Bible is one of two things. It is either:

(1) declaring who and what God is - Mt. 14:33, *Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God.*" **Rev. 4:10-11**, *the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne, and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say: "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being."* The English word *worship* is derived from the word *worth*. It is declaring God's worth, God's worthiness, who and what He is, how great and wonderful and magnificent and marvelous and loving and kind and powerful He is. Or we find worshipping people:

(2) declaring what God has done and will do - Rev. 11:16-19 begins with the church in heaven falling on their faces and worshipping God and *saying: "We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, the One who is and who was, because you have taken your great power and have begun to reign.* Worship declares what God has done and what He will do. Worship is, "Oh Lord, I praise you that you have sent your Son to redeem me at the cross! I praise you that you called me out of darkness into your marvelous light! I praise you that one day Jesus Christ will reign over this earth and all the powers of hell won't stop it!" That's worship!

And God is pleased with worship! Like the frankincense, our prayers and our worship are a pleasing aroma that ascends up to heaven, a sweet smell unto God. It pleases Him. You see, the wise men knew in some way that Jesus was a manifestation of Almighty God and they worshipped Him and presented unto Him the sweet fragrance of frankincense, a gift worthy of God. And indeed, they did more than they knew. That tiny infant was God the Son, the second person of the Trinity Himself, truly worthy of all their worship. Now when you consider that, just think of:

II. The Divine Gift Jesus Gave To Us: He Became A Man Think of the great paradox:

1. He who was God took the nature of man - Phil. 2:6-8 He was God, yet for our sakes He became man. He took, not merely the appearance, but the actual nature and being of a man. He *became* one! He took our nature, our body, our identity. He identified Himself with us once and for all and why?

2. He became a man that we might become sons of God - Gal. 4:4-5, *But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons.* He became like us that we might become like Him, that we might become sons of God, partakers of the Divine nature, possessors of the Divine eternal life of God.

What a gift! What a price He paid to give it! All the wise men had seen was a star in the sky and it was enough to cause them to fall down and worship Him. We know the whole story! We know how He became a man for us and went to the cross for us and gave to us His life! A star was enough to make them cross 1,000 miles of desert to bring the gift of frankincense to Jesus. Surely, knowing what He has done for us is enough to move us to bring:

III. The Divine Gift We Can Give To Jesus: Worship First and last, frankincense symbolizes the worship of God's people ascending to Him and pleasing Him. We probably don't have any incense trees growing in our yard, but because He is our God, we can give Him the real and true frankincense:

1. we can give to Him the adoration of our hearts Like the dog who licks his master's hand in adoration for the love shown to him, we can adore Jesus with all of our hearts for the gift of love He has shown to us. Not because we have to, but because we want to. We can take the time to come before Him and bow down, if not on our knees physically, then in our hearts spiritually, in humble reverence for all that He is and all that He has done for us. And:

2. we can give to Him the expression of our lips We can worship Him. We can sing to Him. We can let our prayers of praise and thanksgiving ascend to His throne. We can make it a priority in our lives to tell Him how wonderful, how beautiful, how majestic, he is and how much we adore Him. Oh, He loves to hear it. It ascends to His throne like incense and when His children love and adore and worship Him, He is well-pleased.

Won't you consider giving Him the gift of your worship this Christmas? Usually, it's the last thing on our agenda. There's just no time to sit down and pray and spend time with Him and when there is, we jump right into asking Him for things and telling Him about our needs. It's like the little boy who was excited about Christmas but told this story: *Daddy took me to store yesterday to see the creche in window; to see what the first Christmas looked like, telling me about Jesus at his birth, about his father and mother and how he was born outside in the cold, like Grampa's barn, only open. But, when we got there, I couldn't see Jesus and His mother and father in the place like Grampa's barn because of all the stuff in the way: a train set with lights and a road with a RR gate that worked, a big doll in the window, lots of pretty packages, and a big Christmas tree, boxes of candy, and pretty clothes. And I forgot all about looking at Jesus and His mother and His father in the barn like Grampa has because of all the other stuff in the way. And when I got home, I was sorry I never got to see Jesus and His mother and His father in the barn like Grampa has because of all the stuff in the way.* Oh, so much gets in the way! What about Him? What about who He is? He is our God who gave us the greatest gift of all, the gift of Himself! What about making it a priority to really worship Him in private and in public. After all, He is your God. He is worthy of it.

The Gifts Of Christmas – Mat. 2:11

Myrrh: The Gift Of Love To Jesus Our Savior

"...they bowed down and worshipped Him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of frankincense and of myrrh."

I mentioned to you in the previous message how strange a thing it is that Wise Men would travel 1,000 miles of desert to present to the infant Jesus a small quantity of gold and two jars of spices. But we saw in them fitting symbols of who Jesus is. The gold reminded us of Jesus' Royalty, the fact that He was a King come to earth as a Servant. The frankincense reminded us of Jesus' Deity, the fact that He was God come to earth as a Man. And that leaves us with myrrh. Now myrrh, like frankincense, is also a dried resin from tree sap. It comes from a stunted species of balsam tree with light grey bark which grows in Arabia and North Africa. The sap exudes from the tree in small tear-like drops which dry to a rich brown or reddish-yellow brittle substance. It was used and sold as a solid like this, but there are also references to liquid myrrh or flowing myrrh, and even oil of myrrh, so undoubtedly, in its use it was probably dissolved into a gel or even a liquid by mixing with a solvent like oil. Now there are three things we know:

I. What We Can Learn From The Scriptures

1. about the nature of myrrh First of all:

a. its taste was *bitter* The very word *myrrh* means *bitter*. It is an edible product and can be consumed. It was used on at least one occasion that we know of in Scripture to spike wine. In fact, the Greek language has a verb which means “to mix or flavor with myrrh.” But the taste of it to the consumer was bitter. On the other hand:

b. its smell was *sweet* It has a very pleasant sweet-smelling odor, though it is a much more faint odor than frankincense. Probably for this reason, myrrh was often used in conjunction with other spices such as myrrh and aloes or cinnamon or sweet cane. But it had one characteristic that frankincense did not:

c. its effect was *medicinal* It is an astringent, a substance which dries or tightens the skin. It is also somewhat antiseptic; it kills bacteria and prevents decay. And when consumed, it also has an effect on the body's metabolism and nerves.

And thus we read in the Scripture:

2. about the uses of myrrh

a. it was an item valued in trade - Rev. 18:12-13 mentions a list of valued articles of trade in New Testament times which includes gold, silver, and jewels, but also frankincense and myrrh! Because it was a rare substance and a useful one, it had real value. It was indeed a fitting gift that the Wise Men brought to the newborn King.

b. it was used as a perfume and beauty product - Prov. 7:17 talks about an adulterous woman who perfumed her bed with myrrh to lure in her lovers. Myrrh is all over the Song of Solomon. The bride had a sachet of it hung around her neck and liquid myrrh dripping from her hands. The smell was fragrant and desirable. In fact, in Persia, if you were chosen to enter the King's Harem, **Est. 2:12** tells us that you ladies would have had to spend six months being rubbed with oil of myrrh daily for purification and beautification. So, it was valued as a cosmetic. Then we read that:

c. it was used in the sacred anointing oil - Ex. 30:22--33 tells us there was a sacred mixture made that could never be duplicated for personal use or placed on any person except the priests. It was composed of about 1/4 myrrh along with some other spices. But the key is that it set apart the person it was placed on to the priesthood. It was a sign of chosenness, being chosen by God. As we move to the New Testament, we find:

d. it was used in the wine offered to Jesus on the cross - Mk. 15:23 says before they crucified Him they offered him wine mixed with myrrh to drink, but He refused it. This was probably an act of kindness and would have acted as some sort of pain-killer to help ease the agony of crucifixion somewhat. But Jesus refused it, because He chose to feel and experience the cross with all its pain and shame to the full. And finally, we read that:

e. it was used to embalm the body of Jesus - Jn. 19:39-40 Nicodemus came and helped Joseph of Arimathea with Jesus' body. He brought about 75 lbs. of a mixture of myrrh and aloes which they put all over the body and wrapped it with linen cloth as a sort of crude embalming. This was, no doubt, customary in that day and the myrrh was not only a perfume, but a preservative of sorts.

And so we find myrrh connected with a number of things concerning the Lord Jesus Christ and if we put together what we've just observed, we can learn:

3. about myrrh as a symbol of Christ's *Humanity* Down through the centuries, interpreters have seen meaning in these gifts and while the frankincense points to Christ in all His Deity, the myrrh points in every way to Christ's full humanity.

a. it reminds us of His suffering because it was offered to Him at the cross and He refused. He would not drink the soldiers' cup which would relieve Him of His suffering. He chose instead to drink the Father's cup, the cup of sorrow and suffering, the bitter cup which included the shame and the agony of the cross. Oh, the humanity of Jesus smelled sweet to the world and to the Father but it tasted bitter to the one who had to drink it! And then:

b. it reminds us of His dying because He was covered in it for burial. Myrrh brings back the image of the stone-cold tomb and two disillusioned men trying hastily to bury a lifeless body before sundown. It reminds us that “low in the grave He lay”, that the bitterness of suffering went all the way to death. And then:

c. it reminds us that God chose Him as our only High Priest because it was used in the sacred oil. The One who was given the myrrh, we're told, was, at the cross, our Great High Priest, the only One who could make atonement for us who entered the Holy Presence of God, not with the blood of bulls and goats, but with His own blood. But that act of Priesthood meant suffering and dying. It was a bitter priesthood. And finally:

d. it reminds us that God was pleased with His sacrifice The sweet smell of it was pleasant. And how sweet it was to the Father that His Son became a man and redeemed the human race. The whole act smelled good like the Holy Anointing Oil, while the taste of it was extremely bitter.

No wonder the hymn-writer John Hopkins penned, "Myrrh is mine; its bitter perfume breathes a life of gathering gloom. Sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying, sealed in the stone cold tomb! Glorious now behold Him arise, King and God and Sacrifice!..." Myrrh pictures Him in all His humanity as our great Sacrifice. Yet at the same time Henry Barraclough could talk about Jesus leaving the Ivory Palaces and say "My Lord has garments so wondrous fine and myrrh their texture fills; its fragrance reached to this heart of mine; with joy my being thrills." You see myrrh reminds us of:

II. The Saving Gift Jesus Gave To Us: He Died For Us - Phil. 2:6-8 We've read this passage three times. Oh, it is so deep. Yes, He who was King and God became a Servant. Yes, He who was absolute Deity became a Man. But look how it ends. As a Man:

1. His humanity took Him all the way to death for us It did not stop half-way. Becoming a man made Him ELIGIBLE to be our Savior, but dying is what MADE Him our Savior. He traded to us His life and took our death upon Himself and notice that:

2. His death was death on a cross It was not the quiet death of an elderly person or the merciful death of a firing squad. It was death on a cross, a means of execution designed exclusively to create pain and to prolong it as long as possible. That's the gift Jesus gave to us. That's what it meant to become our Savior. Oh, it was bitter to Him to provide the sweetness for us. Oh, the enigma of the myrrh speaks to our hearts about what He did for us!

But the myrrh was a gift the wise men gave Him. It was a gift fit for a Savior who would sacrifice His life. What myrrh can we give to such a Savior; what gift can we offer to Him?

III. The Sacrificial Gift We Can Give To Jesus: Our Love Oh, there's one thing I forgot to say about the Wise Men. Their act of presenting gifts was an act of acknowledging Jesus as their King. It was an act of worshipping Him as their God. But it was also an act of adoration and love. You don't part with the finest things you have, not to a baby, in a peasant's house, in a land far from your own where you have absolutely no obligation, unless you want to, unless your heart

cares. As gifts of state, perhaps you might send them. But they wanted to see Him themselves. So they came and so they gave. Having not seen the Savior of the World, they loved Him and offered to Him the most precious things they had. And:

1. we can offer to Him spiritual sacrifices - 1 Pet. 2:5 says, *you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.* He offered Himself as a sacrifice for us. We offer to Him sacrifices as well, sacrifices that are spiritual in nature, valuable, precious things given wholly and completely over unto Him.

2. we can give Him our complete love Jesus agreed with the scribe in **Mk. 12:33** who said about God, *To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.* The first thing we can give to our Savior is the love of our hearts and not just a portion or a piece of it, but all of our hearts, all of our being. To love Him completely, to be completely wrapped up in loving Him, is the best thing we can offer. It's the only thing He really wants. When He has that, He has everything else, doesn't He? But:

3. we can give Him the sacrifice of praise - Heb. 13:15-16 says, *Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise-- the fruit of lips that confess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.* We can be so in love with Him that we praise Him with our mouths, that we sing to Him, that we tell Him how worthy He is and how much we love Him, that we tell the whole world what a Savior He is. And then:

4. we can give Him the use of our bodies for His service - Rom. 12:1 says, *Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God-- this is your spiritual act of worship.* We can say to Him every day, "Here is my body, Lord. You gave Yours for me. I give mine to you. Use it. Speak through me. Act through me. Walk through me. Help through me. I am your instrument, a living burnt offering wholly given to you, even as Jesus was wholly given for me at the cross!" And finally:

5. we can give Him our love through loving others - 1 Jn. 4:10-11 says, *This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.* The love that we show to one another and to a dying world about us is an act of love and adoration to the Savior who loved us first. He can love the world through us and we can love Him by loving the world that He loves!

It is not always easy. Sometimes it is very costly. Sometimes it rips our hearts out or requires of us everything we have. Sometimes it is bitter to our taste, but to Him it is sweet. A fragrant smell of myrrh. Surrender, suffering, sacrifice. These are the gift of myrrh we can lay at the Savior's feet, the tokens of our love for Him.

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The Joys Of Christmas

The Joy Of The Wise Men: A Promise Is Fulfilled - Mt. 2:10

If there is one word that stands out in the Christmas celebration, it is the word JOY. All the carols have it: "*How great our joy, Joy, joy joy..., Joy to the world... joy to the earth... good tidings of great joy I bring..., O come all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant..".* It's everywhere! And it also stands out in the Christmas story in the Scriptures. Mary is filled with joy when she realizes she is to be the mother of the Messiah. The heavens ring with the joy of the angels on the night of the Savior's birth. And even the wise men who get there later have a tremendous experience of joy upon their arrival at the home of the newborn King. Jesus explained to His disciples the principle of abiding in Him, the Vine, and said, *I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. - John 15:11.* And then He told them that after His resurrection their grief would turn into joy and that nobody would be able to take that joy away from them. The rest of the New Testament is filled with references to joy and rejoicing in the lives of believers, even in the worst of circumstances. Joy seems by every measure to be a normal and vital part of the Christian's experience and that's why I want to talk to you in these next three messages about:

I. The Importance Of Joy in our lives. But perhaps we should make an attempt to define it first. Joy, in the Scripture, seems to be more than simple happiness or laughter. It seems to be an inner thing that's not dependent on outward circumstances as much as it is on the focus of the heart. Paul and Silas sang hymns in the stocks in prison at midnight and the early believers rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer for Jesus' Name. It's an inner gladness and delight, not at the circumstances, but at God and what He has done. Just as worship is the response of a heart that is caught up in the awe of God, joy is the response of a heart that is caught up in pure delight with God. So how do we get it? Gal. 5:22 says that the second fruit of the Spirit's presence and control in us is JOY. It's not something you work yourself up to. It's something the Holy Spirit produces in you; He produces a continual delight in God when you let Him control you. The delight that He has in the Father and in the Son become yours! And that has a profound impact on your life. Nehemiah, who led the returned Israelites in the difficult task of rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem amid strong opposition and threats, called

a special assembly in the seventh month and as they read the law of God, the people all wept over their own failures. But Nehemiah stopped them, and with great insight he said, *"Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."* - **Neh. 8:10**. The joy of the Lord is OUR strength. That joy, that delight in Him, is given to us as a gift of strength to carry us through all the difficulties of life. When our delight is in Him, our eyes are on Him and we endure it all. But unfortunately:

1. our joy is often diminished through the experiences of life Sickness comes. Suffering comes. An injury. Loss of a job. A wound from the behavior of a friend. Frustration in the task or the ministry or simply the handicaps that come with old age. Persecution for the faith. Life is full of joy-stealers, things that steal our attention away from the joy we have in Him and focus it on the sorrow and pain that our circumstances are causing us. And when that happens the experience of our joy goes right down the tubes. We become discouraged and despondent and depressed, maybe even bitter. We want to quit and give up and run away. *Gary Carr tells the story of Chippie the parakeet. "Chippie never saw it coming. One second he was peacefully perched in his cage, sending a song into the air; the next second he was sucked in, washed up, and blown over. His problem began when his owner decided to clean his cage with a vacuum. She had stuck the nozzle in to suck up the seeds and feathers at the bottom of the cage when the nearby telephone rang. Instinctively she turned to pick it up. She had barely said hello when--ssswwwwwpppppp! Chippie got sucked in. She gasped, let the phone drop, and switched off the vacuum. With her heart in her mouth, she unzipped the bag. There was Chippie--alive but stunned --covered with heavy gray dust. She grabbed him and rushed to the bathtub, turned on the faucet full blast, and held Chippie under a torrent of ice-cold water, powerwashing him clean. Then it dawned on her that Chippie was soaking wet and shivering. So she did what any compassionate pet owner would do: she snatched up the hair dryer and blasted him with hot air. Did Chippie survive? Yes, but he doesn't sing much anymore. He just sits and stares a lot. It's not hard to see why. Sucked in, washed up, and blown over! It's enough to steal the song from any stout heart."* So many of us believers are just like Chippie; Satan has run us through the vacuum cleaner of life and sucked the joy right out of us. Our true strength is gone. So we plod along, doing all the right things, serving, obeying, even singing, but with no song in our hearts, no longer overwhelmed with delight at the God whom we know, with the flame of our joy almost blown out. So how do we get it back?

2. our joy is fueled through the experience of God's Presence David knew the secret **Ps. 16:11** says, *Thou wilt make known to me the path of life; In Thy presence is fulness of joy; In Thy right hand there are pleasures forever.* It is when we are in the presence of God that we are filled with delight, that our souls are wrapped up in Him and there is joy unspeakable and full of glory. The more that I experience His presence, the more that I sense that I am with Him and He is with me and doing something awesome, the more the flame of my joy blazes bright and all other things pale in comparison. Now with that background in mind, let's go to our text and examine:

II. The Joy Of The Wise Men - Mt. 2:9-10 Notice right away in verse 10:

1. the measure of their joy The NIV is a simplified understatement here. The NAS and KJV more closely reflect not only the words of the Christmas carol but the original text ...***they rejoiced with exceeding great joy***. And in English that doesn't even do it justice. Rejoice and joy are verb and noun from the same Greek root. Great is literally *megas* which means large or huge. It was a mega-joy! But there's more. Exceeding is an adverb, which means exceedingly or greatly but its root means "violent". They joyed with a greatly-great joy, with a violently great joy! Have you ever been at a football game and seen what happens when the receiver catches the touchdown pass in the end zone with 10 seconds left to play? The crowd goes wild, screaming and yelling and almost out of control! That's a sense of what the text is trying to convey here. They experienced an overwhelming joy! I think they stopped and had a praise meeting right there on the road to Bethlehem. Maybe they shouted; maybe they sang. Maybe they did what the lame man who used to sit at the Temple gate did when Peter healed him. He jumped to his feet and followed them in, walking and leaping and praising God, overwhelmed with joy at the miracle of his healing. I don't how they expressed it outwardly, but inside, their joy was filled up to overflowing and bursting at the seams! Why? What's:

2. the reason for their joy It's simple: ***When they saw the star...*** When's the last time you jumped with joy over seeing a star? I've never even heard of an astronomer doing that! But then, you already know the rest of the story.

a. they had traveled a long, difficult way - Mt. 2:1-2 They were Magi, stargazers, respected wise men and leaders from the East, from Persia, outside of the Roman Empire. Their journey had been over a thousand miles on horseback and on foot. It had begun nearly two years earlier when one day, in gazing at the heavens, they saw a brand new star, brighter than all the rest, unlike anything they'd ever seen. They watched it again and again as they struggled to understand what it was and searched for its meaning, but eventually they stopped seeing it. Finally, they became convinced that it was a supernatural sign from God and began to make preparations for an expedition to travel to Jerusalem. For weeks and maybe months, they had plodded the dusty roads and the hot sands of the desert. They had come to Jerusalem, figuring this would be the place to look and began to ask the bewildered population about a baby king who had been born, but nobody could help them. King Herod got wind of it and called them privately and sent them off, without any real assurance, to check out a small town in Judea another 8 miles southeast, called Bethlehem. Following their dream was a long hard road and they hadn't seen the star in almost two years and probably didn't expect to see it again. Like us, they were not operating on sight any longer:

b. they had come on the basis of a promise Somehow they had learned that this star signified the birth of a long-awaited King of the Jews, a Messiah, a Great Deliverer, one who would set up a Kingdom that would rule the world. That knowledge had been planted in their culture for generations by godly Jews like Daniel and Esther and Mordecai. The Jews all over Persia celebrated a feast called Purim every year to commemorate how their God had foiled Haman's plot and showed Himself ruler over all. That God, Jehovah, the God of the Jews had made a promise that a great Messiah, a world-ruler would be born. The Scriptures of the Jews were filled with that promise. And somehow, they had likely read the words of one of their own number, a wayward Magus or wise man named Balaam, who prophesied in Num. 24:17-19, *"I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near; A star shall come forth from Jacob, And a scepter shall rise from Israel, And shall crush through the forehead of Moab, And tear down all the sons of Sheth. And Edom shall be a possession, Seir, its enemies, also shall be a possession, While Israel performs valiantly. One from Jacob shall have dominion, And shall destroy the remnant from the city."* They thought, "A STAR! This star is His star! It is announcing His birth! The King of the Jews is born! The God of Israel has fulfilled His promise!" And it was on the basis of that promise that they set out on their journey. And note that:

c. they had complete faith in that promise They gave up a chunk of their lives. They suffered through the rigors of that journey without a star in sight any longer. Yet when they arrived in Jerusalem, they were not investigating *whether* their suspicions were right. They declared, "Where is He that was born? We know He was born. We saw His star. We've come to worship Him! Surely you all know where He is!" I'm sure they were shocked when nobody knew what they were talking about! And it must have bewildered them! Yet what propelled them onward was another ancient Jewish prophecy in Micah 5:2, *But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, [though] thou be little among the thousands of Judah, [yet] out of thee shall he come forth unto me [that is] to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth [have been] from of old, from everlasting.* The same God who said there would be a star, also specified the town of this King's birth, Bethlehem. So, they set out afresh on the road to Bethlehem and all of a sudden, there it was! The STAR! The same one they had seen back home in Persia. The star whose promise had started them on this quest nearly two years before and had driven them this whole way. The unmistakable Star that was, I believe, the very shekinah glory of God shining. That star blazed out of the night and they went wild with joy! They joyed with violent mega-joy! Why? Not because of the star itself, but because in that moment:

d. they experienced the Presence of God in the fulfillment of a promise God had spoken in the presence of the star. The God who had sent them on the quest had met them at its end and had done what He said. They had encountered Him on that road. The fact that the star went before them and led them to the house where Jesus lay was almost anti-climactic and natural after that! There was no question that a baby lay at the end of that road. The star assured them that God had done it! He was there. He had met them. True joy comes from experiencing the presence of God and they experienced that Presence because He did what He said; He fulfilled His promise. So here's my point: here we are on the long vacuum-cleaner of life having the joy sucked right out of us, but:

III. Our Joy Is Increased By Our Experience Of Fulfilled Promises You can't see God, but when things happen that prove that God has done what He said, that He's fulfilled a promise, we encounter Him, and our joy begins to soar. Hence, one way to maintain and increase our joy in the midst of our heavy circumstances is to focus and concentrate on the promises of God. So, on that basis, let me make three suggestions which might help. First of all, we can:

1. rejoice in the promises already received Just look for a moment at **1 Pet. 1:8-9**. God's greatest and most precious promises you are already receiving right now, present tense, the eternal salvation of your soul. You've already claimed His promise that whoever believes in Him will not perish, but have everlasting life and you've got it! You've experienced His redemption. Look at **2 Pet. 2:4**. You've been made a partaker of the very nature of God. You've been transformed by His grace on the inside and become a child of God, born of His spirit, designated His heir and destined to rule! You've got it all; salvation and all that goes with it is a promise that you've already received in your life. The more you focus on what He's done in you, the more you'll find yourself in His presence and the greater your joy will be. Secondly:

2. rejoice in the fulfillments we continually experience Time after time on the road of life, you'll see your Star, your mark of evidence that God has done what He said, that He's heard and answered your prayer, that He's met your need, that He's been present with you all the way. *Laurie Eve Loftin shares the following testimony: "I was home for Christmas, looking forward to what I hoped would be the remainder of my junior year at Moody Bible Institute. Whether I would be returning to school was uncertain. I had enough money for the plane ticket to Chicago and about $100 more. At least one part-time job on campus would help cover the semester's expenses, but I needed to arrive with a $250 deposit for room and board and about $100 for books and supplies, just to get started. With my saving exhausted, I figured that, barring God's intervention, I would just return to Chicago to pack up my belongings and come back home. The practical alternative to schooling seemed to be getting a job and saving money until I had enough to finish. I would lose momentum in my studies and not graduate with my class, but maybe somehow God would use the lack of funds to reveal His will for my life. Maybe He wanted me home for reasons I could only speculate about. Since the onset of my father's disability when I was 11, my family had lived frugally and often had to trust God to meet our*

needs. The Lord had never allowed us to go hungry. Instead, He'd given us opportunities to share our `abundance' with others. My brothers and I worked part-time as soon as we were able to, and the money we gathered from paper routes, fast-food service, pumping gas, and babysitting was all we had for the three C's, clothes, cars, and college. God had long required me to trust Him to supply my needs, so I prayed, `Lord, I need another $250 by the time I get to Chicago.' I knew He was quite capable of providing the need, even at the last minute. Then the last minute came. My flight to Chicago was scheduled for the first Sunday morning of January. I hated to miss church, but arrangements for transportation on the Chicago end made it necessary. By Saturday night, I had already said good-bye to church friends. That evening I found myself at the church, where my father and I were to pick up my brother from a youth group activity. He had called to say he'd be watching for us at 9 PM. Nine o'clock came and went and David hadn't come out to the car. 9:05. 9:10. Where was he? Somewhat impatiently, I pushed open the car door, battled the winter wind, and went inside to look for him. Nobody was in the gym, though that was where the youth group was supposed to have been. So I continued my search. Passing the church office, I was surprised to see the secretary inside. `Laurie, what are you doing here?' she asked. `Looking for David,' I answered. `Try the library,' she said, `but first I have something for you. I was going to give it to you in the morning.' `I won't be here for church tomorrow,' I confessed. `My flight leaves too early.' `Amazing!' she said. `This was left for you anonymously, and I just assumed I'd be able to give it to you tomorrow. Whatever it is, God must have wanted you to have it before you left.' I thanked her and turned the package over in my hands several times. It was a medium-sized box wrapped very neatly in yellow and orange paper. My name was neatly typed on a tag. After returning to the car with my brother, I opened the package. Inside, amid the fluffy folds of white tissue paper, was an envelope containing $250 in cash. I would return to school and stay! God's provision and timing were proved to me in an unforgettable way." [Power for Living, Dec 17, 1995. Pages 5-6.] Can you imagine her joy? In that envelope, she met God! How many times has God proved Himself faithful to me, has He let me know that He is there, that He hears, that He's keeping me and providing for me as He promised. Don't miss the significance of those moments. Don't ride on by without pausing to let yourself become overwhelmed with what they mean, without listening to God say, "I'm here!" and letting your soul delight in Him and becoming overwhelmed with joy! And finally:

3. rejoice in the promise of ultimate joy in His Presence - Jude wrote, *Now unto him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present [you] faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy...* - **1:24.** There will come that moment when you find yourself in the direct presence of His glory. He's made you a promise and He will keep it. He has the power to keep it! He is able to keep you from falling away! And in that moment when at last you arrive, you will know what exceeding joy means. You will rejoice with exceeding great joy! The crowd will go wild. Picture it, focus on it and let your joy be made full. No one can take it away from you!

The Joys Of Christmas

The Joy Of Mary: A Privilege Is Conferred - Lk. 1:46-49

Last time I talked to you about the importance of JOY in our lives and the need to constantly rekindle it, because the events of life are always stealing it from you. We looked at the joy the Wise Men experienced when they saw the star and knew that God's promise was fulfilled. Today, I'd like to briefly talk to you about the joy that Mary experienced in becoming the mother of the Son of God. Even though, it didn't come right away:

I. Mary's Joy Was Rooted In Her Privilege (1:28-31) There are a few things I want you to notice here. As Gabriel first came to her:

1. she was greeted with a command to have joy "Greetings" or "Hail" in the KJV is literally in the Greek, ***Rejoice!*** or ***Joy to you!*** What the angel had come to tell her was intended as a message of joy that would produce joy in her.

2. she was described as a recipient of privilege She was *One endowed with grace.* "Highly favored" doesn't mean "You're someone who's gotten into God's favor, someone He likes a lot." It means, "God has endowed you with grace; He has conferred a great privilege upon you".

3. she received a privilege she had not sought You know, sometimes you find something by looking for it long and hard. But other times, you simply find something which you didn't expect and weren't even looking for. It's completely an act of God. That's what this was. For her to be the mother of the promised Messiah, the Son of God, was fully and completely an act of God's unmerited blessing bestowed on her through nothing of her own effort. But in reality:

4. the privilege was God's Presence *The Lord is with you* doesn't simply mean, "He's on your side, He's always watching over you". It means literally that His presence is here right now. You're in it. And through it He is going to do a miracle in your life.

5. His Presence was evidenced in a miraculous birth She was told, ***you will bear a Son***. The Presence of God through the Holy Spirit would work a miracle of Divine conception in her womb, so that without any man, the embryo of a baby was produced immediately in her. The Son of God would be born by a miracle birth.

Of course, Mary didn't get it right away. She quietly said "Yes" to the Lord, but she could hardly believe what had happened. And, naturally, at that moment she had no way to physically confirm that it was actually true and she was pregnant. Certainly, she was not ready to face her fiancé, Joseph! She rushed off to see her childless cousin Elizabeth in the hill country, whom the angel had told her was now six months pregnant with little John the Baptist and when she got there, through the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth already knew all about what had happened to her and that she was already carrying God's Son. She called her "blessed among women"! And all of a sudden, the significance of the privilege that had been conferred on her broke through in her mind and:

II. Mary Was Filled With Joy When She Recognized Her Privilege (1:46-49) When she figured out the privilege that was hers:

1. she was overwhelmed with inner joy which burst out in praise She sang or shouted the words of this beautiful text, which we've come to call The Magnificat, praising and glorifying God for what He had done. And:

2. that praise resulted from contrasting her low state with her high privilege in Him She was just a lowly peasant girl from Nazareth, poor and unassuming, destined to live and die a simple life, unknown. But now, she was the mother of the Son of God and all generations to the end of time would know her and call her blessed for that special privilege! The Mighty One had indeed done a great thing for her! The point I want to draw from this is that:

III. We Will Be Filled With Joy As We Recognize Our Privilege - Eph. 1:5-8

1. we have received the privilege of becoming God's children In one fell swoop, those of us who have received Christ have been taken from being lost and dead in our sins, enemies of God and cut off from Him, to having all of our sins forgiven and being placed into a relationship of love with Him where we are called His sons and daughters! John said, *Behold what manner of love the Father has given unto us that we should be called the sons of God!* Hallelujah! I'm a child of God; I'm in His family! And:

2. it is an unsought privilege lavished on us purely by His grace We didn't seek it. He sought us! He planned it out and determined it before creation. Like Mary, He picked and chose us, to pour out His love on us, to lavish His grace upon us. We were less than nobody and now all the generations of eternity will call us blessed. They will say, "There goes a son of God; there goes a daughter of God!" And here's the root of that relationship:

3. it is the privilege of having His Son present in us through a new birth God is not only WITH us, He's IN us. He freely gave it to us IN the one He loves. Jesus came to live inside us. His Spirit created in us a new birth, the birth of a brand-new nature inside and we were born all over again by a mighty miracle of God. Do you see the parallel? The joy of Mary should be our joy! If life has robbed you of your joy and you want to fuel it again, just ponder the privilege of your own salvation. Let the wonder and the awe of it sink in and you will be filled with joy unspeakable and full of glory! Now let me connect that with one of the important ordinances we celebrate:

IV. Baptism Is An Outward Expression Of Joy At Our Salvation - Acts 15:33-34 Did you see it? The jailer was filled with joy because he and his whole family with him had come to believe and that great miracle of salvation had happened in their hearts. He didn't understand it totally, but he felt it! And one of the ways he expressed that joy was by being baptized immediately. Baptism is not some sacred ritual with spiritual power; it is a testimony of your faith. It is to publicly say to God, "Thank you Jesus for saving me, for coming into my heart and life and changing me forever! Thank you for the awesome privilege of the miracle you've done in my life! I'll follow you forever!" And it is to publicly say to everyone watching, "I am so happy to be a child of God that I want everyone to know it. I am not ashamed. I am so full of joy that I want to be known by the whole world as a follower of His!" We express our joy over the miracle of salvation we already have already received by being baptized in His Name.

I trust that each of us will know the joy that Mary had, because we know the joy of having received that miracle in our own life!

The Joys Of Christmas

The Joy Of The Shepherds: A Savior Is Born - Lk. 2:10-11

We have been looking at the subject of joy through the Christmas story. We saw that joy is an important and normal part of the Christian life, but that the circumstances often suck the joy out of our lives. So we've been learning how to rekindle it! The wise men rejoiced with great joy when they saw the star, because they experienced the fulfillment of the promise of God. And from them we learned that our joy can be increased by considering the promises of God which we've already received and the ones that He makes good on day by day in our lives. We encounter His Presence in the events of our lives, just like they encountered it in the Star. Then we saw how Mary rejoiced when she understood the awesome privilege that had been conferred upon her in the miracle birth of her child. And from her we learned that our joy can be increased by considering the awesome privilege that is ours that we have become children of God through a miraculous new birth experience, so that all generations will call us blessed! Today we're going to look at the joy which the shepherds

experienced on that first Christmas eve and see another thing that fuels our joy and also one of the primary purposes of joy in our lives through theirs. We begin on that hillside near Bethlehem with:

I. The Angelic Announcement (8-14) I wish that we could all have been there to see that awesome sight! It would be easy to talk about who these shepherds were and why they were out there at night and these flocks being destined for the Temple and the prophetic significance of it all, but this morning I want to focus on:

1. the message that was announced - *Today a Savior has been born* After all, the word *angel* means *messenger* and when angels appear to people in the Scriptures, it is almost always to deliver a message from God. This is no exception and it would be easy to let the message get lost in the grandeur of the scene. The message God sent to these humble shepherds had three elements:

a. the element of salvation - *a Savior is born*. A Deliverer! The term was actually fairly common. The lexicon says, *The name was given by the ancients to deities, especially tutelary (guardian) deities, to princes, kings, and in general to men who had conferred signal benefits upon their country, and in more degenerate days, by the way of flattery to personages of influence.* However, in God's usage, it had a much more definite meaning. He had told Joseph in Mat. 1:21, *...you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.* Here at last was someone who would do what no other deliverer in the history of the human race could do! Others could rescue from dire circumstances, could lift you out of poverty or protect you from an enemy. But nobody could save you from your sins! That is the message of Christmas: we have a Savior! Paul wrote in 1Tim. 1:15, *Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners--of whom I am the worst.* Whether we're the worst or the best, we're still sinners and we need a Savior. *Jack Deere tells of the time when as a college senior he was flying from Denver to Dallas. He sat beside a young woman on the plane. She was a junior, very intelligent, and unsaved. She even admitted that she was living with her boyfriend. Jack thought it would be a simple matter to shoot down her arguments against Christianity. She said something about her favorite psychologist. Jack had just finished reading his latest book and critiquing it for a class he was taking. But by the time the flight was nearly over, Jack was extremely frustrated. The young lady had managed to reject every argument he could throw at her. She just couldn't see his logic, and even had the gall to say she couldn't understand Jack's crystal-clear explanations of the gospel. Then the pilot announced that their landing would be delayed. Jack had another chance. He decided to take another approach. He just began to listen to her, occasionally encouraging her to go on talking about her dreams and struggles. About 45 minutes later, when the pilot finally got clearance to land, she turned to Jack and said, "What do you think?" He was stunned. Here he had spent an hour and a half telling her exactly what he thought, and it hadn't worked. What else could he say? He shot a quick prayer heavenward and his heart was filled with compassion for this young woman. "Your problem is the same as mine," he told her. "You're a sinner and you need a Savior." Immediately she burst into tears. "It's true," she sobbed. "I know you're right." Jack concludes, "An hour and a half of apologetics and arguments did not even come close to equaling the force of the simple statement, `You're a sinner and need a Savior.'" [Charisma, Sep 1996. Pages 55-56.]* That is God's simple statement to all of us! You're a sinner and you need a Savior and today He was born! Salvation has come! But there is in that message also:

b. the element of prophecy This Savior is ***Christ the Lord***. He is the Messiah, the One whose coming had been prophesied since the Garden of Eden. He is the One of whom Isaiah said, *For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this. - 9:6-7.* He is the one of whom it will be said, *The kingdom of this world is become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever!* The Messiah, the King, the Lord, the Ruler of the Universe, that's who is born! The world is not going to stay this way forever; the One who will change it all is now born! But there is a third element in this angelic message:

c. the element of immediacy - *today in the town of David* It is not some far distant time; it is not next year or next month. It is right now, today. It has already happened; HE IS HERE! And it's not in some far distant place. It's not in Rome or Alexandria; it's not even in Jerusalem, eight miles up the road. He is born right here in Bethlehem, right where you live! The same message is given to us! The Savior, Christ the Lord, is born and you can reach Him, you can find Him, you can see Him, you can know Him, now, today, right where you are!

So, if you understand that message, what do you think the reaction will be? JOY! In fact, let's look closely at:

2. the nature of the message The angel literally said, ***I announce-good to you a great joy***. The words "bring good news" are one verb, the verb *evangelize* - to announce good news. But the object of the verb is not news, but joy. *I announce to you a great joy!* The message that we have salvation right now in the person of Jesus is itself, not just happy news, but a great joy! *John Duckworth remembers one snowy night when he was a boy growing up in rural Washington state. A handful of church folks had gathered to go Christmas caroling. Instead of walking around the neighborhood, they all climbed onto a flatbed trailer, and a tractor pulled them from farmhouse to farmhouse. Everything was fine until after singing at one place, they circled around the house to leave. At the back of the house, lying*

across the moonlit snow was a downed power line. John was old enough to know that it could be deadly. The men talked about it and decided that the insulation of the trailer tires would keep anyone from being shocked. So they proceeded to drive across the power line. John, however, thought they would all be killed if they did that. Just then the group started to sing, "Good Christian men, rejoice, with heart and soul and voice; now ye need not fear the grave. Peace, Peace! Jesus Christ was born to save. Calls you one and calls you all to gain His everlasting hall. Christ was born to save; Christ was born to save." But John was too scared to even listen to the words, much less sing them. He pulled on his mother's coat and cried, "We've got to get out of here." His mother explained to him why it was all right, but as he stared down at that power line, he just knew they were all going to die. No one was electrocuted that night. The men were right, and so was the carol. Good Christian men rejoice! We can sing in the face of death; we need not fear the grave. We have peace. Another carol says, *"God rest ye merry, gentlemen, Let nothing you dismay, Remember Christ our Savior Was born on Christmas Day, To save us all from Satan's power, When we were gone astray; O tidings of comfort and joy!" [Power for Living, Dec 10, 1995. Page 8.]* It is a message of pure joy! But now notice:

3. the intent of the message There is another wonderful part of the angel's statement. This joy is not just for you; it is not just for certain poor shepherds in fields where they lay. This joy ***shall be for all the people****!* This salvation is not for a few. It is not only for you and your families. It is not only for your friends and the people you know. It is for all of Bethlehem and all of Jerusalem and all of Judea and all of Israel. And Jesus spelled out what it meant more clearly many years later. This message is for Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria and the uttermost parts of the earth. It is a message for all people everywhere and for all the peoples of earth! 1Tim 2:4 says God *...wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.* There is not just a Savior for ME today; there is a Savior for anyone, anywhere and for everyone, everywhere. That joy is not intended for me alone, but for every human being who will claim it! *Joy to the WORLD, the Lord is come, let EARTH receive her king. Let EVERY heart prepare Him room and heaven and nature sing!* No wonder there is such an immense:

4. the angelic reaction to the message - *a great multitude... praising God* The sky (or maybe the hillside itself) filled with shining angels, shouting out, "Glory to God in the Highest"! The angels were filled with joy and shouted it out in praise. We're not told how long it lasted, but since we can hardly sing one song in five minutes, I'd bet it was awhile! Then at last they disappeared and the shepherds were left alone again in the quiet of the night. So now let's examine closely:

II. The Shepherds' Reaction (15-20) They heard and understood the message. But then:

1. they found it true in personal experience The child who would save them was born and they set out to seek him and they found him in the stable, just as they had been told by the angel. They came and experienced the truth of the message; they met the Savior and when they did:

2. they were filled with the joy and expressed it in praise (20) They were just like the angels. They ran all the way back to their fields singing *Glory to God in the Highest!* Joy overwhelmed them; joy filled them to overflowing and poured out of them in rejoicing and praise. However, before they left Bethlehem there is one more thing it did:

3. their joy drove them to share it (17) Literally, **they *made-known-to-others*** the message about this child, that tonight a Savior was born. They went through the inn and told everybody. They went through the streets and told everybody they met. Maybe they knocked on some doors and woke people up and told them. I don't know, but their joy in discovering salvation drove them to share the good news with others, just as the angel had done to them, literally to evangelize. What's my point? Joy is rooted in a personal experience of the Savior, but also:

III. The Point: Joy Is The Driving Force Of Evangelism It is our joy in Jesus, our joy in experiencing salvation, which drives us to be witnesses, to share it with others. That which we joy in is always on our minds and hearts and it comes out of our mouths; we share it! Let's look at:

***The Example Of The Thessalonians* - 1 Thes. 1:6-10** Notice what they did:

1. they welcomed the message and turned to the true God Paul took to them the same message the angel told the shepherds. "You need a Savior and there is One, His name is Jesus" and:

a. they were saved from a life of idolatry They worshiped idols, Greek gods who had no life, who had no ability to help or to save and they were led into a life of sin and debauchery and immorality. And Jesus delivered them from all of that. And they realized that:

b. they were rescued from the wrath to come They were no longer under the judgment of God; they were saved, citizens of the Kingdom. They knew there was no more condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus and because they welcomed the message and received Christ:

2. they were filled with a joy produced by the Holy Spirit The Holy Spirit indwelt them and filled them with an inexpressible and glorious joy (verse 7) And:

3. their joy caused their message to ring out all over It rang out all over Macedonia and Achaia; the whole Greek peninsula was talking about them. Their faith became known everywhere because their joy drove them to share it over and over and over again. And many hundreds came to Christ, I'm sure. You see:

a. you can't stop true joy from declaring its news When they were told to stop preaching and teaching about Jesus, the apostles declared boldly in **Acts 4:20**, *For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.* Why not? Because what they had heard and seen and experienced in Jesus filled them with such a joy that they couldn't help themselves! They had to share it; they were driven! Oh my friend, if you have understood the message of salvation in Jesus and have experienced Him personally, it should fill you with great joy every time you think about it. And it should naturally drive you to share it with others and to joyfully do everything within your power to see that the whole world shares your joy! You see:

b. it is not right to keep joy to yourself In the days of Elisha, the city of Samaria was under a long siege by the Assyrian army. Their food and water were gone and people were starving to death in the city. There was no help in sight. At the city gate were four men who were lepers. They weren't allowed in, I guess, so they sat at the gate starving to death and waiting to be killed by the Assyrians. So finally, one said, "Look, what's the difference? If we sit here, we die. If we go in, we die. Let's go surrender to the Assyrians. If they kill us, we die, but if not, we live!" So that evening they walked to the camp of the Assyrian army and do you know what they found? Nobody was there. In the dark, God had done a great miracle; He had caused the Assyrians to hear the sound of a great army surrounding them for battle and they had fled for their lives, leaving behind everything, tents, food, clothing, horses, valuables. And the starving lepers ran into the first tent and found food and water and you can imagine they began to feast! And they looked around and there were clothes and gold and silver and you can just see their joy grow and grow as they take all that stuff and go hide it. Then, in their glee, they went to another tent and started to do it all over again, when something dawned on them and they stopped. **2 Kings 7:9** says, *Then they said to each other, "We're not doing right. This is a day of good news and we are keeping it to ourselves...* So they went and told the whole city. But did you hear what they said? *Behold I bring you good news of great joy which shall be for ALL the people!* This is a day of good news and we are keeping it to ourselves. We are not doing right! It's not right to be filled with joy and NOT share it! It's not right to have the joy of knowing the Savior and not share it with the world that is starving to death without the news that there is a Savior who has defeated death and sin in a mighty victory.

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The Names Of Christmas

The Name Of Grace: John - Lk. 1:13-17

What really struck me as I was reading through Luke's version of the Christmas story this year was the big fuss that was made over naming babies. It struck me that these names must have been specially chosen for a purpose and I set out to investigate a bit and found that there is some treasure that we can mine from the Scripture through studying in this fashion. You see, we 20th century folks often underestimate:

I. The Importance Of Names In Scripture and in ancient cultures in general.

1. Biblical names were often chosen for their meaning When our kids were born, we got the same book everybody else did, "Name Your Baby", and started down the list, listening for how the names *sounded*. We look at names artistically, as objects of beauty or uniqueness. Many modern names are not translatable or have no identifiable meaning in our own language. The ancients didn't do things that way. They only had one name to begin with (last names are fairly recent). Years ago, my daughter had to do a paper on Justin Martyr, an early Christian apologist. She looked him up under "M" and when I asked why, she said what you're all thinking right now, "because Martyr is his last name!" No, it's what happened to him! Justin THE Martyr! Anyway, they chose that one name carefully and very often based on its identifiable meaning.

2. Biblical names often represent characteristics of the person Parents might name a baby to reflect the circumstances of the birth, their own feelings, gratitude to God, their hopes and prayers for the child and so on. Isaac was named "laughter" because his mother laughed at the announcement of his birth. Esau was named "hairy" because of his hairy body and Jacob was "heel-grabber" because he was born grabbing his brother's heel. Moses was "drawn out" of the water. And so often, the name chosen predicted the personality. Nabal was named "fool" and acted like one, while Daniel, "God is my judge", lived that way in pagan Babylon and refused to compromise his faith.

3. Biblical names are often compounded from God's name *El* means God and is part of Isra-el (strives with God), Dani-el and many other names. *Jah* is a shortened form of Jehovah; for instance, Adoni-jah, "my lord is Jehovah" and El-i-jah, "my God is Jehovah". What a name for the man who confronted the prophets of Baal! Hebrew names are often profoundly spiritual in nature. Moreover:

4. Biblical names carry impact far beyond identification A name is far more than a way to identify somebody or something. One lexicon says: *The name is used for everything which the name covers, everything the thought or*

feeling of which is aroused in the mind by mentioning, hearing or remembering the name, i.e. for one's rank, authority, interests, pleasure, command, excellences, deeds, etc. Genesis says Abraham built an altar and called on the Name of the Lord. But he did more than speak the word; He cried out to the Person and all His excellencies as God. Paul said, *At the Name of Jesus every knee shall bow*. Jesus is the Name above every Name, because His person exceeds all others in glory and majesty and authority. We are told to pray "in the name of Jesus," that is, through the Person and the majesty and the authority of Jesus Himself. And then:

5. Biblical names are often God's means of revealing truth They can reveal the spiritual side of the story. By faith, Abraham would literally become the *father of a multitude*. Moses would literally *draw out* the children of Israel from the deadly waters of Egypt in a mighty Exodus. Naomi, whose name means *my delight* or *joy*, thought she was named wrong and should be called Mara, because her adult life was full of *bitterness*. But God's naming was proved right, when in the end her sorrow was turned to joy through the birth of Ruth's son, the grandfather of King David.

Now with all this in mind, let's look at:

II. The Names Involved In The Story Of The Birth Of John - Lk. 1:5-7, 13 There are three of them. John's father:

1. Zechariah was a priest serving in the Temple, whose name was a fairly common one. There are 31 different Zechariahs in the Bible before this one, including the prophet who wrote the Book that bears his name. It means ***Jehovah remembers***. The word *remember* occurs over 200 times and when God isn't the one doing the remembering, it is usually Him urging us to do it! It is a word that seems to characterize the relationship between man and God. Then there is John's mother:

2. Elizabeth In contrast, her name is fairly unique. Only one other shared her name, Elisheba, Aaron's wife. It means ***my God has sworn [an oath]***. But the word *to swear, to take an oath,* also occurs nearly 200 times and in those days to swear was the means of verifying the truth of something that was said or pledged, much as witnesses are sworn to tell the truth in a courtroom even today. It is a word which points to truth. Then there is:

3. John himself. His name here in Greek is ***Iohannes*** which comes from the Hebrew ***Jehohanan*** or Johanan, names found a number of times in the Old Testament. *Jeho* means Jehovah and *hanan* means grace, so the name means ***Jehovah has graced*** or God has given graciously. The root *hanan* indicates a heart-felt response by someone who has something to give to one who has a need. In one form, it means freely or for nothing. Grace is God giving to us, meeting our need, not based on anything on our part. Interestingly this word is a component of the names of 51 persons in the Bible including, Baalhanan, Elhanan, Hananel, Hanani, Hananiah, Hannah, Hanun, Henadad, Jehohanan, Hohanan, and Tehinnah. The woman's name Hannah has given us Anna, Ann, Nan, Nancy, Anita, and Annette. Johanan has given us John, Jean, Giovanni, Juan, Johann, Hans, Jan, and Ivan in seven different languages! It's the name of grace, the grace of God which responds to our need, not based on anything whatever in us deserving it! Now before we dig further meaning out, let's look quickly at:

III. The Controversy Over The Naming Of John (59-66) Notice first that originally:

1. the name John was appointed by God (13) God sent the angel Gabriel to deliver the special message. He could have just let the child be born without any pre-announcement, but He chose to make clear just who he would be and to give him a specified name. And that point was so strong that:

2. agreement to the name was verified by a miracle (64) When Zechariah was hesitant to believe the angel, he was struck dumb and became unable to speak for nine months. When John was born, nobody could understand why Elizabeth wanted to name him John. He had no relatives by that name and they didn't know anything about who the child would be. But when old Zach wrote the words, not "I want to call him John", but "His name **is** John", his tongue was loosed and he ran around talking 90 miles an hour, praising God. That naming was an act of faith that God insisted on.

3. the point: God intended to send a message through the name! (65-66) And everybody knew it! They all asked, "What is this child going to be? He must be special; God must have his hand on him!" God named the child, "Jehovah has graced". That matters. So, what's:

IV. The Message In The Story Of The Birth Of John Well, first of all there is:

1. a personal message for Zechariah and Elizabeth You can see the word and its synonyms all through this story. To Zechariah, God's message was, ***My grace has remembered your prayers*** **(13)** "I know you've been praying for years about Elizabeth having a baby. You've shed tears over it and at this age you've given up hope and even forgotten. But I haven't! I remember your prayers! And in My grace, I am now giving you a Son! My Grace remembers what's on your heart!" And to Elizabeth, God's message was, ***My grace has removed your shame*** **(24-25, 57-58)** "My pregnancy is an act of His grace. All these years I've been ashamed that I couldn't have a child like other women. I have felt a disgrace before my community. But now in my old age, His grace and favor have shined on me and everybody sees it and rejoices with me!" Oh, she got the message. Jehovah is gracious! He sees my need and He responds to it

out of His great love for me! But that's not only true personally; when it was all over, Zechariah saw that in this act of grace there was:

2. a prophetic message for Israel (67-79) If you look carefully, you'll see that this prophetic message was summarized in their names!

a. Elizabeth signifies that **God swore an oath to Abraham (73)** What oath is he talking about? Look at **Gen. 22:15-18**. God swore by His own self. Men swear by something bigger or holier or more powerful than themselves. God could only swear by Himself as a way of asserting the absolute truth of His promise to Abraham. It was threefold: He would infinitely multiply Abraham's descendants, his descendants would rule their enemies, and through his offspring, all nations on earth would be blessed! Abraham, I'm sure, focused on the first part. Zechariah focused on the second. He was waiting for a Promised Messiah to deliver Israel. We focus on the third; God has sworn that He will touch every people on earth with the blessing of knowing His love! But all three are absolutely true; Elizabeth, My God has sworn it! Then the name:

b. Zechariah signifies that **God continually remembered His oath (72)** Generations upon generations had not seen it fulfilled. It seemed to many that God had forgotten. But as Peter says, *The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness...- 2 Pet. 3:9.* God had never forgotten His promise and He never will. Israel will one day in the Millennium rule over the cities of those who were her enemies! And God has not forgotten that He has sworn to reach all nations. He will one day do that as well. Zechar-iah, God remembers! And the name:

c. John signifies that **God 's grace was now sending the promised redemption (67-75)** God was now, in His grace without any merit on their part, seeing their need and keeping His promise to send the Messiah, who would fulfill the promise. They didn't deserve it. They had been nothing but unfaithful. They were captives to Rome in punishment for their sins. But God was now showing His grace in remembering His promise anyway. And:

d. John was God's grace-gift to prepare for the Messiah (76-79) He would prepare the way for Jesus. He would turn the hearts of the nation to repentance so they would listen to Jesus. He was God's gift to Israel to make them ready for the fulfillment of the age-old promise.

Never knew all that was in a name, did you? Well, there is one more message in all of this:

3. a practical message for us There are three lessons we can remember from these specially chosen names that apply to us. The name Elizabeth says to us that:

a. God's promises are as immutable as His Person They don't change. The Word of the Lord stands firm forever. Look at **Heb. 6:13-19**. God swore this oath so we'd understand that He never lies; He can't lie. His purposes are unchangeable; His promises are immutable, just like Him and we can hang our eternal hope and anchor our soul on them! Everything God has promised us, we'll receive, just like Abraham! Eternal life is ours, an eternity in heaven with Him; all the things encompassed in our salvation are as sure as God is! Eli-zabeth, MY God has sworn it! Then, the name Zechariah says to us:

b. God remembers both His promises and our prayers Oh, how many times have we prayed like Zechariah and Elizabeth, poured out the desires of our hearts and nothing changes. It seems as though God has not heard, that He has forgotten. But the truth is that He never forgets either His promises or our prayers. He hears us. Let me show you. Look at **Rev. 5:8**. That's us, there in heaven, the 24 elders, and look what we're holding: golden bowls full of incense which symbolize our prayers. They are the prayers that the church, that believers, have been offering up for centuries. They are not lost; they are not gone. They are treasured up before Him and look what happens to them in **8:3-4**. Our prayers ascend up before God as a sweet aroma. They are not forgotten, but continually remembered! He is merely waiting for His time and answering in His wisdom. Zechar-iah, Jehovah remembers! And finally, the name John says to us that:

c. God's grace encourages us to come boldly to His throne God is a God of grace. His throne is a throne of grace. He loves to give to His own. He is full of mercy and compassion on us and our situation. He is touched with the feeling of our infirmities. He knows what we're going through and He cares and in His grace, He reaches out to do something about it. Look at **Heb. 4:16**, *Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.* Let's come boldly and with confidence in prayer to the One who is gracious, knowing that His great mercy will feel compassion for our troubles and that His gracious nature will give us the strength we need to face our situation and circumstances! Oh, how little we understand of how precious His grace is!

Lewis Sperry Chafer, the founder of Dallas Seminary, was a man known for his emphasis on and ability to articulate the doctrine of grace. His final lecture on the subject was given on a hot spring afternoon in 1952. He taught that semester from a wheelchair and that afternoon mopped the perspiration from his brow. No one in the class moved as the session ended. It was as though the young theologians were basking in what they had heard and were awestruck with the

professor's insights and enthusiasm about God's matchless grace. The gray-haired gentleman rolled his chair to the door and as he flipped the light switch off, the class spontaneously broke into thunderous applause. As the beloved theologian wiped away his tears, head bowed, he lifted one hand, gesturing them to stop. He had one closing remark as he looked across the room with a gentle smile. Amid the deafening silence he spoke softly, "Gentlemen, for over half my life I have been studying this truth...and I am just beginning to discover what the grace of God is all about." Within three short months this champion of grace was ushered into his Lord's presence at the age of 81. (Swindoll, The Grace Awakening, p. 57-58) Oh, just look at the God who would hear and remember the prayers of an aging childless couple and give them a little boy named John. Just look at the God who would remember his 1800 year-old oath and send the Christ He had promised to redeem His people. Psalm 48 says, *This God is our God forever!* The God who is full of grace and truth invites us to come Him and trust Him. He's promised, He remembers, and His grace will see us through every time of need.

The Names Of Christmas

The Name Of Salvation: Jesus - Mat. 1:21

Last time we saw that in the story of the birth of John the Baptist, the names really tell the story: Elizabeth, Zechariah, John. God had sworn an oath to Abraham; God remembered His promise and by grace, was sending His Son to fulfill it. Well, the names in the story of the birth of Jesus are no less interesting and hold no less meaning for us. People have often wondered why God chose Mary and Joseph to be the parents of His Son. We have surmised that it is because they were the purest, sweetest, most righteous, most perfect and faithful couple available in Israel at that time, but the Scripture nowhere says that. We'll never know exactly why God gave Mary the privilege of being the most blessed among all women to bear His son, but one thing you can't miss, if you think about it, is that God very carefully selected:

I. The Names Of The Chosen Couple First, there was a young lady by the name of:

1. Mary - Luke 1:26-27 You would expect God to choose someone with a name that means "beauty" or "purity", wouldn't you? But oddly enough, the name Mary means ***rebellion***. Now please understand that I am not intending to say anything bad about Mary or to malign her character. She was clearly a very humble and spiritual person. Her name was likely the very opposite of our character, but I believe that God set it up that way deliberately to teach a lesson! The name Mary in the Greek is Mariam or Maria, which is from the Hebrew name Miriam. Now you'll remember:

a. it was first worn by Miriam, the rebel She was Moses' sister and at one point, she and Aaron started to rebel against Moses' leadership. **Num. 12:1-2**, *Miriam and Aaron began to talk against Moses because of his Cushite wife, for he had married a Cushite. "Has the LORD spoken only through Moses?" they asked. "Hasn't he also spoken through us?" And the LORD heard this.* She was inciting the people against Moses and asserting her own leadership as God's appointed! She rejected God's choice and command. And God sat on her pretty hard for it and gave her temporary leprosy, which cured her rebellion. That pictures for us the name Mary, one who rebels against the authority of God. So why did God choose someone named "rebel" to be the mother of His Son?

b. it reminds us that God sent His Son to His enemies Mary is, in this sense, a stand-in for the whole human race. God didn't send His Son into a world of wonderful people who loved Him and were trying their hardest to obey Him. He sent His beloved Son into a race of sinners who had rebelled against Him. Paul puts it like this in **Rom. 5:8,10**, *But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us...when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son...* God sent His Son into the arms of a world of rebels, some of us nicer, like Mary, and others really noticeable, like Barabbas**,** but all rebel sinners who have chosen to pursue their own way instead of yielding to God's authority. And:

c. it enhances the meaning of the miracle of Christ's birth: (34-36)

Oh, just think about this for a minute:

(1) God's Holy Son was placed within the womb of a sinner by an act of the Spirit Again, that is no inference against Mary's character, but she was a sinful human being, a rebel like the rest of us! And Almighty God placed His holy, pure, spotless, sinless Son inside her body. How could that be? It was an act of the Holy Spirit, we're told! The Spirit's presence could hallow the spot, if you will, and make it a fit habitation for the Son of God! Holy God took on human flesh, but spotless, pure, sinless human flesh, in the womb of a rebel child of Adam by a mighty act of the Spirit. Isn't that wonderful? But guess what? It pictures another truth:

(2) God's Holy Son will come to indwell the soul of a sinner by an act of the Spirit today Think about it! As a human being, you were a rebel, a sinner deserving punishment, an enemy of God and impure. But when you called on Jesus to save you, a miracle happened. The holy, spotless, sinless, Son of God literally came to live inside you. The Holy Spirit caused you to be literally born again. A brand-new spirit, pure and holy, was born inside you, and Jesus Himself came to live in your spirit and joined Himself to it! What a miracle of God! Look what Paul says in **Col. 1:25-27**. My friend, if this miracle hasn't happened to you yet, it can happen today. You're a rebel, but the sinless Son of God will come to live in you and save you from your sins, on one condition. You see, the meaning of Mary's name:

d. it enhances the importance of Mary's (*the rebel's*) submission (38) Symbolically, Mary, the rebel, has to say yes, to submit to God's will and authority in order to receive this precious gift. And that's God's condition. Every rebel must bow the knee, must say yes to receiving God's gift of eternal life. So must you!

But Mary's name is not the only one to hold meaning. Let's look at Mary's fiancé:

2. Joseph His name was fairly common; it is worn by five men in the Old Testament and five in the New. It means ***He (Jehovah) will add*** and it was first given to a baby way back in the book of Genesis. There:

a. it expressed Rachel's hope to add another son A baby war was going on between the two wives of Jacob and at long last, beloved but barren Rachel had a little boy and here's the record in **Gen. 30:22-24**, *Then God remembered Rachel; he listened to her and opened her womb. She became pregnant and gave birth to a son and said, "God has taken away my disgrace." She named him Joseph, and said, "May the LORD add to me another son."* Her heart had a hope, a wish for another son, "may He add", but the name itself is future tense, "He WILL add!" It's an expression of faith, "God WILL do more for me!" And it became prophetic of little Joseph's life.

b. it foreshadowed her son's odyssey to the throne Listen to the Psalmist summarize it for us in **Ps. 105:17-21**, *[God] sent a man before them-- Joseph, sold as a slave. They bruised his feet with shackles, his neck was put in irons, till what he foretold came to pass, till the word of the LORD proved him true. The king sent and released him, the ruler of peoples set him free. He made him master of his household, ruler over all he possessed,* God told Joseph in the beginning of his young life in a dream, "You will rule; all will bow down to you. You may be lowly now, but I will add to you; I will increase you". However, next came long years of slavery and disappointment, of being nothing, even of false accusation and two years in prison, but the whole while, his name served as God's reminder, "I will add to you!" And at long last, He did and Joseph sat on the throne of Egypt at the right hand of Pharaoh ruling over the whole Kingdom! And Joseph's life, of course, is one of the clearest foreshadowings we have of Jesus in the Old Testament. So God sovereignly chose that His earthly father would bear that name because:

c. it reminds us of the royal destiny of Jesus He will start out a lowly baby born in a stable, but Jehovah will add to Him, Jehovah will increase Him until He sits on the throne. Look at **Lk. 1:32-33**. This son is the Royal Son, the Son destined to rule on the Throne of David forever and ever. Jehovah will add to Him, will give Him that Throne. Isaiah said it like this in **9:6-7**, *For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.*

The name Mary reminds us of the glory of the Incarnation of Jesus; the name Joseph reminds us of the glory of the Exaltation of Jesus, but there is one Name that is more important than both, one name that the Scripture says is above every other name:

II. The Name Of The Christ Child Himself. It was not only given to Mary directly by the angel Gabriel, but it was later given to Joseph in a dream in **Mt. 1:21**, *You shall call His name Jesus.* You would expect it to be unique, a name that nobody else shared, but actually, it is one of the most common names in Scripture, even as the name *Jesus* is common in the Spanish world today. Jesus in Greek is *Iasous*. Others in the New Testament bore this name. It is the Greek form of the Hebrew *Jehoshua.* Do you recognize the compound with Jehovah? It's short form is *Joshua* or *Yeshua*, which is found all over the Old Testament.

1. its meaning is *Jehovah is salvation* *Yasha* means to save or deliver. Jehovah is salvation. Maybe it's such a common name because it's such a common fact. Jehovah saves! Notice that it was a name worn by a couple of very important people.

2. it was worn by Joshua, captain of the Lord's host Joshua was the man God had chosen to lead His people into the Promised Land. He was the captain of their armies, the leader of the host of Israel, the Lord's host. And the night before he led the army into battle, he had a strange visitor, **Josh. 5:13-15**, *Now when Joshua was near Jericho, he looked up and saw a man standing in front of him with a drawn sword in his hand. Joshua went up to him and asked, "Are you for us or for our enemies?" "Neither," he replied, "but as commander of the army of the LORD I have now come." Then Joshua fell facedown to the ground in reverence, and asked him, "What message does my Lord have for his servant?" The commander of the LORD's army replied, "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy." And Joshua did so.* Who was that man who so suddenly appeared? It was Jesus. Joshua met Joshua! He said, "I know you're the Captain of the Lord's army, but I'm the real Captain who saves and delivers! That name Joshua, Jehovah is salvation ***pictures Jesus, the Captain of our Salvation - Heb. 2:10***, *In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author [KJV Captain] of their salvation perfect through suffering.* He's the Captain, the Commander who led the way to glory for us by His suffering on the cross. He marched up Calvary's Hill and took it for redemption. He stepped out of the Tomb victorious

and ascended to Glory and we follow behind the mighty Victor in His train, His triumphal procession of soldiers! But that name was also:

3. it was worn by Joshua the High Priest When the Israelites got back from captivity and it was time to reconstruct the Temple, there were two men who led them, a governor named Zerubbabel and a High Priest named Joshua. Joshua would not only lead in the building, but would have a glorious future. Listen to **Zech. 6:11-13**, *Take the silver and gold and make a crown, and set it on the head of the high priest, Joshua son of Jehozadak. Tell him this is what the LORD Almighty says: `Here is the man whose name is the Branch, and he will branch out from his place and build the temple of the LORD. It is he who will build the temple of the LORD, and he will be clothed with majesty and will sit and rule on his throne. And he will be a priest on his throne. And there will be harmony between the two.'* He'll be the priest who offers the sacrifice and the king who sits on the throne. Who's that talking about? ***It pictures Jesus, the High Priest of our Salvation - Heb. 8:1-2****, The point of what we are saying is this: We do have such a high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by man.* Jesus made one sacrifice for our sins forever on the Cross, offered Himself for us and that made the way into the Holy of Holies, where He sat down on that Mercy Seat, that Throne in Heaven to rule as a Priest on His Throne; He was Sacrifice and Soldier, Redeemer and Ruler. And in fact, His very name:

4. it indicates that our salvation is found in Him alone - Acts 4:12, *Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.* Jehovah is salvation and Jehovah is Jesus. There is no other Name, there is no other Person, who can save. He alone is the Savior. *Charles Lowery tells this tale of the supermarket: "A lady was in a hurry to get groceries, and she put her son in the cart and told him to be quiet. As she hurried along, putting stuff in the cart, the kid spotted some chocolate chip cookies. He said, `Mom, please may I have some?' She said, `No! I told you to be quiet.' About four aisles over, the kid asked if he could just have a few chocolate chip cookies. Again she told him no and to be quiet. About the sixth aisle, he asked, `Mom, could I have just one cookie?' Again she said no, popped him, and told him to hush or she'd have the manager put him in the big freezer. When they got to the checkout, the lines were long. The mother glanced down and saw a gleam in the little boy's eye. She knew something was coming, but she didn't know what. All of a sudden this little kid stands straight up in his seat, lifts his hand straight toward heaven, and in his loudest voice hollers, `In the name of Jesus, give me some chocolate chip cookies!' The surrounding shoppers erupted in applause, so he said it again. More applause, and with everybody clapping, the mother didn't know what to do. So she ran and got a bag of chocolate chip cookies. The story's cute but what's the lesson? **When you come to the checkout of life with no resources and no hope, there is only one name that has power--the name of Jesus!** The Bible says that Jesus is the only name whereby we can be saved. **Make sure you know that name**." [SBC Life, Nov 1995. Page 14.]* Salvation is in Jesus! Then in closing, let me tell you something I didn't know about that name:

5. it was worn by Barabbas, the rebel released in His stead Look at **Mt. 27:16-17**. A good minority of the ancient manuscripts record two names for Barabbas, just as Simon was also called Peter and is often referred to as Simon Peter. Barabbas' original name was likely also Jesus. It may be that many later copyists left it out from reverence for our Savior! But listen to the question in the NRSV and NEB, *"Whom do you want me to release for you, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah?"* Symbolically, ***it pictures our choice.*** Who is Jesus going to be to you? Is He, *Jesus Barabbas (bar-abbas* means *son of a* father), a human being, maybe a great teacher or a figure of history, a person to respect and remember and imitate? Let me tell you, that Jesus bar-abbas is a murderer and a rebel. Jesus as a mere man is a false hope for salvation that has killed many. Or will you have *Jesus called Christ (the Anointed, the Chosen)*, the One who died for your sins on the cross, the Messiah of God who now sits on the Throne of Glory?

Jesus! His very name tells the story. Jehovah is salvation. Jesus is the Only Savior. There is no other Name but His in which you can trust!

The Names Of Christmas

The Name Of Deliverance: Christ The Lord - Lk. 2:11-12

We've been studying the fact that the names of Christmas tell the story. *Mary* reminds us that God sent His Son into a world of rebel sinners. *Joseph* reminds us that God will add to Him the Throne of David and He shall reign. And *Jesus* means Jehovah is salvation. In that baby, Jehovah was saving the world. Now today let's move beyond personal names to study:

I. The Titles Of Our Lord Jesus Christ Look at what the angel announced to the shepherds in **Lk. 2:11-12**. They proclaim a Savior which is Christ the Lord. Those terms have become so familiar to us that we often forget their meaning. In fact, 81 times in the New Testament, Jesus is called *Lord Jesus Christ*, and 5 times, *Jesus Christ Our Lord.* Just as in the Old Testament we have the *Lord God Jehovah.* We use these terms so often that we think of them almost as though they

were personal names, but in fact, two are not; they are titles. Look at **Acts 2:36**. God invested Jesus with both a title and an office:

1. Jesus - His Personal Name - *Iesous* which means ***Jehovah Is Salvation***. We talked about His name last time. This is His human, individual, identifying, proper name, just like mine is John and yours is whatever. The Father gave His personal identifying name as Jehovah or Yahweh. The Jews treated it as too sacred to pronounce, which is why we're not sure how the vowels should be today! They would always say, *Adonai* (Lord), much as the disciples would come to Jesus and would call Him:

2. Lord - This is **His Royal Title - *Kurios*** which means ***the Supreme One***. Titles have to do with right of ownership and possession. Of course, we don't have lords anymore, at least where we live, so it's hard for us to grasp the depth of this. When we hear of some British guy who is Lord Fauntleroy or something, we think it's just a stuffy old prim and proper title thing. But to help get a grasp of the ancient meaning, I want you to think back to the days of Robin Hood, to medieval England and what was called the feudal system. Lords were landowners, rich and powerful, with their own armies and with great authority. The king was the lord over the other lords, the most powerful lord with the biggest army and everybody else was a serf, a peasant, a landless servant. All his land, his defense and his privileges were provided by his lord and in return, he owed his lord absolute loyalty and service. Certainly, a lot of that goes against our modern American individual-centered ideas, but you need to know that when you call Jesus Lord:

a. it denotes the right of ownership and possession He owns you; you belong to Him. You are not only His creation, but He bought and paid for you on the cross with His life. You were bought with a great price. So you have no right over yourself; you are not your own. And when you call Him Lord:

b. it denotes the right of decision and disposition As Lord, He has the right to dispose of what is His as He sees fit; He has the right to do with you and your life as He pleases. What He's chosen to do is to make you His child and heir and exalt you to His throne to reign with Him forever, however He has also has the right to allow suffering and difficulty to come into your life, to change the course and direction of your circumstances, to mold and shape you into His image any way He chooses. You have no rights to your own life anymore. You are a servant; He is Lord. And when you call Him Lord:

c. it demands the response of loyalty and submission Your Lord gives you everything; you owe Him everything. Your response is to be that of absolute loyalty and complete submission to His orders. And that's what He asks. **Rom. 10:9** says, *...if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.* Salvation doesn't come any other way. The price was paid to purchase you. You either bow the knee to Jesus as Lord and lay yourself at His feet with a thankful heart and give up all right to yourself, or the deal's off; no salvation. *Joe and Sally were new Christians, but they were both illiterate. Joe got involved with a group of men in the church. They were working on a building project. All the guys had red shirts that they wore when they were working, so Sally made one for Joe. When he came home the first day he wore his new shirt, Sally could tell he was disappointed. He told her he liked the shirt real well, but his didn't have a message on it like all the other guys' did. Sally figured that was easy enough to change. That night she stitched three words onto the back of Joe's shirt. Since she couldn't read, she just copied the letters from a sign she could see in a store window across the street from their apartment. Joe wore it the next day and came home bubbling over with joy. He reported that all the men really liked what it said on his shirt because it was such a good description of the changes they had seen in his life recently. Can you guess what words Sally had sewn on the back of his shirt? "Under New Management." [Double Bind by Rod Cooper. Zondervan, 1996. Page 112.]*

You see, there's a new Owner! The baby born that night is Lord; in fact, He is King of Kings and Lord of Lords! He is the Supreme Lord and His position demands your prostration at His feet! But He is even more. He is:

3. Christ - This is **His Divine Office**. An office is a position given to a person with a view to a duty or function, such as President, chairman, CEO, or chief. Jesus is God's appointed Christ. But what's that? ***Christos*** is the Greek word for the Hebrew word ***Messiah*** which means the ***Chosen, Anointed One***. In order to understand this concept, we must remind ourselves of:

a. the ancient promises of One who would come Beginning way back in the Garden, God made a promise of:

...the Seed who would crush the Serpent's head - Gen. 3:15, *I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring {Or seed} and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel."* God said, "I will send one of your offspring, one man who will crush Satan and destroy him and his work once and for all." And so began that expectation which the Jews had of One who would come. The promise is mentioned all over the Old Testament. Moses spoke of:

...the Prophet like Moses - Deut. 18:15, *The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him.* One day a Greater Prophet than Moses would come, One to whom the would indeed finally listen! John records that the crowds asked John the Baptist, "Are you THAT PROPHET?" He said "No", but when Jesus multiplied the loaves, the crowd said, "Surely this is the Prophet

who is to come into the world." They knew One man was coming, One prophet greater than Moses, doing greater miracles than He did. Jesus WAS that prophet. Then David spoke of:

...the Priest after the order of Melchizedek - Ps. 110:4, *The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind: "You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek."* One would come who would be a High Priest greater than Aaron, who would be of an entirely new order, who would not make atonement with the blood of bulls and goats, with sacrifices and burnt offerings, but would accept the body that had been prepared for him and do the perfect will of the Father and offer himself! Jesus was that Priest! The Jews weren't too big on that promise, but they were always talking about:

...the King who would rule on David's Throne We read it last week in **Is. 9:6-7**, *For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever...* God had promised a New King, one far greater than any earthly monarch, who would reign forever and set the whole world straight! Jesus was that King!

Oh, the Messiah would be Prophet and Priest and King, One Man, God's Man, to change the world, and for centuries upon centuries this expectation had been developing and growing. By the time of Jesus' birth, it was very clear in Israel. You can see in the New Testament:

b. the current expectation of the Coming One Look at John 1 with me. As soon as Philip had met Jesus, he ran home to find his friend Nathanael and look what he said in **John 1:45**. And when Nathanael met Jesus and believed in Him look what he said in verse **49**. Everybody expected the Coming One. The Messiah would have two characteristics:

(1) the Christ would be the Son of God He would be more than a mere man. He would be the Son of God, a being greater than any mere human, a miracle-working, powerful One who would share the essence of God. Even Peter said it, when Jesus asked him, "Who do you say I am?" Peter declared in **Mt. 16:16**, *"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."* He would be the equal of God, one with Him, and:

(2) the Christ would be the King of Israel, the one who would lead Israel to independence, throw off the yoke of the brutal Roman oppressors and establish the Kingdom of God on earth. The mob around the cross taunted him with it in **Mk. 15:32**, *Let this Christ, this King of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe."* Even they knew that the Christ would be the true King of Israel. All this was wrapped up in the office of Messiah which was given to Jesus.

But now, let's look at:

II. The Mission Of Our Lord Jesus Christ - Lk. 2:11 The angel called him something else, **A Savior**. The Greek word is ***soter*** which means "one who saves". *Savior* is a term borrowed from Greek and Roman society. Thayer says, "The name was given by the ancients to deities, especially tutelary [or guardian] deities, to princes, kings, and in general to men who had conferred signal benefits upon their country…" An army general or the Emperor himself would be called *soter*, savior of the people. Even Chairman Mao liked it in our time! But the angel said, "Tonight the true Savior is born..." So, what are:

1. the implications of the term Savior Well, a Savior is:

a. one who rescues you from death or destruction You're about to die, to be destroyed. You're hanging onto a tree branch in a flood with the water dragging at your body and your hands slipping, about to die, and somebody in a boat comes over and drags you in and saves your life. That's a savior. Or a savior is:

b. one who frees you from suffering or misery You're captured as a hostage and you live as a prisoner, a slave. There is nothing you can do to help yourself. You are tortured, impoverished, and someone stages a rescue effort. They break into your circumstances and carry you off. You are liberated, freed from your suffering. That is a savior. Or a savior is:

c. one who protects you from potential harm or danger, one who is your protector and guardian, in modern parlance, your superhero, who is always there to stop you before you take that misstep, to shield you from that out-of-control car, to make sure no bad guys break into your house. That would be a savior.

All these things are what Israel was expecting in their Messiah, one who would save them from death, release them from the suffering of servitude and protect them evermore. But here's:

2. what Israel failed to understand about the Savior They could not see what John and Jesus both tried to tell them, that:

a. spiritual deliverance must precede physical Here's what Peter preached to the crowd of Jews gathered at the temple in **Acts 3:18-20**, *But this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Christ would suffer. Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing*

may come from the Lord, and that he may send the Christ, who has been appointed for you--even Jesus. Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the Promised Savior, and He will come and bring that kind of deliverance to Israel, but first there must be repentance! First, Israel must turn her heart to God and find forgiveness of sins! And then He will return as that conquering deliverer they were expecting. In **5:31**, Peter adds, *God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel.* The spiritual must precede the physical! Christ came into the world this first time for a spiritual purpose, which was made absolutely clear in his birth announcement:

b. Christ came as a Savior to free us from sin - Mt. 1:21, *...you are to give him the name Jesus [Jehovah is salvation], because he will save his people from their sins.* Jesus' birth is not about saving us from our troubles or setting us free from our circumstances. That's not the kind of salvation He came to accomplish this time. Heb. 9:28 says, *so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.* The first time He came as a Savior from sin; the second time He will appear to bring physical deliverance to His people and change the world as the prophets said.

But many people have this same mistaken idea even today. They want to come to Jesus because they're in danger and they're scared and they want Him to rescue them, or because they're miserable and they want Him to change their circumstances and alleviate their suffering, or they want Him to guard them from all harm. But that's not how it works. He didn't come to fix our circumstances, to alleviate all our secondary problems; He came to deal with our primary problem, to save us from our sins! The real thing that is killing us is not our circumstances, not our suffering and misery, it is our sin! But look at:

3. what Jesus accomplished as our Savior Instead of vanquishing His enemies, He chose to let them nail Him to a cross for us. He bore our sins in His own body on that tree. And by that heroic act of dying in our place, He accomplished three tremendous things:

a. He saved us from the deadly penalty of sin - 2 Tim. 1:9-10 You see, we were going to die. The wages of our sin is death. We were on death row, and not just for physical execution. We were going to die forever, sentenced to eternal death, forever in a place of burning fire called hell. But we have a Savior who stepped in and took our place and in so doing, He destroyed death and gave us life! He put death out of business and broke its power. He took out its sting and its poison so that now physical death is just stepping into heaven for us! 1 Cor. 15:55-57 says, *"Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.* We have a Savior who has saved us from the deadly penalty of sin, but that's not all:

b. He saved us from the dominating power of sin - Titus 3:3-7 We were captive slaves living in bondage. The power of sin indwelt us and ruled us like a cruel taskmaster. Try as hard as we might, we could not overcome its power and get free. But our Savior delivered us in a wonderful way. He started us all over again through a spiritual new birth. He created a new spirit in us that is pure and holy and without sin, one that does love Him and want to serve Him. And He put His Holy Spirit inside that very spirit of ours and joined Himself to us, so that we now have the very power of the Spirit of God available to us to give us the power NOT TO SIN! We're not only justified or pardoned from the penalty of sin by His grace, but we're liberated from the power of sin by the generous outpouring of His Spirit. We're free! We have the power to refuse to sin; sin is no longer our master. That's what our Savior did for us! But there is still more:

c. He will save us from the very presence of sin - Phil. 3:20-21 We're waiting for the Savior to return to take us to Himself, and when He does, the final phase of His saving work will take place. These old bodies that still have the presence and the effects of sin in them will be shed like an old worn-,out coat and we'll be clothed in brand new, glorious, resurrection bodies that are made exactly like His glorious body. And we'll be in a new place, in heaven, where our citizenship is already registered. And, both in us and around us, there will be no more sin anywhere. No more injustice and hatred and wrong desire. Nothing unholy or unclean. We will be safe and protected from the presence of sin forever and ever to enjoy a glorious eternity with Him. That's what our Savior will do for us!

That's why He was born! He is the Lord, the Chosen Messiah, who came to save His people from their sins! *"The Desperate Hour" is a drama written by John Haye. In it there is one very intense scene where a family is being held hostage at gunpoint. The climax of the scene is when Ralph, the young son, is targeted by the gunman, who tells the rest of the family that he will kill the boy if he moves. The intruder is unaware of the fact that the father managed to take all the ammunition out of the pistol. The tension builds as the man points the gun at little Ralph's head. Then the dad quietly speaks to the frightened boy and says, "Son, listen to me. I've never lied to you before, and I'm not lying now. That gun isn't loaded. I'm telling you the truth. The man can't hurt you. When I count to three, I'm going to open the door, and I want you to run out." One, two, three, and Ralph pulls away and runs out the door to freedom. The frustrated gunman stands there just clicking the trigger. There were no bullets. [Pulpit Digest, Sep/Oct 1996. Page 20.]* That little boy is us! Sin held us

hostage and had its pistol pointed at our head to kill us. But by dying on the cross for us, Jesus unloaded the gun. He removed the power of the gunman to control us and opened the door and set us free! He saved us from sin's penalty, power and presence. That's the kind of Savior He is! That's His mission! If you know Him, thank Him and worship Him today. He is Christ the Lord! If not, come to Him and make today the day you experience what it means to have a Savior!

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The Scenes Of Christmas

Scene 1: A Virgin Conceives - Lk. 1:26-38

The Christmas Story is probably one of the most familiar portions of Scripture to us. We've heard it read every year since we were children. In fact, it is so familiar that we often hear or read it without thinking much about its meaning. Yet it is Act One of "The Greatest Story Ever Told", as George Stevens called it in his classic film, and it is told to us by God Himself in our Bibles through two of the Gospel writers, Matthew and Luke. Unlike many stories, this is a true story in every detail, not an ancient fable or a religious myth, but a story that actually happened in a real time to real people in real places. And God records this part of the Story for us in five distinct scenes that we will look at together over the next five weeks. The first scene occurs probably in spring of the year 5 BC, according to our Gregorian calendar dating, in a tiny village in the northern Israeli region of Galilee called Nazareth. Nazareth was off the beaten path, not near any main road, and most of the 400 or 500 people who lived there probably led common ordinary lives involved with agriculture or livestock. But among them was a teenage girl who was about to become one of the main actors in God's story. Read with me **Luke 1: 26-27**. Let's begin by looking at:

I. The Two Actors In The Scene The first is not a human, but an angel:

1. the angel Gabriel He is one of only two angels actually named in Scripture and we have seen him before. He was sent to the prophet Daniel twice to declare to him important messages about the future of the nation of Israel and the coming of the Messiah. And he was sent in **Lk. 1:19** to Zechariah in the Temple to announce the birth of John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus who would prepare the way for Him. He appears to be one of the most important of the angels, one who is sent to deliver messages of utmost importance and in this case:

a. he was sent by God to deliver an extremely important message, the message of the Incarnation, that God's Son was about to come into the world as a human being to become one of us. God would become a man to save us from our sins! It was the best news, the biggest news, in the history of the world; there could not be a more important message! And notice that to deliver that news, Gabriel:

b. he was sent into a perfectly designed set of circumstances The phrase *the sixth month* reminds us that he was sent exactly at the right time. It refers, of course, to the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, but centuries earlier, God had laid out to the prophet Daniel the exact year in which the Messiah would be "cut off", and Gabriel was sent with his message exactly 30 years before that happened, so that the Scripture would be fulfilled at the exact time predicted. He was sent to Nazareth so that Jesus would be called a "Nazarene" in fulfillment of Scripture. He was sent to a virgin so that Isaiah 7:14, *Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son,* would be fulfilled and he was sent to a virgin betrothed to a man who was of the line of David so that God's promise to David would be fulfilled. Everything about this announcement was specifically designed by God to keep His Word! He's faithful like that, you know! He ALWAYS keeps His Word! He always does exactly what He says He's going to do; you can count on it! Now the other person in this scene is:

2. the virgin Mary And the very first thing we learn about her, even before her name, is that:

a. she was a virgin, in the Greek a *parthenos*, a woman **who literally had not been with a man**, a fact that she herself points out in verse **(34)**. No matter what liberals or nonbelievers may say, Christ's birth was not the result of a pre-marriage tryst between Mary and Joseph or the result of Mary's unfaithfulness to him with some other man. It was a Divine supernatural miracle, something that had never occurred in all of human history, either before or since, a child born solely of a woman with no man involved, a virgin birth! This is one of the most fundamental, important beliefs of the Christian faith, one that has been confessed by the faithful in the creed ever since the time of the Apostles. *I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary...* People today may say, "I can't believe in that; we know it's physiologically impossible!" Exactly, that's the whole point! The virgin birth of Christ is a unique, one-time-only miracle and if you don't believe it, the Jesus you say you believe in is not the Jesus of the Bible, but just another ordinary human being like yourself! We'll talk more about this in a few verses, but also notice that:

b. she was betrothed to Joseph who was of David's lineage Jewish society was patrilineal, that is, descent was counted, property was inherited and all other rights were passed down through the genealogical line of the father. So even though Joseph was NOT Jesus' biological father, in marrying Mary, Jesus would be counted as being from his tribe and his family line, which line goes all the way back to King David. Had she been engaged to someone from the tribe of Benjamin or Ephraim or even to someone from a different family line within the tribe of Judah, Jesus would not have had the right of Kingship. And again, we'll talk more about this in a moment, but it's amazing to

note that Mary was both a virgin AND engaged to a man from the right family, both of which fulfilled God's promises! He really DOES keep His Word!

Now let's move on to look at:

II. The Great Announcement Made By The Angel in verses (28-37) Of course:

1. Mary was greatly disturbed and confused by his greeting (28-29) Notice that it was Gabriel's greeting, rather than his appearance, that troubled her, so maybe he came in a rather ordinary human-like form instead of some glorious appearance. Yet, having been trained in the Scriptures from childhood, she couldn't have helped noticing that his greeting:

a. it was like the Angel's greeting to Gideon In **Judges 6:12** the angel of the Lord appeared to call him to be the leader of Israel and said, *The Lord is with you* and then called him something he didn't know he was, *...you mighty man of valor.* Gabriel said the same thing to Mary. It was a sign that she was being called to leadership, called to serve God in some important task. And his greeting:

b. it indicated that she was the most blessed of all women If you're reading the KJV this morning, the verse ends with, *Blessed art thou among women.* If you're not, that phrase is hidden in tiny print in a footnote. That's because the phrase is missing in two of the oldest Greek manuscripts we have, yet it appears almost unanimously in all the other existing manuscripts. So I think the angel actually said those words and that's confirmed by it being restated in verse **(42)**. I think Mary was shaken by being told that she was the most blessed of all women. The word *blessed* essentially means *happy* and the angel's greeting literally translated is, *Rejoice!* "Rejoice Mary, God has made you the most happy woman of all time in the whole world!*"* Wouldn't you be confused? "Who me? Why would God say that to me? What could He possibly want with me?" So, gently:

2. Gabriel calmed her fear and reassured her of God's favor (30) "There's nothing to be afraid of. God has taken notice of you; He has seen you. He has seen your heart and your life and He is pleased with you. He is for you; you have His special favor. And He wants to use you in a special way." And then:

3. Gabriel told her she would conceive and bear a Son (31) She was not being called to serve God by leading an army like Deborah the Judge, or to influence a Kingdom like Queen Esther. She was called to conceive, carry and deliver a baby and to raise Him as His mother. Only it was not just any baby, but one very special baby. Look at what Gabriel tells her about Him. First:

a. He will be named Jesus, which means **"Jehovah** or Yahweh **is Salvation"**. This child will be the Savior, the Deliverer, in Jewish terms, the Messiah, the One who will save and deliver His people. Gabriel went on to say that:

b. He will be great (32) He will be greater than Abraham, the father of the Jewish nation, greater than Moses, the great lawgiver and deliverer, greater than David, the greatest King Israel ever had, or Solomon, the richest and wisest King. Like His Heavenly Father, He will be *greater than all* because:

c. He will be the Son of the Most High, not the son of Joseph, not the son of Mary, but look at **(35b)**. He will the very Son **of God Himself**. Now let me be very clear about this. In Jewish thinking and parlance, a father and a son are of the same nature; to be the Son of God was to actually be EQUAL with God. John 5:18 explains that the Jews wanted to kill Jesus ...*because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God*. "Mary, you're going to have a baby, a baby who is greater than anyone else who ever lived, a baby who is God Himself!" That's the great truth of the Incarnation, that God the Son took to Himself a human body in the womb of a virgin and was born as a man! Jesus was not merely a great religious leader whose teachings would change the world, not merely a great prophet who would do great miracles and help people; He was God Himself, the second person of the Trinity, the eternal Son come down to be one of us in a human body! How shocked Mary must have been! But now go back to verses **(32b-33)** where Gabriel adds that:

d. He will be the the long-awaited King from David's line God had made David a promise that was to stand for all time. He said that his kingdom would endure, that he would never lack a son to rule. God said through Jeremiah, *"For thus says the LORD: David shall never lack a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel - 33:14.* And Isaiah said, *For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.* - **Is. 9:6-7**. Jesus will be that Messiah and King that Israel has been waiting for all these years and:

e. He will rule over Israel and over all God's Kingdom forever He will be the eternal King who will rule the world for eternity! That's who Jesus is, the King who is coming one day soon to judge the kingdoms of the earth and set up a kingdom that will never be shaken. Instead of using His Name in vain, we ought to bow trembling before Him!

What a message Gabriel delivered! "And Mary, of all the women who ever longed for this privilege, God wants YOU to be His mother! Rejoice! What amazing grace God has given you!" It's hard to imagine all that Mary must have felt when Gabriel told her this. But what she expresses is confusion in verse **(34)**:

3. she was confused as to how she could conceive without a man and rightly so. She's not doubting what God was going to do, only asking how He was going to do it. So Gabriel graciously explained to her that:

a. His miraculous conception would be an act of the Holy Spirit (35) Throughout the Old Testament, when the Holy Spirit came upon someone, He would take control of their tongue and speak through them or He would infuse them with power in their actions. This conception would happen just like that; it would not be an act of man, but an act of God's power falling upon her and engulfing her like a shadow. And we know from other scripture that:

b. it would be accomplished by God's power creating a body for Jesus in her womb. Look with me at **Heb. 10:5**. God did not want the sacrifice of bulls and goats and animals. He prepared a body for His Son to inhabit, to live a perfect sinless life in, so that He might offer it up as a perfect sacrifice for our sins upon the cross. You see, the Virgin Birth was necessary because:

c. it would make Him completely holy, free from human sin If Jesus got His body from Mary's cells, she was born a sinner. Sin was transmitted to her from her parents, just like it is to us and the body Jesus came to inhabit would have been one tainted with sin exactly like ours, yet Rom. 8:3 says God sent ...*his own Son in the <u>likeness</u> of sinful flesh and for sin*... It was flesh just like ours, but without sin and how could that be if He got it from Mary? The Catholic church recognized this problem and tried to fix it centuries later by declaring a dogma called *The Immaculate Conception*, which says that Mary was conceived without original sin as well, but the Bible says that God prepared a body for His Son. I believe that He created it there in Mary's womb, that Jesus, the eternal Son, came to live in and join Himself to it and because of that, He was absolutely and completely holy, with no trace of human sin. And just in case that answer sounds too fanciful and hard to believe, look what Gabriel goes on to remind Mary:

d. nothing is impossible with God! (36-37) "God even gave a baby to your elderly relative Elizabeth who has been childless all these years and is past menopause! Go check it out! Nothing is impossible with God!" Jesus Himself said to His disciples, *All things are possible with God!* in **Mk. 10:27**, and in Luke, He added, *What is impossible with man is possible with God!* in **Lk. 18:27**. Yes, the Virgin Birth is impossible, but our God can do whatever we consider impossible! Amen?

Now finally, please notice:

III. The Humble Reaction Of Mary (38) I see three things in her reaction. First of all, it is obvious that:

1. she believed what the Lord had told her would happen She didn't doubt and question; she wasn't skeptical. She believed, not only that God COULD do such a miracle, but that He WOULD do it as He said. Elizabeth put it this way when Mary came to visit in verse **(45)**. She believed whatever God said He would do, whatever He promised He would fulfill. Do you? Do you really believe God's Word is true? All of it? Second, I want you to notice how Mary saw herself:

2. she regarded herself as the Lord's servant "I am literally the slave of God. I am here to do whatever He wants." Like her Son, she had the attitude of a servant, "I am here to do Your will, O God, not my own!" Do you? Do you see that you're here simply to serve and obey Him and do what He wants, not to get Him to do what you want? And because she had that attitude:

3. she submitted to the Lord's will without reservation She gave no thought to how this was going to disrupt her plans and her life. She didn't say, "But what about Joseph; he won't believe me! He'll hate me and divorce me!" She didn't say, "But what about all my neighbors; they'll think I've been unfaithful and immoral! They'll never speak to me!" She didn't say, "Wait a minute, I have to think about this!" No, she didn't hesitate for a moment; she said, "Let it be so. I am willing. May God's word and His plan be carried out in my life!" Submission. Saying, "Yes, Lord!" Is that your response when God calls you to do something?

Very few occasions in our lives are as momentous as this one was for Mary; only rarely do those moments requiring drastic obedience with far-reaching consequences come to us, yet they do come. When I was 19 God told me what He wanted to do with my life and my rebellious flesh resisted for six months before I finally fell on my knees and surrendered my life for His use in the ministry. I told Him I was His and He could do whatever He wanted to with me and it changed absolutely everything in my life. If you know Jesus, there will perhaps be a couple of those dramatic life-changing moments in your life too. Yet nearly every day of our lives, the Lord comes to us right where we are with His demand for what He wants to do with us in the circumstances of our lives. He may speak to us about the attitude He wants while we're in line at the grocery store that we don't feel like displaying. He may instruct us to give away some of His money in our account to meet a need when we don't want to. He may demand that we forgive someone who has hurt us when it's the last thing we want to do. He may order us to give up or let go of something or to endure something that's really painful for us. *Alice Smith shares this testimony: "In the spring of 1989, the Lord began to deal with me about taking a sabbatical from selling real*

estate. At the time, I was a successful real estate agent in Houston, Texas. I had experienced a financially profitable year. In the fall of 1989 I went away for a weekend to spend time with the Lord. I knew in my heart He was going to ask some difficult questions of me. As I lay praying on the floor of a hotel room, the Lord spoke to me with such clarity I had never heard before. He said, `Alice, will you give up your real estate business in 1990 and do nothing but minister to me and pray?' I could feel my body tighten as I groaned for an answer. `Lord, I love my work, and I am so good at it,' I answered. Sadly, I could feel a resistance that surprised even me. Again, as He repeated the words, waves of love seemed to roll over me. I cried bitterly to think that there was possibly anything more important to me than Him. He revealed how I was finding my significance in my real estate success. Unsettled, I wept as never before. Then with an indescribable love He gently said, `I gave everything for you; won't you give this to Me?' The dam of resistance inside of me broke and submission flooded my heart. Absolute surrender was my answer that evening. I spent the next two months closing down my real estate business. In 1990, my assignment was simple: PRAY!" [Beyond the Veil by Alice Smith. SpiriTruth Publishing, 1996. Pages 140-141.] When God comes to you with His call to serve Him, your answer will depend on who you think you are. That's why you need to settle now that your answer will always be like Mary's, *I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.* I trust that will be your answer in every circumstance of life and I guarantee it will be worth it.

The Scenes Of Christmas

Scene 2: A Husband Believes - Mt. 1:18-25

The second scene in the Christmas Story is recorded for us in the Gospel of Matthew and it involves the one person who is mostly forgotten in the narrative. Joseph never says one word that is recorded for us. He never utters a "Magnificat" like Mary does so we can hear his thoughts. And after the birth stories, he passes totally off the scene, except for one brief glimpse when Jesus is 12, and even there, he is not mentioned by name, but only included in the phrase, *His parents.* Yet Joseph played a vital role in the birth and the early life of Jesus. Much of:

I. What We Know About Joseph comes from these two verses **(18-19)**. We don't know much else. From other texts we know that:

1. he was a carpenter who lived in Nazareth 30 years later the crowd in Nazareth said this about Jesus in Mt. 13:55*, 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?* That's how we know that Joseph was a carpenter. The Greek word is *tekton*, which can mean a craftsman, a carpenter who worked with wood, or a builder, or even a stonemason. We don't even know what kinds of things he made or built, really. No doubt, he could take rough logs and an adze and a plane and make beams to hold up the roofs of masonry houses or even build the whole house himself. Maybe he made boards which could become part of anything from tables to boats that sailed the Sea of Galilee. Or perhaps he made wagons and wooden plows and yokes for oxen or turned wooden bowls or carved bows for hunting and staffs for shepherds. He was not among the elite and powerful of his day, nor was he among the poor and despised. He was a man with a respected trade and well-known in his community as *the tekton, the carpenter*. Jesus followed Joseph into his trade, as did most all Jewish boys, and Himself became known as a carpenter as well. However:

2. he seems to have died before Jesus' ministry began Mary appears at various points throughout His three years of public ministry. At the wedding in Cana, Mary is there, but not Joseph. On another occasion, she and his brothers came to take him home, but Joseph is noticeably absent. From the cross, Jesus assigned John to take care of her in His place as oldest son, which would indicate that she was a widow. Jesus probably lost his dad sometime between the age of 13 and 30 and was left with being the provider of the family. Maybe some of you can relate to that, but that's another story. However, the fact that he probably died many years before Mary did, seems to indicate that he was perhaps significantly older than she was. So don't imagine two young 17 year-olds in love, waiting to get married. Joseph was likely an older man, established in his business, and verse 18 tells us that:

3. he was betrothed to Mary in an arranged marriage To us, engagement is a young man on bended knee with a ring in his hand asking tenderly, "Will you marry me?" But as sweet as that is, it is not the way marriage worked in Jewish culture, nor the way it works in many, many cultures of the world today. Most likely, Joseph actually "proposed" to Mary's father, "Will you give me your daughter in marriage?" and an agreement was made. She was "pledged" to or betrothed to him, perhaps even some years ahead of time, and they were waiting until the agreed time for her marriage. Or maybe Joseph was a friend of the family and Mary's father approached him as a respected man in the community with the prospect of marrying his daughter when she turned of age. It is very possible that Mary and Joseph didn't really know one another very well at all personally. We simply are not told. What we are told in verse 19 is that:

4. he was a just man, a righteous man, which in the culture of that day means that he was **a devout keeper of the Law**. He was reverent and respectful of God and careful to keep all the regulations and the ordinances God had commanded. You can see it in the few glimpses we have of him. Luke tells us that on the eighth day he had Jesus circumcised and named Him, just as the law says to do. On the 40th day he took Jesus up to the Temple to offer the proper sacrifices commanded in the law, a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons. Every year, Joseph would take his family up to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. These were not things Mary could initiate; they were Joseph's doing. And

they were things not everyone did; they were marks of devotion to the Lord, of godliness in his life and respect for the Scripture. And that's all we know about him; he was a lover of God, a hard-working, well-respected carpenter, betrothed to a younger woman and awaiting that marriage to begin his family. Now let's think about:

II. The Natural Choice Joseph Intended To Make when he learned that Mary was pregnant **(19b)**. You see, for Joseph:

1. the discovery of Mary's pregnancy was sudden and unexplained It is not like Mary ran to Joseph that night after the angel appeared to her and told him the story and how she would be pregnant and he watched this all unfold. That wouldn't have been natural. Rather, she ran to the hill country to her relative Elizabeth, whom the angel had told her was already 6 months pregnant by a divine miracle. It confirmed her faith and she stayed there with Elizabeth and Zechariah for 3 months. So, when she came home to her parents' house again, she was obviously pregnant. They are the ones who "discovered" it and were shocked and shamed. Her father is probably the one who had to take her to Joseph and say, "My daughter has violated our pledge; she is with child." And you can probably bet that even if Mary did explain her vision of the angel to her parents, that her father probably DIDN'T say to Joseph, "You see, an angel appeared to her and this is the only occasion of this kind of supernatural miracle of pregnancy without a father to ever occur...." Joseph was shocked, I'm sure, perhaps angry at first, certainly disappointed, maybe shamed, because it was an act of insult and disregard toward him as he would understand it. Yet verse 20 tells us that:

2. he considered his reaction carefully (20a) He pondered seriously over what to do; He didn't make a rash decision. He certainly couldn't marry her, because in his righteous eyes, she was no longer a virgin, no longer pure. In anger, he could have dragged her before the elders of the town and shamed her and demanded that they enforce the penalty of the law upon her. By law, being betrothed meant they were already married and she could be stoned. Of course, Rome wasn't allowing the Jews to do stonings at this point, but still she could have been publicly humiliated in the eyes of her whole community and he been vindicated as innocent! If he wanted get even, the opportunity was surely there, even if her father may have begged him not to do that. Yet verse 19 says that:

3. he was kind and did not want to publicly disgrace her He was not only a keeper of the letter of the law; he had something of the heart of God. He realized how this event, in his eyes, would ruin her life anyway, how she would always be viewed as an "unfaithful" one, a morally loose woman, and her child as "illegitmate". He thought of the suffering and shame she would have to endure and he did not want to bring that upon her. So, after pondering and praying at length, in his kind heart:

4. he decided to divorce her privately, to go to her father, break the agreement, get his dowry back and let her quietly go on living her life in the shelter of her father's house the best she could, if they would have her. He would separate himself from her; he would simply break the deal and go on. A divorce was the best option he could think of, that is, until God stepped into his life in a dream, perhaps that very night! So now let's think about:

III. The Revolutionary Choice God Called Joseph To Make (20-23) The angel called him to do three things that were absolutely unheard of. First, he was:

1. to accept Mary as his pure virgin wife, to marry her immediately and take her to his home as his wife. But beyond that, he was to believe the unbelievable, to believe that she had not been unfaithful, to believe that God had indeed performed a miracle and caused her to become pregnant supernaturally by His Spirit with no man involved. It was a call to faith. Second, he was:

2. to declare that her son is the promised Messiah/Savior He was to believe that this child from God was the Promised Messiah, the One who was to come and save Israel from their sins. Generations upon generations of faithful Jews had waited and waited for the Messiah to arrive and Joseph was to believe that this child was He! And moreover, in his role as the father, Joseph was to declare this belief publicly by naming him Jesus, that is, *Jehovah (or Yahweh) saves,* And finally, he was:

3. to believe that God was fulfilling His ancient plan Most translations indicate that the angel's words end at verse 21 with a quotation mark. But the Greek text uses no quotation marks, or any other punctuation for that matter, and the particle translated *Now* is a simple connector that often simply means *and* or *moreover*. It makes perfect sense that these are the words of the angel explaining to Joseph, "And all this has happened to fulfill what God had promised through Isaiah 750 years earlier that a virgin would be with child and give birth to a son who would be Immanuel, God with us, and that here and now God is fulfilling that promise in the very body of your betrothed Mary. Believe it!" He was called to believe that Mary was a virgin and that this child was actually God Himself who would now be with us as a man, the two key truths of the Incarnation that Mary was told by Gabriel initially!

To Joseph this was a call to lay down every preconceived idea he had, to accept as God's truth things that were beyond his wildest comprehension. It was a call to lay down all his plans and dreams, all his personal agenda as the carpenter of Nazareth who wanted to start his little family and to embark on a journey of faith that would take him literally to places he never dreamed of. It was a call to choose to be obedient to what God told him to do in spite of all the ridicule and lack of understanding he would face, to stand up and be counted as obedient no matter what, for the glory of God's Name. But

the choice was his; Joseph didn't have to do that. But he did. Look at:

IV. The Choice Of Faith That Joseph Made (24-25) First of all:

1. he accepted all the consequences: *...he took Mary home as his wife* immediately. Before the town probably knew what was up, he married her and took her to his own house. He became her husband and let the questions and the innuendoes and the rumors all fall on him. He rescued her; he gave her valid standing in the community as his wife. Even if they blamed him for fathering the child and moving up the marriage in haste, it didn't matter. He believed God and stepped up and obeyed. Secondly, notice that:

2. he surrendered all his privilege Usually, being married comes with the privilege of enjoying sexual union with one another, but ***...he had no union with her*** until AFTER Jesus was born. Though living together as husband and wife and acting like family, it would be 7 more months before he could experience the physical union he had waited for for years, because he had to protect God's name and reputation in this; there could be no ground for accusation that this was, after all, his natural child. He must be able to swear in full truth to the miracle that he had never touched her. And ladies, in case you don't know this, let me tell you, to a guy, that's a big deal! But Joseph stepped up and said, "Yes God, I'll die to what I want; I'll lay down my plans and my desires. I'll die to self." Hey young people, did you know God calls you today to step up in a similar way! He calls you to abstain, to have no sexual union until you marry. Why? Not only because it's good for you and it's right, but for the glory of His Name! So that you can say to the world, "I'm a Christian and I want to live a life that's holy and pleases God!" And thirdly notice that:

3. he declared his faith How? After the child was born, on the eighth day ***...he gave him the name Jesus***, just like the angel said. Instead of a natural choice like *Joseph Jr.* or naming him after some relative or hero of the faith, he chose to declare that THIS CHILD was the Savior of the world by naming Him Jesus, *the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb*.

Joseph had a choice and he nearly made the wrong one. He nearly went along with the crowd and common sense, but he considered it carefully and once he finally understood God's call on his life, he chose, against everything that stood in the way, to step up and follow Him and be a husband to a virgin mother and a father to the Son of God. Years ago, country singer Brad Paisley put out a music video titled "He Didn't Have To Be". You can watch it on YouTube and cry if you want, like I did. The singer pictures himself as a little boy who was the only son of a single mom. And every time any man asks his mom on a date, they always look inside the house and see that she has a little boy sitting on the steps and they always walk away. One man after the other doesn't want him. Yet one day when he's five, a man comes to call and sees him sitting there and smiles at him and invites him along on their date. That man marries his mother and becomes his father and now, singing as an adult, he celebrates growing up with the love and acceptance of a father who made their house a home and their twosome into a family. And finally, standing there beside him at the nursery window in the hospital, watching the nurse bring out his own newborn son, he sings, *Lookin' back all I can say About all the things he did for me Is I hope I'm at least half the dad That he didn't have to be...you know, he didn't have to be...* What a picture of Joseph! Joseph signed up for something he didn't have to sign up for, to be a husband to a pregnant virgin, to be a father to the Son of God. He chose to be "a dad he didn't have to be" because He believed God and submitted his will to Him, just like Mary did. Oh, there are times in our lives when God calls us to step up and go against the grain, against the culture, even against reason. *Harry Rimmer tells the story of a young man who entered the army. As a boy he had formed the habit of studying his Bible in his bedroom each evening and then kneeling down to pray. He faced a real test the first night in the barracks, for he was surrounded by scores of rough servicemen preparing to retire. Many of them were joking and cursing loudly, so he considered lying down on his bunk, concealing his Bible under the blanket, and reading it so no one would notice. But then he told himself, "I'm a Christian! I must take my stand for the Lord. I won't hide my faith. I'll do just as I did at home!" So the young man took his Bible and after quietly reading a chapter, he knelt and offered a silent prayer. When the men noticed his actions, a few sneered, but in about two minutes the barracks became quiet as some who respected the new recruit hushed the others. He felt like a goldfish in a glass bowl. After a while the talk began again, but the cursing stopped. The next night when he opened his Bible, eight of the other men dug out their Bibles and did the same. Within a month, everyone in the outfit respected that young Christian so much that they would defend him against anyone who would criticize him. Rimmer said, "They brought their troubles and questions to him to be settled, and he influenced more men for Christ than half a dozen chaplains could have moved in a year of Sundays."* He stepped up. He didn't have to, but he did. What is God calling you to step up to? What He's calling you to do may be very different from Joseph. It may seem very big to you or in comparison to Joseph, it may seem like a very small and simple thing in your life, yet it just might change somebody else's life or even the world. Will you be like Joseph and step up?

[NOTE: Scene 3 in the Christmas Story is in the first seven verses of Luke 2, where Mary and Joseph arrive in Bethlehem, go through labor and delivery and Jesus is eventually born, not in hospital or even a house, but in a stable. What a traumatic night that must have been for them! This message was brought by Pastor Rob Lyons and is not available.]

The Scenes Of Christmas
Scene 4: Shepherds Abiding In The Fields - Lk. 2:8-20

Scene 3 very quickly gives way at verse 8 to Scene 4, which takes place in a field outside the town where some shepherds are watching their flocks that night. And again, we have read or heard this scene read so often that we have it memorized as part of the Story. We even watch it in cartoon in "A Charlie Brown Christmas"! Yet we seldom ponder and think about the reality of it. Let's read verse **(8)**. Now how is this ever going to fit into the Story of God sending His Son into the world? What could a bunch of shepherds have to do with it and why do they matter? Well, in order to answer that, it's important that we understand first of all:

I. The Circumstances Behind This Scene You see:

1. there were two deeply held expectations about this place that had been in the heart of every Jewish person for generations. The first was a solid prophecy that:

a. the Christ would come from Bethlehem - Micah 5:2, *"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, [Though] you are little among the thousands of Judah, [Yet] out of you shall come forth to Me The One to be Ruler in Israel, Whose goings forth [are] from of old, from everlasting."* Every Jew knew that. When the wise men showed up later on looking for the newborn King, Herod called together the chief priests and teachers of the law and demanded of them where the Christ was to be born and they didn't bat an eye. They replied instantly, "In Bethlehem of Judea for thus it is written by the prophet..." and they quoted this verse. Everybody knew it! Israel's greatest King, David, was born in Bethlehem and when the one who will rule over the house of David forever comes, He will be born in Bethlehem too! God was keeping an age-old promise He had made. But there was another belief about the Messiah, the Christ, that was also prevalent in that day which was that:

b. he would be announced from *Migdal Eder*. There was a place, a spot about a mile outside Bethlehem on the road to Jerusalem where a small tower stood. It had been there a very long time; Genesis says that Rachel was buried near it. In Hebrew its name was *Migdal Eder* which means "watchtower of the flock". It was **a shepherds' watchtower near Bethlehem**, a stone tower where shepherds could rest or find refuge, but also where they could stand up high and watch over their flocks out in the acres of open pasture on the hillsides. And **Micah 4:8** says, *As for you, O watchtower of the flock [Migdal Eder], O stronghold of the Daughter of Zion, the former dominion will be restored to you; kingship will come to the Daughter of Jerusalem."* Over the years, the Rabbis had interpreted this verse to mean that the Messiah would be revealed or announced, heralded, from this very ancient tower outside Bethlehem. And they had taught it to the people so that everyone knew it. And that's why it was at this very spot that the angelic announcement was made. A hillside full of sheep, a few sleeping shepherds and at least one watching from the top of an old stone tower, that's the grand place God chose to make the announcement of His Son's birth. Why? Because He had promised to do so! He was saying in a way that no Jew could miss, "This baby is MY Christ, MY SON!" But why announce it to shepherds? Well:

2. there were two contradictory facts about these shepherds First of all:

a. they were regarded as ceremonially unclean people They lived out in the fields. They worked with animals. They were often dirty and unwashed and had contact with blood and dead animals. They had no opportunity for ceremonial cleansing and purification that Jewish tradition had come to require and they could not leave their flocks for weeks at a time to go up to the Temple. So they were regarded as perpetually "unclean", as sort of "spiritual outcasts", by the religious elite of their day. And yet, strangely enough:

b. they were entrusted with providing unblemished lambs That's why they were watching over them, even through the four watches of the night, by turns. Instead of bringing them into a fold at night, the sheep were out on the hillside day and night also, being watched so that no accident, no fight, could mar them, no wild animal could attack and scar them. Why? You see:

3. there was a very special purpose for these flocks In these fields between Bethlehem and Jerusalem were the flocks that belonged to the Temple. Every morning and every evening of every day a single spotless lamb had to be offered in sacrifice. That's a lot of lambs! On the feasts and holy days even more unblemished lambs were offered in sacrifice. One source estimates that more than 250,000 sheep were offered every year during the Passover celebration alone in this time. Did you ever stop to wonder where all these thousands of sheep for sacrifice came from? Almost all of them were born and raised in the shepherds' fields near Bethlehem and taken up to Jerusalem for sale. So:

a. the lambs in these flocks were destined for sacrifice in the Temple These poor, simple, unclean shepherds produced an endless flow of spotless lambs that covered the sins of the entire nation. Every male lamb born in these fields was born to die, born for sacrifice. So it is no accident that:

b. it was in this place, to these people, that God's Lamb who would take away the sins of the world **was born and announced**. Unclean people need a spotless Lamb to take away their sins. When John the Baptist saw Jesus, he said, *"Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!* Peter wrote, *For you know that it was not*

with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed... but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. - 1Pet 1:18-19.

A Lamb was born in Bethlehem that night, a Lamb born to redeem a world full of unclean people, sinners every one of us. He was a perfect Lamb without any blemish or spot, with no taint of sin, who would offer Himself as a sacrifice on the altar of the cross for the sins of the world. The shepherds might not have understood it that night, but for us who know the whole story, God's symbolism couldn't be more clear. Now let's look further at:

II. The Event Which The Shepherds Experienced (9-14) Picture it in your mind, a hillside full of scattered sheep, lying down or grazing. A handful of shepherds fast asleep somewhere. A couple of them maybe up in the tower taking their turn keeping watch, struggling to keep their eyes open. Honestly can you think of anything more boring than watching sheep sleep? In the dark, in the middle of the night? I can see myself dozing off, fitfully waking and looking and my eyes creeping shut again. But their sleepy night was interrupted by:

1. the sudden appearance of an angel and an intense bright light all around them. Imagine standing in Lincoln Financial Field in the darkness of a pitch-black night for hours and then all of those banks of bright lights that light it up come on instantly at once with no warmup. What an effect that would be, and this must have been far brighter than that! And in the midst of that blinding, shining light, as they squint their eyes to see, there stands an angel! No wonder:

a. it produced a great fear in them Literally, the Greek says, *they feared a great fear*! They were terrified. They shook; they huddled together. They probably fell to the ground, maybe hid their faces. We would too! No doubt they thought death was only seconds away, but:

b. the angel comforted them His first words were, "Fear not! Do not be afraid! I'm not here to destroy you but to announce good news to you!" Wow, that must have gotten their attention! You can bet they were listening! But there's a second thing they experienced here that we usually read right past:

2. the sight of the glory of God ...*the glory of the Lord shone around them*. All around them in every direction was this brilliant, glorious, bright light they had never seen before, yet they knew what it was! It was the *shekinah*, the glory-cloud of God's presence, "the brightness of the perfection of the all-sufficient God". It has been described as "the sum total of the attributes of God combined together to create brilliant perfect light". It had been seen by their forefathers coming down on Mt. Sinai. They saw it at the dedication of the Tabernacle when *the glory of the Lord appeared to all the congregation* in Num. 16. It was seen when Solomon completed the Temple, *...the cloud filled the temple of the LORD. And the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled his temple. The whole house was filled with the glory-cloud of God's presence and no one could enter! - 1Kin 8:10-11*. It was Israel's great privilege to have the visible presence of her God appear in her midst. But Israel fell deeply into idolatry through the centuries and by this point in time:

a. the *shekinah* glory had not been seen in Israel for 600 years! The last one to see it was the prophet Ezekiel, and that was in a vision where he saw the glory depart step by step, first from the temple, then from the city of Jerusalem itself and when he last saw it in chapter 11, it stood, interestingly enough, above the mountain east of the city, the Mt. of Olives. Then it was gone. Centuries went by and it did not appear again, that is, until this night, until:

b. the shepherds beheld God's glory returning to Israel His Presence was here once more; He had come back among His people! And we know how He came! The baby whose birth the angel announced was Emmanuel, God with us, God in our midst as one of us! John described it this way, *The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.* ***- John 1:14****.* God's presence was coming into the world, His glory was descending to earth in this little baby born in Bethlehem that night and the shepherds experienced the visible manifestation of it, just as their forefathers had in the wilderness, in this glorious light that shone all around them. Oh, how awed they must have been! It was a "take your shoes off; you're standing on holy ground!" moment! And in that moment, they heard:

3. the Divine announcement of the birth of the Savior, the grandest announcement that has ever been made, *I bring you good news of [a] great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you*... It was the greatest news the world has ever heard, God announcing to the human race, "Today I have sent you a Savior!" The event itself is the "great joy". *On Nov. 12, 1918 the New York Times printed an article with these headlines: NATION REJOICES AT WAR'S END; CITY IS JUBILANT; All America, With Pealing Bells and Parades, Celebrates Germany's Defeat.... CITY IS ABLAZE AT NIGHT... NATION REJOICES AT WAR'S END...* World War I was such a painful war; the people of America and Europe had paid such a high price and had so longed for its end that the ending of that war was itself "a great joy" and the news of it ignited tremendous celebration wherever it spread. The news the angel brought this night was that kind of news, news of a great joy, news of an event that is so wonderful, so marvelous, so joyous that it will spark celebration wherever it goes. Yet think who this great joy was announced to:

a. it was given TO these humblest of people To these few poor, despised, unclean shepherds in a lonely field at night. By rights, the whole world should have been assembled there to hear it! All the kings and queens in their array, all the emperors and governors, all the leaders and generals and important people of the earth should have

been present to bow the knee. But God did not choose to announce it to any of them! He chose "certain poor shepherds in fields where they lay!" Why? I think part of the answer lies in **1 Cor. 1:27-29**. When God wants to do something, He often chooses the weakest, lowliest, least likely people to do it through, so that He gets the glory. When He wants to set His people free from slavery, He sends an 80 year old man with a staff; when He wants to slay a giant He sends a shepherd boy with a sling. When He wants to feed a multitude He uses a boy's lunch of 5 loaves and 2 fishes! And when He wants to announce the Savior to the human race, He uses a handful of poor shepherds in a field! Why? So that He gets all the glory! So everybody knows the power is of HIM, not of the instrument! Oh, this night, this is so like God, to make the greatest announcement to the least of people and trust them to share it by His power! You see:

b. it was given to them FOR the whole world It was not intended for them alone. This announcement was for ALL people! And these shepherds were to be His first witnesses to testify to the whole world of the birth of the Savior, so the world would know that the Savior was born this night.

4. the heavenly celebration of the angels (13-14) Suddenly the sky filled from horizon to horizon with angels, not singing, but shouting, *Glory to God! Glory to God! Glory to God!* over and over! Imagine how loud it must have been, how the sound must have rolled across that quiet hillside louder than any thunderclap could be. Why? God gave the shepherds a gracious glimpse, a visual object lesson, that night of what all of heaven was doing, shouting "*Glory to God! Glory to God!*" Millions of angels shouting glory, glory, glory, because God's Son became a man to save us! And when we hear it and believe it and comprehend it, our cheering should be louder than theirs because it is US that He saved by doing it! That great joy is OURS and we should be filled with awe and wonder and thanksgiving and celebrate like all of heaven did. Glory to God!

But now let's come back to earth. What did the shepherds do after this wonderful experience they had been given? What was:

III. The Effect Of Receiving This Good News upon them? Notice three things. First of all:

1. they believed what the Lord had told them (15) They didn't say, "Let's go see IF this thing is true...", but "Let's go see THIS THING THAT HAS HAPPENED!" They KNEW it was true. They went to look for the baby in **FAITH**, believing the angel's words that a Savior had been born that night. And that is also to be our first response when we hear the good news of the Savior. We are to believe the words of the angel as the very Word of God. "This Jesus is YOUR Savior. Believe it!" You are not asked to examine and see for yourself; you are called to FAITH, to believe what God has said about His Son and act in accordance with it by acknowledging Him as YOUR Savior. Then second:

2. they shared what the Lord had told them (16-18) They went out of that stable and shared the good news with everyone they met. Their response to finding the Savior was **WITNESS**; they were the first witnesses of Christ and that is what we who have found the Savior today are! He said, *But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." - Acts 1:8*. The shepherds are a mini-picture of the mission of the church; because our lives have been so touched and so changed, because we have experienced the Glory of God in Christ, we will naturally take the news of that grand announcement into our town and to the very ends of the earth! And finally:

3. they rejoiced in what the Lord had told them (20) Oh, what a meeting there was in the shepherds' camp that night! All the way back to the field they kept shouting, "Glory, glory to God! Hallelujah!" and all night long they shared their amazement and wonder and prayed. Their response was **WORSHIP** and so should ours be, to fall before His feet in wonder and amazement with thankful hearts, to sing with all our hearts His praise, to shout with our voices His glory, because God has sent His Son to be our Savior!

Have you ever thought about the fact that we would never know about that night, we would never know about that grand announcement, except for the shepherds' response of believing, going to see the baby and then being witnesses to everyone. No one else was there. No one else saw that grand sight. No one else heard the Divine announcement, not even Mary and Joseph. No one else could have told the story but them! We know it today because of them! Praise God that night in Bethlehem these shepherds believed and bore witness to us! But the real question is, "Have you believed the message like they did?" Many people have heard moving sermons about Jesus. They have heard others tell of the changes Christ has made in their lives. They can even repeat the angel's words. But they have never believed them and come in faith to Christ themselves and experienced that great joy personally. *Well known author Jill Briscoe says that she was in college before she discovered what Christmas was all about. It was then, she realized, that "God became a baby for me! He came to earth because He knew I needed eternal life; the Christ child was the only way to the Father. I reeled in horror at the realization of how our family's benign neglect must have offended Jesus. I knelt, then lay flat, face down in my college dorm room, crying, `Jesus, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. Help me make good those 18 years!' [Christian Reader, Nov/Dec 1997. Page 92.]* Have you understood that grand announcement was for you? Have you placed your FAITH in the angel's words? Have you fallen before Jesus in sorrow for your sins and taken Him as your Savior? And if you have, are you so taken with Him that you are a WITNESS to others, that you live to bring Him glory by sharing that

announcement of a great joy with others? And is your heart filled with WORSHIP, celebrating continually what God has done for you?

The Scenes Of Christmas

Scene 5: Wise Men From The East - Mt. 2:1-12

Without a doubt, the strangest characters in the Christmas story are the wise men. Their arrival looking for a newborn King of the Jews is truly a puzzling thing. How and why did such an event ever happen? Only Matthew mentions their visit, and that briefly in 12 verses which include very little detail about the wise men themselves. However, out of this tiny bit of information has risen a tremendous amount of speculation and tradition over the years which we tend to perpetuate. For instance, Matthew never said that they were kings. He never said that there were three of them (we assume it from the mention of their three gifts). Tradition has even given them names, Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar, and it has pictured one of them as a black man from Ethiopia. In fact, the Shrine of the Three Kings is a golden sarcophagus behind the high altar of the cathedral in Cologne, Germany which is supposed to contain the skulls of the three wise men, but I rather doubt it. We know so very little about the visit of the wise men and it's best not to try to read in things that God doesn't tell us. However, if we simply look carefully at the picture the Scripture *does* paint of their visit, we will soon enough be amazed by the simple fact that at the birth of Jesus these men actually showed up in the first place. It all began when:

I. The Wise Men Saw A Star (1-2) First off, let's look at:

1. who they were The Greek word translated *wise men* is ***Magi***. From this word in English we get our word *magic* and *magician* and even the word *magistrate*. The term *magi* refers to a particular class or caste of people who were common in the ancient world. They were priestly astrologers, leaders in the pagan worship of their culture. These magi were sorcerers and diviners who studied the heavens, the planets, the constellations, and the movements of stars to see what was written there that concerned the king and the rulers of the kingdom. Every near-eastern culture had it's wise men, it's priestly spiritual leaders who could divine the hand of god, and every king had his own troupe of them. They were not kings themselves, but usually advisers to royalty who knew the "secret arts" of divining the future and exercised special powers. It was this practice of astrology and sorcery, divining the future, that focused them upon the star which heralded Christ's birth. Now look:

2. where they lived They saw the star **in the east**. The Greek historian Herodotus in the fifth century BC said that the Magi were a caste or tribe among the Medes who came to exercise a special function during the time of the great Persian empire. They came from Persia or modern Iran. By the time of Jesus, the land of Israel was the eastern edge, the buffer zone, of the Roman Empire. Everything to the east of it, the remnant of the old Persian empire, was now part of the feared Parthian Empire, enemies of Rome which somehow they were never able to defeat, and so the two empires coexisted in an uneasy truce. Moreover, in 40 BC, Herod was in Rome seeking help and the Roman Senate bestowed upon him the title "King of the Jews". No wonder Herod had a cow when wise men from the Parthian Empire showed up asking about a new King of the Jews! Not only did he respect who they were as magi, but they were also representatives from the enemy kingdom next door! Now let's think about:

2. what they knew They said *Where is the King who was born; We have **seen His star**.* How would they know that? Daniel was counted among the magi of Babylon and was a governor there, even under the Persians. And of course, Esther's story caused many in the Persian empire to become Jews, so the Jewish belief in a coming Messiah King who would rule the world was well known. But, do you remember Balaam, the guy with the donkey who talked? Balaam was one of the magi like them in his earlier time and lived in the same region. He said in *Num. 24:17-19, I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near: a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel; it shall crush the forehead of Moab and break down all the sons of Sheth. Edom shall be dispossessed; Seir also, his enemies, shall be dispossessed. Israel is doing valiantly. And one from Jacob shall exercise dominion and destroy the survivors of cities!"* Likely from this ancient prophecy the wise men knew to look for a star, a sign in the heavens, to mark the time of this coming powerful Jewish King. And they saw it. When?

4. when they saw the star Well, notice in verse **7** that Herod asked the Wise men the exact time when they had seen the star and verse **16** tells us he used that carefully extracted information to decide to kill all the infants in Bethlehem two years old and under, which seems to me to mean that the time they actually saw the star was at least 1 year and maybe nearly 2 years before they arrived in Jerusalem. So, God put this special star in the sky perhaps **a year to almost 2 years before Jesus was born** and some 1200 miles away where they would see it. Now, let's ask:

5. what the star was For centuries, people have tried to explain the star by speculating that it was the special lining up of several of the planets to appear like a specially bright star in the night sky. Others have speculated it was a comet or a supernova. But think about this, if you go outside tonight or any night and pick the brightest thing you can see up in the sky, even if it's a moving airplane, can you follow it? Could you follow it to a small town or to one specific house? No, the regular stars in the heavens are way too high up to point out any specific location. The whole point of this story is that the star was supernatural; it was unlike anything they'd seen before. It was a miracle which God did in the sky

that was closer and brighter and more pointed than any usual light in the heavens. John MacArthur says the only thing in scripture like this is ***the glory of the Lord!*** Do you remember what the shepherds saw on the hillside the night Jesus was born? **Lk. 2:9** literally says, ...*an angel of the Lord [stood above] them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear.* The angel was above them in the sky and the light of the Shekinah glory of God shone, not around the angel up in the sky, but straight down encircling them. It cast its rays down upon them like a circular spotlight so that they and the things around them were lit up. Isn't this what the wise men saw? Not on the same night, but the same thing. What they were seeing wasn't a regular star; it was an appearance of the glory of God, an explosion of God's supernatural light and it shook them so deeply that it moved them to leave their homes and go seek the new King! So where did they go?

II. The Wise Men Traveled To Jerusalem Why? Because it was the capital city of Judea, the land of the Jews, and they thought surely everybody there would know about the birth of the King! It was a long way. You can't go from Persia to Jerusalem in a straight line because the Arabian desert is in the middle. You have to travel up and around it and that is a distance of 1200 to 1500 miles! That's like riding your camel or your horse from here to Miami, Florida and halfway back again! How long do you think that would take? Til you got ready and gathered all the provisions and all the servants you would need for such a long journey and then rode and walked all that way, at least a year would go by, I'm sure. So when did they get there? The night Jesus was born? No! They were NOT there at the stable the night Jesus was born. In fact,

1. they arrived more than 40 days after Jesus' birth How do we know that? Well, immediately after the wise men left, verse 13 tells us that Joseph took Mary and Jesus and fled to Egypt and they never went back to Bethlehem but went to Nazareth instead. Yet **Lk. 2:22** tells us that, *When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses [which was 40 days] had been completed, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord.* They didn't leave for Egypt until after Jesus was dedicated at the Temple. God showed the Wise Men the star at exactly the right time so they would arrive at least 40 days after Jesus' birth, probably in February. So, do you think everybody in Jerusalem was glad to see them when they got there? No! Verse 3 says:

2. their arrival troubled the whole city (3) Why? Because the Roman governor of the Jews:

a. King Herod was a vicious, jealous ruler He had a total of 10 wives and 15 children. One of his wives he murdered and when her two sons found out, he had them both put to death. He killed all the male infants in the family who might have any legal claim to the throne. He crushed any sign of revolt against his authority. They used to say about him, "It is better to be Herod's sow than his son!" So when three wise men came talking about a newborn "King of the Jews", you can bet he was really upset! And when Herod was unhappy, EVERYBODY was unhappy, because they were afraid of him and what he might do. But nobody had heard anything about a Messiah King being born, so Herod asked the Jewish priests where He was to be born according to the Scriptures and:

b. they learned that Messiah must be born in Bethlehem (5-6) because that's what **Micah 5:2** said, *You, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, ...from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel*. So Herod told the Wise Men to go and look for the newborn King in Bethlehem, but do you think Herod was going to join them in worshipping Him? Not at all!

c. Herod planned to use them to destroy Jesus (7-8) He was crafty. Instead of arresting the Wise Men or sending soldiers with them to Bethlehem, He told them to go and find the child and then come back and report to him. He wanted to use them to use their special brand of wisdom to find the baby so that he could kill Him! And so:

III. The Wise Men Found Jesus (9-10) While they surely could have asked door to door in the small village of Bethlehem, God supernaturally enabled them to find him in this way:

1. the same star appeared to them after a long absence That supernatural glory of God, which had appeared to them back home and which they hadn't seen in possibly almost two years, suddenly reappeared to them on the road to Bethlehem! Oh, how it filled them with joy to see the Divine confirmation that they were on the right track. But God did even more than that:

2. the star led them to the house where Jesus was Notice that it *went before them*. That means:

a. it moved at their pace It lighted the ground ahead of them like a huge flashlight and moved only as fast as they were moving, something no star in space could do. Step by step it brought them into Bethlehem until it *came to rest over the place* where Jesus was. In other words:

b. it lighted a specific location It would have meant nothing for it to stand over the town of Bethlehem; they still would have been a long time finding Him. It stood over the very house (no longer the stable!) where Mary and Joseph were living. But notice that God led them to the very spot where Jesus lay for a purpose:

IV. The Wise Men Worshipped Jesus (11) That was the whole point of their long journey; it was the reason they came. They came to worship Him. They said it in the beginning of the story and they did it in the end. Now if you stop to think about it, God went to an awful lot of trouble to make this special visit happen, didn't He? And then He had it recorded

carefully for us, so it must have a purpose, a point that He wants to get across. And I think this is it. To use a play on words in English, **Wise Men Worship Him!** If a bunch of pagan astrologers knew enough and were willing to go to such great lengths to worship Him, isn't that what God is calling all of us to do? In fact, isn't that why you've come here this morning or tuned in online, to worship Him? People who are wise, people who listen to what God is telling them and act on it, they worship Jesus! And I want you to notice three things in the text that tell us what that means. First:

1. they fell down before Him They got down on their knees in front of Him and put their heads on the ground. If you remember the story, when Joseph was the prime minister of the land of Egypt after his father Jacob had died, *His brothers also came and fell down before him and said, "Behold, we are your servants." - Gen. 50:22*. Falling down before someone is an act of ***submission***; it says, "I yield myself to You. You are my King; I will serve and obey you! I am Yours to do with as you wish!" During Jesus' ministry, people repeatedly fell down before Him and we should too. To worship Him means to submit yourself to Him completely, to yield yourself fully to His service. As Romans puts it, our spiritual act of worship is to present our bodies to Him as a living sacrifice, to give them fully to Him to do His will. Have you fallen down before Him in your heart and yielded yourself to Him? Second, it says that:

2. they worshipped Him which probably means that on their knees they repeatedly touched their foreheads to the ground. The Greek word is *proskuneo. Pros* means *toward* and a *kuon* is a dog and the concept is that of a dog coming and licking his master's hand. Have you had that happen to you? Dogs do that. Why? It's how they express their love and affection to you. For the wise men, this bowing down was an act of ***adoration***. They were saying, "I adore you; my heart belongs to you!" And isn't that what our worship is to be about? Jesus said plainly that the single most important thing God wants is for us to love Him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength! If God so loved the world that He sent His only Son to earth to become a man and die on the cross to save us from our sins, how can we NOT love Him?! How can we not adore Him? We sing it often at Christmas, "O come let us adore Him!" That's what God is challenging us to do through the wise men! Let's adore Him! Then lastly, notice that:

3. they offered Him all their treasures They had brought expensive, precious gifts and they offered them to Him. That's an act of ***devotion***. It's saying, "Everything I have is Yours! I give you everything that's precious to me!" They brought Him gold, the most precious of metals, the gift fit for a King. They brought Him frankincense, the fragrant resin more valuable than gold that that the Jews used primarily to burn in worship to God. And they brought Him myrrh, the precious, fragrant oil that would one day be brought by Nicodemus to include as he wrapped the body of our Savior for burial in the tomb. Jesus is our King, our God and our Savior and like them, we should devote to Him everything we have, our money, our house, our possessions, our time, our skills; we should tell Him that all these things, everything we have, is His to use as He sees fit. For what purpose? Well, there's one last thing we need to realize about these wise men:

4. they are the firstfruits of all the nations God has only had one purpose all through Scripture, throughout all of human history. It's spelled out in **Ps. 86:9**, *All the nations you have made shall come and worship before you, O Lord, and shall glorify your name.* And here in these wise men, all the way from Persia, see the very firstfruits of that promise fulfilled! Through them, hear God giving a powerful assurance that one day, some from every people, tribe, tongue and nation will come and worship His Son! That's the purpose for which He wants us to devote everything to Him, to give our all, that He might have worshippers from every people on earth come to Him and bow down as they did. Are you involved in His great purpose?

Well, there's a brief ending to this scene. As it closes, we read that:

V. The Wise Men Returned Home Another Way (12) Why? Because they listened when God spoke to them in a dream that night and warned them not to go back to Herod. That bought Joseph time to take Jesus and Mary and escape to Egypt before Herod's soldiers could come looking to destroy Him. You see, wise men listen when God speaks! Is the Spirit of God speaking to you today? You'll be wise if you listen to Him!

Orville and Wilbur Wright tried repeatedly to fly a heavier-than-air craft until finally, one December day in 1903, off the sand dunes of Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, they did what man had never done before. They actually flew! Elated, they telegraphed their sister Katherine this message: "Katherine [stop] We have actually flown 120 feet [stop] Will be home for Christmas [stop]" Katherine ran down the street and shoved the telegram - the news scoop of the century - at the city editor of the local newspaper. He read it carefully and smiled, "Well, well! How nice! The boys will be here for Christmas!" [Go Ye... A Command Not An Option, Charles Blackshear, p. 13]. He read the amazing news and totally missed the point! Sadly, almost everyone reads or hears the story of the visit of the Wise Men and misses the point. It's just another quaint part of the Christmas narrative, some neat figures to add to our Nativity Scene. But in reality, it is God's announcement to the world that this baby Jesus, born at Christmas, is the King, the promised Messiah who will rule all the peoples of the world and we all should come and bow down before Him! This Christmas let's not be content to simply receive and enjoy gifts and revel in all the blessings we have. Rather, let's commit ourselves afresh to the task of spreading the news that Christ is King throughout our neighborhood and throughout the world! Let's be wise men and women and boys and girls and carry out our assignment as they did, telling the world Christ has come and inviting them to come and worship Him!

The Scenes Of Christmas
The Forgotten Scenes - Luke 2:21-38, Mt. 2:13-23

This month we've looked at all the familiar scenes of Christmas, Gabriel's announcement to Mary, the angel's appearance to Joseph, the birth of Jesus in the stable, the angels and the shepherds and the arrival of the wise men. These are the ones we read over and over again each year. All the songs and carols are about them and they are pictured on all our Christmas cards. However, there are two other scenes that we seldom mention, let alone study, or even think about. I'm going to call them The Forgotten Scenes of Christmas and I'd like to remind you of them this morning. The first one is found in **Luke 2:21-28**, if you'll turn there with me, and let's call this scene:

I. Jesus' Sojourn In Bethlehem A sojourn is a temporary stay in a place, usually with a purpose. In Gen. 12:10, ...*there was a famine in the land. So Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land.* Abraham sojourned in Egypt; he went to live there temporarily in order to find food for his household. After He was born, Jesus sojourned in two different places with His parents. The first was right there in Bethlehem. Even though they could only find lodging in a stable that first night, evidently Joseph and Mary soon found a real house in Bethlehem and began to live there temporarily. I'm sure this was part of their plan from the beginning, because they knew they would need to visit the Temple 30 days after their child was born to dedicate Him and it would be difficult to make the week-long trip to and from Nazareth again so soon. So while they were living in Bethlehem, four important things happened. The first is in verse **(21)**. Jesus:

1. He was circumcised on the eighth day, exactly as the Law commanded in Lev. 12:3, making Him a true son of Israel. But also, on that same day, as Jewish custom dictated, He was **officially named Jesus**, because that is what they had both been told by God to name Him. Of course, *Jesus* is the English pronunciation of the Greek version of His name, *Iesous,* in the text. However, in the Hebrew or Aramaic which his parents would actually have spoken, it is *Yehoshua*, the same name as brave Joshua of old, and *Yeshua* in its short form. At any rate, it means "Jehovah/Yahweh is salvation" and He was to be given that name because, *He shall save His people from their sins.* Jesus is the name of salvation, the name of the One born to be our Savior, to save us all from our sins! Acts 4:12 says, *And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.* So often, we give our children names because they sound good or because they strike our fancy. But God named His Son so that His very Name would declare the purpose of His incarnation as a baby; it declares that He is the only way of salvation. Amen? Secondly, Jesus:

2. He was presented to the Lord at the Temple at one month old (22-24) Evidently Mary and Joseph continued living in Bethlehem for just over a month. As good Jews who kept the Law, they were required to go up to the Temple in nearby Jerusalem for two reasons. First, Leviticus 12 goes on to say that any woman who gives birth to a male child has to wait 33 days after his circumcision, during which time she is unclean and not allowed to into the sanctuary. But upon completing that period, she is to go and offer a sacrifice for her purification and, since Joseph and Mary were poor, the sacrifice required of them was two doves or young pigeons, one for a sin offering and one for a burnt offering. The second reason for this Temple visit was that the Law repeatedly said that every firstborn son belongs to the Lord and must be given to Him. So in Jesus' time, they would put the child in the arms of a priest who would then offer two short benedictions or prayers and the couple would pay the redemption price of five silver shekels required by the Law. Notice how devout Mary and Joseph were, how careful they were to obey to the letter everything God told them to do, both in His Word and by His angel, even though it caused them to have to live in a strange town for over a month to do it! What an example for us! They're the kind of parents we ought to be! Our genuinely devout example makes a powerful impact on our children. No wonder God was willing to entrust the care of His Son to them! But then a third thing happened on this occasion. This godly old man named Simeon met them when they came into the Temple and:

3. the Holy Spirit confirmed through Simeon that Jesus is the Christ (25-35) The Holy Spirit had revealed to him that he wouldn't die without seeing the Lord's Christ and when He saw the infant Jesus, the Spirit must have spoken to his mind and said, "Here He is!" What joy it brought him personally! Now he could die in peace, having seen the Lord's promise fulfilled! But this "chance" encounter had an even greater purpose. Think of the affirmation it brought to Joseph and Mary to have this godly stranger, out of the blue, recognize what they already knew, that their baby was indeed the Christ and make prophecies about Him that He would not only be the glory of Israel, but a light to all the nations of the earth! Verse 33 says they marveled at what he said! But don't fail to notice that the first hint of the cross is given by Simeon. He prophesies that Jesus will be opposed and even tells Mary that a sword will pierce her own soul, pointing to the tremendous agony she would experience as hostility to Jesus grew and ultimately as she stood by the cross and watched Him die. It was a great privilege for her to be the mother of the Messiah, but it would also entail great pain because, in order to save us from our sins, her son would have to die. *A television interviewer was walking the streets of Tokyo at Christmas time. Much as in America, Christmas shopping is a big commercial success in Japan. The interviewer stopped one young woman on the sidewalk, and asked, "What is the meaning of Christmas?" Laughing, she responded, "I don't know. Is that the day that Jesus died?" There was some truth in her answer. [Donald Deffner, Seasonal Illustrations, San Jose: Resource, 1992, p. 16.*] *For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." - Mark 10:45*. Jesus' birth, His coming into the world, was just the

first step to His cross. He came to give His life to save us. But just then a fourth thing happened. At that very moment, as Simeon is declaring all of this, another stranger walks in on it in verses **(36-38)**. Anna was a prophetess, a woman through whom God spoke, and when she heard that this was the Christ, the Spirit also confirmed it to her own heart. She not only began to worship with thanksgiving, but what Luke notes is that:

4. the prophetess Anna began to tell everyone that He is the Christ She went to announce the news to all the people who were in the Temple courts and maybe in the streets. She went to all the devout people she knew, people who loved the Lord and were waiting for the coming of the Christ and she told them, "He's here! He's born! I saw Him with my own eyes!" First, the shepherds stirred up Bethlehem with that news on the night of His birth, and now Anna began to stir up the city of Jerusalem with the same news from that day of His dedication! Listen, If you know that God has sent salvation to the world, it should not only fill you with rejoicing, but you should want to share it! You can't be content to keep it to yourself; you simply must tell others!

What a day this must have been for Mary and Joseph as they went back to their little house in Bethlehem! What joy they must have felt from all these things! But they could never imagine what was about to happen next. Luke chooses not to record it, but Matthew tells the whole story in chapter 2:1-12. A caravan of Persian Magi show up on their doorstep, either that night or one soon afterward, led by a supernatural star. They declare that their baby is indeed the newborn King of the Jews and that they have come all the way from Persia to find him. They come into the house and fall down and worship Him and give him these expensive gifts, fit for a King! What a shock that must have been, but we've already covered that scene! I only mention it briefly because it is the catalyst that leads to our second forgotten scene:

II. Jesus' Sojourn In Egypt - Mt. 2:13-23 It seems that very night God warned Joseph to take the baby and flee in the darkness because Herod would try to kill Him. So off they went on another journey, this time to Egypt. Jesus, along with his family, officially became a displaced, homeless, refugee seeking asylum, if you will. Even in His infancy, Jesus identified with the hundreds of thousands of refugees in our world today who have been forced to flee from their homes. Even as we've enjoyed this Christmas season, this month our church has been instrumental in completing the Futaa Center in a village in Guinea and two families, who were forced to flee their homes in other villages because of persecution, have moved in! We've helped give them a place to stay, because of Jesus who said, *Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.* He knows what it's like to be a refugee. How long the family stayed in Egypt, we are not told exactly, but since we know that Herod died in March of 4 BC, it was probably not much more than a month, yet it is a significant event we so often overlook. Let's talk first about:

1. the family's flight into Egypt (13-15a) After the overwhelming visit of the wise men, Joseph finally drifted off to sleep, but it was not a peaceful repose. Once again, an angel appeared to him in a dream, this time with instructions to leave immediately, explaining that the child was in danger from Herod. So that night, Joseph packed up Mary and the baby and the expensive gifts and headed out. By morning, no one knew that they were already far along the 75 mile road to Egypt. However, don't think of Egypt as it was back in the days of Moses; in this period, Egypt, too, was a Roman province like Judea, well-controlled, but out of Herod's jurisdiction. One ancient historian says there were about a million Jews living in Egypt in that era, so Mary and Joseph might have been able to find friends among their own people and begin to fit into a new life there. But oh, how sad they would have been if they could have known what would happen in Bethlehem just after they left! Within a day or two, we read about:

2. Herod's slaughter of the infants (16) When the wise men didn't return to him immediately, it became obvious to Herod that they had seen through his evil intent and were not coming back, and he was furious. So instead of trying to find one particular child and destroy him, he did the most logical thing to his depraved mind and decided to kill all the children in Bethlehem who had been born from the time the wise men had first seen the star to the present, no doubt allowing a large margin for error! In that day, Bethlehem was only a small village with possibly 300-1,000 people at most, maybe 60 to 100 families. The slaughter of a few dozen infants in a rural town hardly made the "evening news" in Jerusalem that day, in light of Herod's long list of atrocities. Yet in Bethlehem there was a deep and loud mourning and wailing, a sadness which God chose to memorialize in Scripture to this day. However, soon the tables were turned. We read lastly of:

3. the family's return to Nazareth (19-23a) Within little more than a month after his heinous massacre, Herod was stricken with a horrible disease and died an excruciating death. Josephus states that a loathsome disease descended upon him as a judgment from God on account of his sins. He describes the horrible details —burning fever, ulcerated entrails, foul discharges, convulsions, stench, and more. Immediately after his demise, God informed Joseph in a dream that he was dead it was time to go back to Israel. So the family set out, no doubt, to go back to Bethlehem, but once they were back in Judea, he heard that Herod's son, Archelaus, who was as crazy as his father, was ruling Judea, and he was afraid. God confirmed his fears yet once more in another dream and he headed north to Galilee, which was ruled by Antipas, another son of Herod, but one who was much more level-headed. There he settled his family, back in his home town of Nazareth.

Those are all the details that we know concerning Jesus' brief sojourn in Egypt, and you might wonder what the purpose behind it was. But Matthew clearly tells us three times that:

4. **these events all fulfill God's prophecies** For example, verse **(15b)** tells us:

a. Jesus was called out of Egypt in fulfillment of **Hos. 11:1** which says, *Out of Egypt have I called My Son.* No one was sitting around saying that when Messiah comes, He must be called out of Egypt. In Hosea, the first half of the verse says, *When Israel was a child I loved him and out of Egypt have I called My son.* This promise was fulfilled first in His "son", the nation of Israel, but here the Spirit says that God intended ultimately to make this text have a second fulfillment in the life of Jesus, so that He not only called His son Israel out of Egypt, but He also called His literal Son Jesus out of Egypt in His great love. Then, if we look at verses **(17-18)**, we're told that there was a great weeping when:

b. the children of Bethlehem were destroyed as **Jer. 31:15** predicted. Originally this prediction referred to the weeping of the Jewish mothers at the time of the Babylonian captivity, mourning over the death and carrying away of their children from Ramah. Ramah is slightly north of Jerusalem, Bethlehem is a bit south of it, but you have Rachel mentioned here, whose tomb was close to Bethlehem and who was considered figuratively to be the mother of the nation. Again, though no one was expecting it, God showed how this was fulfilled a second time through the life of His Son, in the weeping of the mothers of Bethlehem over their children slaughtered by Herod. And finally, in verse **(23b)** Matthew shows us that:

c. Jesus was called a Nazarene There is no specific statement anywhere in the Old Testament like that, but **Is. 11:1** says that *There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.* Isaiah predicted there would be a Branch from the stump of Jesse (King David's father), who would be the Messiah. The Hebrew for *branch* is *netzer*, and that is the root of the name Nazareth. Because Jesus grew up in Nazareth, the designation "Jesus of Nazareth" or "the Nazarene" was attached to Him through His life. That is literally saying, "Jesus the Branch". So, while calling Him by His common designation all his life, people were really calling Him the Messiah, even though they did not see the significance of it! But Matthew did, and so once again, he points out that the Scriptures were fulfilled!

Listen, in Jesus every detail of the Scriptures concerning His life finds fulfillment, from all of the events surrounding His birth, down to the most minute details of His crucifixion. God always watches over His Word to perform it. Every promise He has made, He keeps; every prediction He has made comes true. And that means we can count on the ones that apply to us today! We live in a chaotic world, much like the world Jesus was born into, filled with evil rulers, mad terrorists and the suffering of innocent people. It is so easy to get caught up the awful news that surrounds us that we forget to what Christmas means. Charles Swindoll points out that the year 1809 was also a similar time. *The international scene was tumultuous. Napoleon was sweeping through Austria; blood was flowing freely. Nobody then cared about babies. But the world was overlooking some terribly significant births. For example, William Gladstone was born that year. He was destined to become one of England's finest statesmen. That same year, Alfred Tennyson was born to an obscure minister and his wife. The child would one day greatly affect the literary world in a marked manner. On the American continent, Oliver Wendell Holmes was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts. And not far away in Boston, Edgar Allan Poe began his eventful, albeit tragic, life. It was also in that same year that a physician named Darwin and his wife named their child Charles Robert. And that same year produced the cries of a newborn infant in a rugged log cabin in Hardin County, Kentucky. The baby's name? Abraham Lincoln. If there had been news broadcasts at that time, I'm certain these words would have been heard: "The destiny of the world is being shaped on an Austrian battlefield today." But history was actually being shaped in the cradles of England and America. Similarly, everyone thought taxation was the big news--when Jesus was born. But a young Jewish woman cradled the biggest news of all: the birth of the Savior of the world. [Adapted from Charles Swindoll].* And in that Savior, God's promises to you are all fulfilled. You have the forgiveness of sins and a relationship with God Himself, you have His constant presence as you pass through the turmoil of this life because He will never leave you nor forsake you, and you have the certain hope of a glorious future with Him that never ends. And it all came to you wrapped in the person of a baby born in Bethlehem.

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Three Perspectives On The Incarnation

God the Father Sent His Son - Gal. 4:4-5

Even though we seldom think about it, every major thing that God has ever done involves all three persons of the Godhead. When the world was created, it was not just the Father who did it. Colossians says that Christ created everything that was made and Genesis 1:2 says that the Spirit of God was there, moving over the whole thing as it was being formed. All three were present and involved. At Jesus' baptism, Jesus was standing there in the Jordan as the Father's voice spoke from heaven and the Spirit descended upon Him in the form of a dove. All three Persons were present and involved. The Bible says that God the Father raised Jesus from the dead, but it also says that ...*through the Spirit of holiness [He] was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead*. Yet Jesus Himself said that He had power to lay down His life and power to take it up again! All three Persons of the Godhead played a role in that powerful event! And the same thing is true of the Incarnation, of the coming of Christ into the world *in flesh*, as a human being. There are three perspectives from which to understand it. God the Father was involved in sending His Son. God the Son Himself chose to become a man. And God the Holy Spirit was the very instrument of His human birth. So, there

you have the *Three Perspectives On The Incarnation* that we're going to study together. The key text which reveals what the Incarnation meant from the Father's perspective is **Gal. 4:4-5**. **God the Father sent His Son into the world.** Such a simple fact that we all know, but what a profound statement that is! Each part of these verses is just ripe with meaning and we want to explore them thoroughly. First of all, it's obvious that:

I. The Father Planned To Send His Son Verse **(4)** says, *When the fullness of time had come God sent forth His Son*... The Greek word translated *fullness* here is a special word. It means absolute completion, full maturity. Col. 2:9 says that in Christ ...*the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily*, which means that Christ was fully and completely God. So, for thousands of years, the time that Christ was to be sent into the world was coming nearer and nearer and nearer and when it had fully come, when the completely perfect moment had finally arrived, the Father sent His Son into the world. Obviously that means that:

1. the Father had a plan God did not simply look down one day from heaven and say, "Oh my, I ought to do something; I must send my Son!" It was planned long ago, even before actual the creation of the world. Way back in the counsels of eternity past, Father, Son and Holy Spirit together determined that the Father would send the Son to be the Savior of a world that was not even created yet and determined exactly when He would do it. Let's look back to verses 1-2. Many societies have some kind of rite of entering manhood. The Jews had, and still have, a celebration called a *bar-mitzvah*, where at a certain age a boy was invested with the stature of manhood and full membership in the Jewish community. The Romans had a very similar thing. A boy was regarded as a child, but there would be a certain time when there was a special ceremony and he was invested with his full rights as a son and heir as an adult son. And in Roman society, that time was set by the father. The father would set in advance a time by his own judgment and prepare for it and when that time would fully come, the boy would be installed as a son. In the same way, our Heavenly Father long ago set the time when He would install US as His sons and daughters and to accomplish that goal, He would send His Son into the world at the perfect time that He had established. Jesus' birth was the fulfillment of the Father's perfect plan from eternity. And we can see the mention of that plan as:

2. the Father promised to send His Son over and over in the Old Testament. Way back in Gen. 3:15, immediately after man sinned, God first made this promise concerning Eve. It is known by scholars as the *protoevangelium*, the first gospel. It is a pronouncement that God actually made to Satan himself saying, *I will put enmity between you and the woman [Eve], and between your offspring and her offspring; He [Jesus] shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel."* That word *offspring* is singular and so are the pronouns; "a HE, a person, the Son of Man will crush you, Satan!" God was already pledging that at the right time He would send His Son who, though His heel would be bruised at the cross, would ultimately destroy Satan! To Abraham, the Father promised in Gen. 22:18 that he would have a Seed, an Offspring (again singular, as Gal.3:16 reminds us), through whom all nations on earth would be blessed. Through the greedy prophet Balaam, God said, *I see Him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel. He will crush [His enemies]..."* Moses said that God would raise up a Prophet like him and so the promise goes on and on. God kept reminding His people century after century that there was a plan and He promised over and over that in the fullness of time He would send the promised deliverer, His Son. And then, of course, through all those intervening years:

3. the Father prepared to send His Son He prepared the world by putting into power a Roman empire that, for the first time, brought peace to the majority of the Mediterranean world, the peace of Rome. And for the first time, there was a system of roads and shipping lanes that connected that world and which could be safely traveled so that the message of the Son's coming could be carried everywhere. And for the first time, the whole Mediterranean world had a universal language, Greek, which could be understood in almost every place so that the message of His son could be understood by most people. And in practically every major city of this empire was a synagogue and Jews who proclaimed their faith in a single transcendent God and a coming Messiah who would change the world and in that way, He had people everywhere who were prepared to understand the message of His Son! So, when the time had fully come, when the world was fully prepared and when the pre-determined moment had arrived, the Father fulfilled His promise and sent forth His Son from heaven into the world.

But how did He send Him forth? You've heard the carol, *How should a King Come? Even a child knows the answer of course, In a coach of gold with a pure white horse. In the beautiful city in the prime of the day, And the trumpets should cry and the crowds make way. And the flags fly high in the morning sun, And the people all cheer for the sovereign one. And everyone knows that's the way that it's done. That's the way that a King should come*. But is that how God sent forth His Son? No, the end of verse 4 tells us:

II. How The Father Sent His Son (4b) The language here is very interesting. The word in the Greek language is not *born*, but actually the verb *becoming*. Literally it says, *becoming out of woman, becoming under law*. God did not send His Son into the world in the same state that He was in beforehand in His preincarnate glory. To be sent meant for Him to become something else that He was not previously. Actually, two things; He became a human being and He became under law. To say that:

1. He was born of a woman is to say that God the Son became a man. He left the splendor of His glory behind and took on the limitations of a human being in a human body exactly like ours. Philippians says He did not count His

position as God something to be selfishly grasped, but took the form of a servant. And 2 Corinthians adds that though He was rich, yet for our sakes He became poor. Everything that we are, He became, yet without sin. Then Paul adds:

2. He was born under law Now understand, He made the Law! And it's not like He made it just for others and was above it Himself. The Law was born out of His Nature and character. He was righteous already as far as the moral aspect of law goes. But now, *becoming under law* meant subjection to human authorities and it meant keeping all the ceremonial law of sacrifices and regulations that was meant for sinful human beings. 3:24 tells us the Law was a schoolmaster designed to lead people to Christ; the whole thing pointed to Him. But now, He to whom it all pointed had to become subject to the very things that were so unnecessary for Him! He who WAS the sacrifice had to offer sacrifice. He who WAS the Passover now had to celebrate Passover. He who INSTITUTED every authority among men, now had Himself to be subject to human authorities and finally to be killed at their hands!

I don't think there are words that can convey the sacrifice that it meant for the Father to send His Son in this way. We try to describe it. The Christmas hymn says:

Down from His glory, Ever living story, My God and Savior came, And Jesus was His name. Born in a manger, To His own a stranger, A Man of sorrows, tears and agony.

What condescension, Bringing us redemption; That in the dead of night, Not one faint hope in sight, God, gracious, tender, Laid aside His splendor, Stooping to woo, to win, to save my soul.

Without reluctance, Flesh and blood His substance He took the form of man, Revealed the hidden plan. O glorious myst'ry, Sacrifice of Calv'ry, And now I know Thou art the great "I AM."

O how I love Him! How I adore Him! My breath, my sunshine, my all in all!
The great Creator became my Savior, And all God's fulness dwelleth in Him.

Hallelujah! We try, but our best words fall short of describing it! The Father sent His Son forth into something that no father would ever send his son into, unless there was an overwhelming reason to do it. So, in verse 5 we have the reason:

III. Why The Father Sent His Son (5) The Greek word translated *sent* here is *apostello* (from which we get the word *apostle)* and it means to send with a specific purpose or mission. The Father sent His Son into the world on a mission, for a two-fold purpose and verse 5 explains what it was. It was first:

1. to redeem us The Greek word for *redeem* means to buy out of the market, that is, to buy a slave for the purpose of setting him free, taking him off the auction block. You see, verse 3 tells us that:

a. we were in slavery to the elementary principles of the world (3) When a child is little, he or she lives under a set of rules, "Don't touch this!" "Don't do this or that". The Jews were under the basic principles of the Law of Moses which were, "Don't do this, don't do that, don't touch this or handle that." Even the Gentiles were enslaved to the same kinds of basic elementary rules. Look with me at **Col. 2:20-23**. Everybody, Jew and Gentile alike, had their rules for how to come to God, how to be accepted by Him, and none of them worked. None of them brought us into a relationship with God, because no set of rules can take away sin. So as a result:

b. we were under the curse of law Look at **Gal. 3:13**. The curse of the law was, "the soul that sins, it will die". And Christ bought us back out from under that curse by becoming sin for us and taking it in our place so that we were made free. God sent His son to redeem us from the curse of sin and from slavery to the basic principles of the world so that we could be in a personal relationship with Him, to give us what we could never get any other way. And it's even deeper than that; verse 5 says He sent His Son in order:

2. to install us as His sons The Father had a desire and we get a glimpse of it in Heb. 2:10 through the phrase, *in bringing many sons to glory*. The Father didn't merely want His Only Son with Him in glory. He wanted to bring many sons and daughters to glory. He wanted to take us from the position of being enslaved and cursed and make us His very sons and daughters. So, through the sending of His Son:

a. we receive the relationship of His adult children We are not merely servants and not merely infant children, but full-blown mature sons in relationship with Him. The word *adoption* in verse 5 doesn't mean adoption as we usually think of adoption, the taking a new child into our family. It's a technical term that describes what we talked about back in verses 1-2. Every boy in a Roman family belonged as a child of the family, but the "adoption" was the time of his installment as an adult son with full rights. We're no longer little kids or slaves who have a bunch of rules and regulations to make us do what's right. We are full blown adult children in personal relationship with our Heavenly Father and, like Him, doing what's right because His nature is inside of us! Look at **verse 6**. His very Spirit lives inside us. And now on to **verse 7**. Because we are His adult children:

b. we receive the position of being His heirs We are rightful heirs of everything that belongs to God our Father. Everything that is His is ours. In fact, we are called joint-heirs or equal heirs with Jesus Christ. We share in every way in all that the Father has laid up in store for His only Son whom He loves!

That's what the Father wanted to give us and that's why, when the time had fully come, the Father sent forth His Son into the world. He did it to rescue us and to lift us up into a brand-new relationship with Himself as sons and heirs. But in order

to accomplish that, He couldn't merely send forth His Son; He had to give His Son. He loved the world so much that He gave His only begotten son to become a man and to suffer the curse of sin so that you and I might not perish but have everlasting life. For us, Christmas is such a time of great joy and to the human race, it is Good News of great joy, as the angels said. But I can imagine the sadness in the Father's heart on that day as He sent His Son from heaven to redeem us. He obviously knew it was the first step to the cross. Remember that one day, God met with Abraham and said to him, *Take now your son, your only son whom you love, Isaac and go to the land of Moriah and there offer Him as a sacrifice to Me.* From that moment on, for Abraham every step must have grown sadder because it was one step closer to Moriah, to the sacrifice of His son. The Incarnation that we celebrate at Christmas was the first big step toward Moriah, toward Calvary, toward the Father's sacrifice of His Son, His Only Son whom He loved. It was not pleasant, not easy, not joyous for the Father to send the Son forth into the world, but His love for us was so great that He did it anyway. *In the summer of 1937 John Griffith was employed as the controller of a great railroad bridge that spanned the broad Mississippi River. Each day at certain times the great bridge would be raised so that barges and ships might pass and at other times it would be lowered so that freight and passenger trains could rush across. One particular day John took his 8 year old son Greg to work with him for the first time. Little Greg was obviously thrilled with all the levers of the control house and the observation deck from which he could watch the boats and trains go by. At noon John put the bridge up for some passing ships and since no trains were scheduled for some time, he made his way along the catwalk to the observation deck and the two sat down to their bag lunch. As they ate, John was thrilling his son with the story of the great flood when the river had once overflowed its banks. Just as he was ending that story, he was startled by the distant shriek of a train whistle. Glancing at his watch, he saw that it was 1:07. The express train for Memphis with 400 people on board would be roaring across the bridge any moment. He leaped from the deck to the catwalk and raced to the control tower. His hand grasped the controls and started to close the bridge, but as it did he glanced down to see if any ships were passing below. His eyes saw something that made his heart leap into his throat. Greg had fallen from the deck into the great iron gears that operated the bridge. His left leg was caught in the cogs of the 2 main gears. John knew if he shoved the lever his son would be ground between 4 tons of whining grinding steel. His mind whirled in panic and desperation. There was no time to free Greg before the train would be upon the bridge. The whistle shrieked again. 400 people, 400 souls... John was a father and this was his son but he knew what he had to do. With tear-filled eyes his hand pushed the lever and the great bridge closed. The Memphis Express thundered onto the bridge and passed by. As it did, John lifted his sobbing face and looked into the windows of the train. There were businessmen reading their papers, finely dressed ladies sipping coffee in the dining car, others sleeping in their seats. In agony John screamed at the steel train "I sacrificed my son for you! Don't you care! Don't you care!".* This Christmas season, the train of humanity is passing rapidly by. Some are wrapping presents and going over Christmas lists. Some are decorating and sending cards. Others are cooking lavish meals, while still others are partying and having a good time, blindly unaware that the Heavenly Father is standing outside their lives with a saddened heart shouting at them, "I sent forth My Son; I sacrificed Him for you because I love you and want you to be My sons and daughters! Won't you wake up and care? Won't you receive Him?" Dear ones, let us never be like them. Let us never forget the tremendous sacrifice the Father made for us to belong to Him. Let us worship Him!

Three Perspectives On The Incarnation

God the Son Became A Man - Phil. 2:5-8

Last time we looked at Christ's coming to earth from God the Father's perspective. When the fullness of the time had come, God the Father sent forth His Son into the world. Today we want to consider the Son's perspective and we can sum it up in this simple phrase: **God the Son became a man**. It is such an easy thing to say, but what an enormous fact is contained in those few words. Jesus, God's Son, did not simply take a trip to earth to visit or even to accomplish some task. He had done that before; you can see His occasional visits and appearances in the Old Testament quite plainly. But this time, coming to earth meant changing the very essence of His being, actually becoming a man. It is tremendously hard for us to comprehend even a small part of what that means and there is no good illustration of anything similar in human experience. The best we can do is to turn to the Scriptures and there read the description God Himself gives in **Phil. 2:6-8** of what it meant for the Son to become man. First of all, we see there that:

I. Jesus Emptied Himself Of Some Things In Becoming Man (6-7a) We must begin with understanding who Christ was. Verse 6 is very clear; He was God. He was not just with God or like God; He was in very nature God. He was eternal, omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, and glorious, just as the Father was. From eternity past, He was enthroned in glory and worshipped by angels. The worlds were created by His word and the earth shook at His command. Most people would give anything to be like God and escape the limitations and troubles of this world; Jesus actually WAS God and had all that, yet He did not view it as something to be grasped and selfishly hung onto! Instead, the Word says, *He emptied Himself*. That means:

1. He left behind His position But don't misunderstand; the Son never stopped being God to become man. You can't change the nature of a thing. I'm a human being and I can never be God or an angel or an animal. I may die, but I can't stop being a human being, no matter what else happens to me. God cannot stop being God, either. Christ did not stop being God and become transformed into a human being. Rather, He added a perfect human nature and a sinless human body to the Divine nature He already had. That's why we say He was the God-man, fully God and fully man. He did not lose any of His attributes that I mentioned; in fact, you can see Him use every one of them on earth. His power

calmed the storm and made blind eyes see; His omniscience saw Nathanael under the fig tree miles away. But He chose to limit the use of His Divine attributes and authority as God. He no longer constantly used His attributes to act as a transcendent Being, but chose to limit Himself most of the time to all the ways in which a human being experiences life! In other words:

2. He left behind His privileges as God For one, He left behind:

a. His glory Look with me at His prayer in **John 17:5**. Before the world began, He was a glorious being. He was shining and beautiful and too wonderful to be seen by human eyes. Remember John's description of Him in glory in Revelation 1, with hair white as snow, eyes like fire, and a voice like the sound of rushing waters? That's how He always was, beautiful and shining and glorious. But He laid all of that down; He put it all aside in order to become a human being like you and I. He also left behind:

b. His riches Look with me at **2 Cor. 8:9**. In glory, Jesus was rich. He had everything He wanted except us. He had no limitations; He could be anyplace He wanted, do anything He wanted. I find myself at a loss for words; every time I try to describe riches, it comes out in monetary terms and that doesn't begin to cover it. Glory, position, power, the whole universe, He had it all, yet He traded that; He left it behind to become, not the richest, most powerful human being on earth, but to become poor, a baby born to a humble family in a cattle stall behind an inn! Just think about one of those TV shows you see about world hunger and people lying in grass huts on dirt floors with one meal a day and that being rice or some other staple. Then think of all the nice things you have and enjoy. Would you leave your life here behind to become one of them? Would you live like they live and look like they look and go through what they go through in order to save them? That's what Jesus did! But He not only divested Himself of some things:

II. Jesus Took On Some Things In Becoming Man (7b-8) Jesus took on some things that He had never experienced before. For instance:

1. He took on servanthood As God in heaven, He was served, by the angels, by all of creation. But now it was different. He Himself said that He did not come to be served, but to serve. He took on the job of a common slave and washed the disciples' feet. Instead of everyone else putting Him in first place, He put Himself in last place. He served people, human authorities, and His Heavenly Father. Further, Paul says:

2. He took on humanity And please don't misunderstand. He did not just appear to look like a man. He was actually made in the likeness of man, that is, He was made in every respect exactly like every other human being except one, that He was without sin. He became fully man and in taking on humanity, He didn't take on some glorified superhuman form of humanity in which He didn't feel pain or experience suffering. Look with me at **Heb. 2:10, 16-18**. Notice that he had to be made like his brothers in every way in order to save them, so He took on humanity:

a. with its sufferings Pain and hunger and thirst and tears and fatigue and frustration, things He had known of, but had never experienced for Himself! These are the things you read about Him time after time in the Gospels. He was hungry in the wilderness, He thirsted on the cross, He wept in compassion over Jerusalem, and He wrestled in agony in the garden over the cross, sweating great drops of blood. In becoming man, He chose to take on suffering and He also took humanity:

b. with its temptations We read in James that God cannot be tempted to evil, yet as a true human being, Jesus could be. He was genuinely tempted. In fact, Hebrews 4 says He was tempted in every way just as we are, yet without sin. Immediately we think of His temptation in the wilderness, but I think the strongest evidence of temptation was in the garden. Jesus was STRONGLY tempted not to go to the cross. Jesus, now as a man, had to exercise His will not to do wrong, instead of just doing right and good by His nature! And it was tough, even for God the Son! But that came with humanity! Furthermore, Paul says:

3. He took on obedience In glory, everybody obeyed Him, but now He learned the depth of what obedience really means, according to Heb. 5:8, through the things that He suffered. He submitted Himself to the Father's will as a man and to the authorities over Him who tried and crucified Him. He experienced what it is like to obey, even when that obedience leads to suffering and finally:

4. He experienced death If there was one thing Jesus never experienced as God, it was death. He was life! He could not die. He could not experience that which He had decreed for men. But in becoming man, He could experience that thing which all human beings fear most, death itself, and destroy the sting of it once for all for mankind. Yet it was not a kindly, gentle death in old age at home in bed that He chose, but the death of the cross, death in its cruelest, most heinous, savage, torturous fashion.

All this He did for you and for me! He left all the splendor of heaven for all the agonies of earth for me! That's what becoming man meant. And it's all wrapped up in that little baby in a manger. Cute and cuddly and warm as the image may be, there lies God the Son in the straw for me on His way to the cross! So, the issue now becomes:

III. What I Do As A Follower Of Jesus (5). His mind, His attitude, should be in me. What was true of Him as God the Son should be true of me as His follower:

1. I should be willing to leave everything behind for Him Look with me at **Phil. 3:7-8**. He counted His privileges in glory as loss for me. My possessions, my lifestyle, my happiness, none of those things are things to be grasped, things to be selfishly held onto and clung to. I ought to be willing to count everything I have and am in life as lost and gone, if He deems it so, after what He did for me. There is to be nothing so dear to me, not even my own life, that I would not give it up for Him. And it follows that:

2. I should be willing to take on anything for Him I ought to be willing to go anywhere He wants me to go, become anything He wants me to be, and do anything He wants me to do. After what He took on for me, no request of His is asking too much!

Perpetua was a 22 year old Christian noblewoman who, in the year 203 AD, lived with her husband, her newborn son, and her slave, Felicitas, also pregnant and a believer, in the city of Carthage in what is now Tunisia. In a new wave of persecution, Perpetua and Felicitas were both arrested and both of them willingly gave up, not only their lives, but their newborn children rather than deny Christ. While she was in prison, Perpetua's father desperately tried to get her to recant, and she said "Do you see this waterpot here?" "Yes, of course." "It isn't something else. Can it be called by any other name than what it is?" "No." "Then I can't be called anything other than what I am, and I am a Christian!" Jesus became a man and that became His very nature. He could not be anything else but truly human ever after. He could not reverse the process and go back to being what He was before because the price of the cross loomed too large. And I became something too, when I got saved. My very nature was changed. I became a Christian, a follower of Christ. And I cannot be anything other than what I really am and being what I really am means being willing to lay down my all for Him. But I can do it, because I know something else. St. Augustine preached three sermons about these two women and he pointed out that Perpetua means *everlasting* and Felicitas means *happiness*. And that's why they gave their all; they knew they would have everlasting happiness! That's why we are willing to give our all. That's why God the Son became man for us, because in the end, He knew He would have the everlasting happiness described in verses 9-11. God the Son chose the eternal over the temporary. So did two young ladies in Carthage many years ago. And so must you and I.

Three Perspectives On The Incarnation

God The Spirit Arranged A Birth - Lk. 1:34-35

We come today to the third perspective on Christmas. At Christmas, God the Father sent His Son into the world. At Christmas, God the Son became a man. But what about the Holy Spirit? What role did He play in the coming of the Son into the world? Well, simply put, **God the Holy Spirit arranged the birth.** If you will permit a kind of modern analogy, the Holy Spirit seems to be the detail man of the Trinity. At creation, it seems that the Father spoke the world into being. The Son was there with the Father causing all things to hold together by the word of His power. But it is the Holy Spirit who moved upon the face of the waters and caused the earth to be formed. It seems that the Spirit took care of the physical details of fashioning the world. The Father decrees, the Son acts, and the Spirit details. The same thing is true concerning our salvation. The Father decrees our salvation and it is before Him we are justified. The Son procured our salvation by dying on the cross and saves us by His death. But it is the Holy Spirit who does the actual work of regeneration in us, uniting Himself to our spirit, regenerating us and creating a new nature in us. And it was the same way with the coming of Jesus into the world. The Father sent Him, the Son acted in becoming a man, but the Holy Spirit arranged all the details that were necessary for His birth! First of all:

I. The Holy Spirit Announced Jesus' Birth It would not make sense that the Son would come into the world unnoticed and suddenly without any preparation. In fact, the Father had been preparing the world from creation for His entrance. So it became the function of the Holy Spirit to see that the birth of the Son was properly announced beforehand, in order that the world and particularly the nation of Israel would be prepared.

1. the method of announcement was the prophets Look with me at **1 Pet. 1:10-11**. It was the Spirit of Christ, the Holy Spirit, who predicted the coming of Christ, both His suffering and His glory. Flip ahead to **2 Pet. 1:20-21**. It was the Holy Spirit who moved the prophets of old to speak about the coming of the Son into the world and to write their words down. It was God the Holy Spirit setting the stage, preparing the world for Jesus' coming. Century by century and prophet by prophet, the Holy Spirit announced the details surrounding, not only the birth, but the life, death, resurrection and return of the Son. However, for the moment we're only interested in His birth. You can see clearly:

2. the message that was announced in Mt. 1-2 No less than four times in these two chapters, you have the phrase you see in 1:22, *this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet.* And remember, we just read that it was the Holy Spirit who did the speaking. So, through the prophets the Spirit revealed:

a. the manner of His birth (1:22-23) It was through Isaiah in 7:14 that the Holy Spirit revealed that Jesus would be born of a virgin and through that means, would be not merely a man, but Immanuel, God with us, the God-man. What comfort Mary, and especially Joseph, must have found in Isaiah's words later on, to see that it was not just

the word of the angel that had spoken to them, but that the Holy Spirit had revealed it more than 700 years earlier! But not only that, the Spirit revealed:

b. the place of His birth (2:5-6) Even the Jewish leaders knew Micah 5:2, where the Holy Spirit had announced Bethlehem as His birthplace. They knew where to look for Him to be born because the Holy Spirit had announced it ahead of time. Then there was:

c. the flight at His birth (2:14-15) Through Hosea, the Holy Spirit had revealed something that no one even recognized until long afterward, that Hos. 11:1 had a double meaning. Not only was God speaking there about His son Israel, but about His Son Jesus. He would be called out of Egypt. and so, without realizing it, Joseph and Mary were fulfilling God's plan announced hundreds of years earlier. And along with that, the Holy Spirit also announced:

d. the slaughter at His birth (2:17-18) Through the weeping prophet Jeremiah in 31:15, the Holy Spirit had announced this prophecy of the weeping over the slaughter of the infants. Then finally, the Spirit announced:

e. His home after His birth (2:23) Is. 11:1 refers to Jesus in Hebrew as the *netzer*, or in English, *Branch*, which is also the root of the word *Nazareth*. So God had Joseph return with Jesus to his hometown of Nazareth in order that the double sense of this prophecy would also be fulfilled.

Of course, I seriously doubt that Mary and Joseph had any idea of the meaning of some of these prophecies, other than possibly the first two. Probably nobody at that moment did. The Spirit only revealed that full meaning of some of those prophecies later through Matthew. But when He did, do you see what the effect is? It becomes clear that this whole event of the birth of Jesus was planned down to the smallest detail. None of it was a surprise, none of it an unfortunate turn of events, none of it an accident of history. God the Holy Spirit arranged the entire thing. He arranged to have Mary in Bethlehem when Jesus was born, through moving the Emperor Augustus to proclaim a census at the right time. He arranged to have Jesus go down to Egypt, by sending wise men from the east following a star to alert Herod. He arranged to have Jesus grow up in Nazareth, instead of Judea. Every part of the events surrounding the Savior's birth was announced by the Holy Spirit and therefore, carefully arranged and orchestrated by the Holy Spirit, according to the will of the Father! He's a great arranger! And guess what? He's busy doing the same thing in your life! The Holy Spirit arranged for me to meet a boy name Jeff in the sixth grade and to have him like me. He arranged Jeff's sister and family to live near me and be willing to take me to church with them. He arranged for a new pastor named Bob to come to that church when I was 15, so I would listen and understand the Gospel. He arranged for Pastor Bob to transfer to LuAnn's church in a couple of years and for that church to have a concert one night that both LuAnn and I independently decided to go to, so that we would meet. The rest is history, but my point is that the Holy Spirit is the arranger of your life too! He is in all the details, working them out according to the Father's plan, so it would be good to learn to listen to Him! Now the Spirit not only announced Jesus' birth beforehand, He also played a second role:

II. The Holy Spirit Identified Jesus As God The Son At His Birth He pointed Him out and made clear who He was. He kept Him from being regarded as merely another human baby. First, He identified the Son:

1. to Elizabeth in **Lk. 1:39-43**. Notice Luke's comment that is so important; Elizabeth was filled with the Spirit when she spoke, that is, it was really the Holy Spirit speaking through her mouth. How would Elizabeth know what was going on? In comes her cousin Mary, who hasn't told anyone about her miraculous conception, not even her fiancé Joseph. Elizabeth surely didn't know what had happened, humanly speaking, but the moment Mary walks in the door, the Spirit tells her what's going on, "This is the mother of the Lord, the Christ. The child she's carrying is the Son of God!" Then a little later, the Holy Spirit identified Jesus:

2. to Zechariah, Elizabeth's husband, after her own child was born in **Lk. 1:67, 76**. Note again the phrase, *filled with the Holy Spirit*. The Holy Spirit showed Zechariah that his child, John, would be the forerunner to announce Mary's child, who would be the Lord, the Christ. And coupled with that, it was the Holy Spirit who identified Jesus:

3. to John himself 30 years **later** at Jesus' baptism in **Jn. 1:32-34**. John says, "I wouldn't have known Him, that is, I wouldn't have been sure that He was the Christ, the Anointed One, but the Holy Spirit showed me visibly by coming down like a dove and lighting upon Him." And what the Holy Spirit did for John, He really was doing for all of us. First, He planned Jesus' coming into the world and announced it. Then when He came, He made it plain to all men that He was here and identified Him specifically as the Son of God.

But there is one role even greater than these that the Spirit played. We are told that:

III. The Holy Spirit Arranged Jesus' Birth - Lk. 1:34-35 The angel Gabriel came to Mary to inform her and explain to her what was going to happen to her. It took Mary back a bit and her mind was confused and so without any disrespect, she asks a simple question that points out:

1. the human impossibility of a virgin birth (34) "How will this be?" She didn't say, "Oh, you mean after Joseph and I get married, I will have a son." She knew what the angel meant, that she would have a child with absolutely no interaction with a man. And she voices the question, "How can this be?" Science has been asking that question ever since

and coming up with the answer of human reason, "It can't be, so it wasn't!" But Mary isn't expressing doubt; she just wants an explanation. What God the Son intended to do in coming into the world was a biological impossibility. It defied all the laws of nature. He was going to be born of a virgin. How could that possibly be arranged? Well, in verse 35 you have:

2. the Divine explanation of the virgin birth (35) Now please understand that this is not a biological explanation; it is a spiritual explanation. Biology and human reproduction are not going to accomplish this; the Holy Spirit is going to do it! Look carefully with me at the wording here and you'll find some significant things. First, you can see:

a. the nature of the Spirit which is ***power***. Notice the two phrases are in parallel. *The Holy Spirit* (will come upon you), *the power of the Most High* (will overshadow you)". The two phrases say exactly the same thing. The power of the Most High is synonymous with the Holy Spirit. That is the Holy Spirit's chief characteristic, power to act, power to accomplish what the Father decrees and the Son directs. So many times, His Name is connected with power. Acts 10:38 says Jesus was anointed with the Holy Spirit and power and went around doing good and healing. In Rom. 15:13, Paul prays that we may overflow with hope by the POWER of the Holy Spirit. In Rom. 15:19, Paul said that all he had said and done, all the miracles and signs, were done in the POWER of the Holy Spirit. And in 1 Thes. 1:5, he said that it is the POWER of the Holy Spirit that brings men under conviction and saves them. Friends, that's why God put the Holy Spirit in every one of us as believers, that we might have the very POWER of God to live for Him and serve Him. That's why Jesus told the disciples they had to wait before they could be witnesses. Acts 1:8 says, *You shall receive POWER when the Holy Spirit comes*... Think of it; the same power that created the world, the same power that caused the Virgin Birth, that same power of God, the Holy Spirit, dwells in us and is available to help us every day of our lives! Secondly, notice:

b. the action of the Spirit He would **come upon** Mary. That's what He did in Old Testament times, before His coming to indwell believers at Pentecost. He didn't live IN people; He came UPON them and controlled them. He came upon Samson and filled him with supernatural strength from time to time. He came upon the prophets and controlled their mouths to speak the Word of God. He came upon Moses and the elders of Israel and Joshua and Gideon and Saul and David. And in every case, He imparted something to the person, words or wisdom or courage or strength. And now He came upon Mary and imparted something to her; He created in her the Divine embryo which would become the body of the Son of God, the body which the Father had prepared for His Son and in which the Son had now placed Himself. Just as He came upon the face of the deep in Gen. 1:2 and created the world as we know it, so now He came upon Mary and performed that supernatural miracle of creation which we call the Virgin Birth. Thirdly, notice:

c. the greatness of the Spirit in the word ***overshadow*** The word means to cast a shadow upon something. I always thought of *overshadow* as simply a synonym for *coming upon*, but then I noticed how the word is used elsewhere. In Acts 5:15 the people regarded Peter's power as so great that they felt even being overshadowed by him would bring them healing, that just his shadow would be enough to perform the miracle they needed. And that's the same sense we have here. The Virgin Birth was not some difficult and strenuous thing for the Holy Spirit, requiring all His power and concentration. He is so great and full of power that to Him, doing this miracle was the mere casting of His shadow upon Mary! The point comes in verse 37, *For nothing will be impossible with God!*

And that's the point of application I'd like to leave with you from this message. The same mighty, powerful, Holy Spirit who came upon Mary and produced this great miracle of the Virgin Birth now lives IN YOU full time! And when you have a hard time facing life, when you face difficulty going through the things that the Holy Spirit has orchestrated and planned out in detail in your circumstances, remember that He is also inside you to give you the power you need and that with Him nothing is impossible!

A young man who was studying medicine just could not accept the doctrine of the supernatural birth of Jesus. He went to a minister who tried to reason with him but left him in greater perplexity than ever. When he had finished his medical studies, he went to practice medicine in a rural community. So at Christmas time he decided to go to church and hear the local pastor, not thinking for a moment that it would change his viewpoint on the virgin birth of Jesus Christ. But this humble man got up and said, "If there is anybody here troubled about the mystery of God becoming man, I want to take you back to the first chapter of Genesis, the first verse. 'In the beginning God...'" He looked down into the audience very searchingly. The doctor was so self-conscious that he felt the speaker was looking directly at him. Then the pastor continued. "My brother, let me ask you this: Do you believe God was in the beginning? That is to say, that before the beginning began, God was? Somebody had to be to start things off. Science tells us how things evolve and grow, but not how they first started." "Yes, I believe that.", the doctor thought. "Now." the preacher said, "if you believe that God was before the beginning, you believe the only mysterious thing of this universe." "If I believe that, God knows I could believe anything else in the world," thought the doctor to himself. And his conclusion that memorable morning was, "I went to college and traveled through the mysteries of the theory of reproduction and cell formation, and now I realize that I was just a common fool for not believing in the Virgin Birth; that if God was in the beginning, that was the one supreme mystery of all the mysteries of this universe. My friend, the Virgin Birth is not a mystery. Our Tri-une God is the real mystery. If I can believe that in the beginning was the God the Father, then I can believe the Father sent His Son. If I can believe that in the beginning was

God the Son, then I can believe that the Son became a man. And if I can believe that in the beginning was God the Holy Spirit, then I can believe that the Spirit arranged a Virgin Birth. And I can also believe that I can do all things through Christ who strengthens, who literally puts power, in me in the person of the Holy Spirit.

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Vignettes Of Christ's Coming In Isaiah

The Prophecy Of The Virgin Birth - Is. 7:14

There are many prophecies in the Old Testament that point to Christ's first coming ahead of time. But during this Christmas season, I'd like to focus on three vignettes, three little pictures of the coming of Christ to earth, three beloved prophecies that we find in Isaiah that are dear to our hearts. The first is that well-known prophecy of the Virgin Birth that we have all memorized, Is. 7:14, *Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.* Did you notice that we only ever quote the second part of the verse? In order to understand:

I. The Background Of Isaiah's Prophecy, we have to look at the context. Isaiah was speaking to somebody and he was saying, *God Himself will give you a sign...* If you read the chapter, you'll see that by this statement that we love:

1. God was assuring Judah's King Ahaz of protection from Syria and Israel, who at that moment in history in 734 BC, were allies threatening to invade his land. So through Isaiah:

a. He promised the defeat and destruction of these two enemies Look with me at verses **(5-8)** He says, "Their plan to invade you WILL NOT happen and not only that, within 65 years Israel will completely cease to be a nation!" Then God offered Ahaz the opportunity to ask Him for a sign to prove it, but he refused to ask. So God Himself:

b. He gave Ahaz the sign of a child to assure him that it would be soon (14-16) The Hebrew word translated *virgin* simply means a young unmarried woman or maiden of marriageable age. The sign is that some maiden known to Ahaz would marry and have a baby, name him Immanuel, and before her child was old enough to know the difference to choose good over evil (maybe age 2 or 3), the enemy alliance would be shattered and the land deserted. This baby, soon to be born, was the physical sign to Ahaz that God was with His people and would deliver them within 3 years or so. Well, in fact, in 732 BC, Assyria wiped out Syria and put its king to death, ending that threat once for all and in 722 BC, Assyria conquered Israel and carried many of its people away! Then finally, King Ashurbanipal of Assyria took all the remnant of Israel away and transplanted Assyrians to live there in 669 BC, 65 years later, exactly as God predicted!

So God meant this newborn child, whoever he was, to be a physical sign to reassure King Ahaz and all Judah that He was with them. However, when we come to the New Testament:

2. Matthew says this prophecy was ultimately fulfilled in Christ - Mt. 1:20-23 It is not merely declaring that an ordinary human child would be born in Ahaz' day; the promise goes far, far deeper than that:

a. it is declaring that the Promised Savior from sin would be born, that the baby Joseph was so disturbed about, the child that Mary, his betrothed, was carrying, was actually the long-awaited Messiah, the Savior of the world! And:

b. it is declaring that He would be born to a literal virgin, to an unmarried maiden who had never been with a man! That is the whole point of the story; as unbelievable as it had seemed to Joseph, Mary had become pregnant without any interaction with a man and God had promised this through Isaiah more than 700 years ahead of time in that simple phrase, *Behold the virgin shall conceive and bear a son and they shall call his name Immanuel (which means, God is with us!)*.

The Virgin Birth of Jesus is one of the basic tenets of our faith. We affirm it in our doctrinal statement. Go to any ordination council and you will almost always hear the candidate be asked, "Do you believe in the Virgin Birth?" as a test of whether he is truly orthodox. We affirm it in the Apostles Creed; we sing it over and over in our Christmas carols, yet why does it matter so much? What is its true significance? Let's take a few moments this morning to ponder the imponderable:

II. The Nature Of The Virgin Birth First of all, let me point out that:

1. it was not merely a fatherless conception In the physical sense, all that requires is a fluke of nature where the chromosomes in the woman's egg cell divide themselves an extra time to create the proper number so the cell can go ahead and divide and form a fetus. Of course, there is no record of that ever happening throughout history, but even if it did, it would still be nothing like the birth of Christ, because all it would give you is another human being, a clone perhaps, but a human being that is exactly like every other human being and nothing more, except that he has an extraordinary origin! Second, I want to say plainly that:

2. it was not the union of God and Mary Mythology is filled with stories of gods marrying human women and having babies that were half-god and half-man, men with supernatural powers. In fact, Muslims accuse us Christians of believing that very thing and the thought is abhorrent to them. Sadly, some of us tend to actually think sort of like that;

Mary was Jesus' mother and God was His Father and that makes Jesus the Son of God, as though each contributed half somehow. But Jesus was not begotten or conceived in the human sense of the term. Yes, John repeatedly calls Him the only-begotten Son of God, but that phrase has nothing to do with Mary or her being pregnant. Christ was the Only Begotten Son before He ever came into the world, according to 1 Jn. 4:9. He was eternally the Son of God; He is called that in the Old Testament. He did not become God's Son through Mary's conception. Rather:

3. it was the Eternal Son becoming a baby in Mary's womb The difference between this birth and every other human birth is that the One who was born existed before His conception! Micah 5:2 says that the one who is to rule Israel would come forth from Bethlehem, and adds literally, "whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting [or from eternity]". Jesus is God the Son, an eternal being. He has always existed from eternity past. He was there all through the Old Testament and made a few rather vivid, if only temporary, appearances. Yet at this particular time, He entered the womb of the virgin Mary and planted Himself there as a human embryo. Mary was simply a chosen vehicle, providing the means He needed to enter the human race. But there is still more to it:

4. it was God specially creating a human body for His Son Jesus, God the Son, in eternity past did not have a body nor a human nature. He was God and as such, was spirit only. Now look with me at **Heb. 10:5**. When Christ came into the world, God the Father prepared a special body for Him. The Greek word *prepared* means to perfect or complete or prepare or even to create. If you look at **11:3**, it says that God *created* the universe at His command out of nothing! That's the same Greek word. God created a special body for Jesus there in Mary's womb, one that was totally human in every way and yet without sin, as we'll see in a moment. Exactly how He did that, we don't know. Perhaps He used Mary's egg cell as the raw material and then transformed it, much like He transformed the dirt out of which He made Adam. But I'm personally inclined to think that He created out of nothing a special human embryo that would develop into Jesus' perfect body. It's a deep mystery we'll never understand, but we do know this:

5. it was done through the power of the Holy Spirit Mary asked the very question, "How can this be?" of the angel Gabriel in **Lk. 1:34-35** and the answer she gets is very simple, *The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy— the Son of God.* The Holy Spirit often came upon people and caused them to do things in the Old Testament. When He came upon Samson, He infused into him enormous superhuman strength. When He came upon the prophets, they spoke words under His control. And that same dynamic power of God would now come upon Mary to accomplish this special thing in her. The power of Him who is the Highest Being in all the universe would simply cast its shadow upon her. **Verse 37** sums up the angel's point, *Nothing will be impossible with God*. What was to happen in her was to be a supernatural act of God's power and yet to Him, it would be only the casting of a shadow compared to all He is able to do. And our text reminds us that the end result of the process is that:

6. it made Jesus Immanuel It made Him to be **God with us,** literally, **as one of us**, God with us and among us, not merely in human *form*, but as an actual, real, 100% human being, the exact same as we are in every way. He developed in the womb like we do, He was born like we are, He grew up and matured to adulthood exactly like we do. He ate and drank and went to the bathroom like we do. He got hot and tired and hungry and thirsty like we do, because He WAS one of us, even though He was still 100% God!

Yet the question remains, "Why did God do it? Why did He devise such an amazing, miraculous way for His Son to enter the world? What are...":

III. The Reasons For The Virgin Birth The most obvious one is this:

1. it allowed Jesus to become a sinless human being Because of the virgin birth, the angel says that the child Mary bears will be holy. He will be without sin. You see:

a. every human being born since Adam has a sinful nature - Rom. 5:12 says *Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned*. When Adam fell, his human nature was corrupted. The evil force called sin entered his body, soul and spirit and he became sinful. And ever afterward, that sinful human nature was spread to the entire human race by natural generation. Every human being is born with a sin nature, with a bent or drive to sin and with the force of sin dwelling in him, because he gets it from his parents. If Jesus had been born through natural generation, He would have had a sin nature like we all have; Mary would have transmitted it to Him because she had a sinful nature like all the rest of us. However, because God created a body specially for Him in Mary's womb:

b. in Jesus there was NO sin - 1 John 3:5 says literally, *In Him sin is not.* He was born without sin, without any trace of that fallen nature we all get from Adam, without the power of sin dwelling anywhere inside Him. You see, when we say that Christ was sinless, it does not only mean that He did not commit any sins; it means that there was no taint of sin in Him at all. He was absolutely and completely pure! Without the virgin birth, Jesus can't be a sinless human being and here's why that's important:

2. it qualified Jesus to become our Substitute Look with me at **Heb. 2:14-17**. Put simply:

a. He had to be made like us in order to make atonement for us Human beings have flesh and blood and if anyone or anything is going to redeem or save human beings, God says it must be someone who is of their own race, someone with flesh and blood like theirs. It must be another human being. No angel, no animal, no other type of being could save us from our sins. Yet the problem, as we just saw, is that every human being is a sinner, an imperfect creature who is corrupt at the very core of his being. No human being could save us either! So, God sent Jesus into the world through the virgin birth:

b. He was sent in our likeness to be our sin offering - Rom. 8:3 says, *...By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh*. Notice it does not say that He sent Him IN SINFUL FLESH but in the *LIKENESS* of it. What does that mean? He came in a real genuine human body just like ours in every way except one; it did not have that corrupt sin nature in it! Then Paul says, *and FOR sin*, or as other translations put it, *to be our sin offering.* Because Jesus became a perfect, sinless, flawless, pure human being, He was fit to become our sin-bearer, the One perfect, holy, spotless human being who could stand in for us at the cross and take our place. And that's exactly what He did.

c. He did the Father's will completely, going to the cross and offering His body to make us holy Look with me at **Heb. 10:3-10**. Animal sacrifices, like those made in the Old Testament, could never take away sins. They were only symbols that looked ahead to what Christ would one day do. They covered sin for the time being. It was sort of like buying on credit, receiving the item, forgiveness, before the payment was actually made by presenting a "credit card", a symbol of the real payment mirrored in the death of an animal. Sacrifice and offering couldn't save us; the death of an animal couldn't pay for the sin of a man. So God prepared a body for His Son and sent Him into the world to do His will, which was to go to the cross. And the writer of Hebrews is actually quoting **Ps. 40:6-7**, *Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but my ears you have pierced; burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not require. Then I said, "Here I am, I have come-- it is written about me in the scroll*. The author of Hebrews did a little inspired interpretation here. In the Old Testament, when a Hebrew man was another man's servant and he didn't want to go free, but wanted to completely devote himself to his master permanently, he would go to the doorpost and the master would take an awl and bore a hole through his earlobe and pierce it. The point is that God didn't want animal sacrifices; He wanted a Perfect One who would be so completely devoted to Him that He would allow Himself to be pierced, not just through the ear, but allow His whole body to be pierced on the cross for sins. So God prepared Him a body and He came to earth to became our Substitute, our Stand-in, the One who would take our place and receive our penalty! That's what the virgin birth did for us! Hallelujah! But it also did another thing:

3. it revealed God to us in a tangible form You remember **John 1:14**, *...the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.* And then verse **18**, *No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.* God was so different from us! So far away, so unlike us, so removed from everything we experience. We couldn't see Him; we couldn't touch Him, that is, until He took to Himself a human body, became flesh and lived among us. Philip expressed that human frustration in the Upper Room when he said, *Lord show us the Father!* "If only we could just see Him, that would be enough for us forever! But Jesus replied, *Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father*. - **14:9**. Jesus said, "I AM Him! See ME! That's why I came! I am God in a body you can see and touch and hear!" John put it like this, *That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life* - **1 Jn. 1:1**. Through the virgin birth God became tangible to us so we could see and touch and hear Him in a body like ours, in a way that we could KNOW Him! And here's the icing on the cake:

4. it equipped Jesus to be genuinely empathetic to us as human beings You see, Jesus did not just come to earth and take a human body like ours for a time and then return to heaven. He took a body unto Himself in entering Mary's womb, but He never let go of it.

a. Jesus remains a man, a human being like us, forever - 1 Tim. 2:5 says, *For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the MAN Christ Jesus*. Right now, there is a Man in the glory on our behalf! There is a Man heaven for us, seated on the throne! There is one of us up there! And the Scripture says what this means is that:

b. as a man He is able to sympathize with our weaknesses Look back again to **Heb. 4:14-16**. We have Someone there to go to who knows what it's like to be a human being, who knows what it's like to be tempted to sin, who knows what it's like to experience all the limitations of a human nature living in this sin-cursed world. We have One who lived it and we don't have to be afraid to come to Him, to bare our hearts and souls to Him in prayer, because He's been there; He understands. He will never say, "Tough luck, you should know better!" That word *sympathize* means "to suffer with". As a man He suffers with us; His heart feels our pain! He understands and will give us all the mercy and grace that we so desperately need whenever we need it!

A Belgian priest by the name of Joseph Damien was sent in 1873 to minister to lepers in Hawaii. As soon as he arrived on Molokai, he began trying to build friendships with the residents of the leper colony, but they rejected him. He poured himself into the ministry, building a small chapel and holding worship services. But hardly anyone came. After 12 long years, he gave up. As he was standing on the pier about to board the ship that would take him back to Belgium, he looked down at his hands and saw tiny white spots. He knew they could mean only one thing; he had contracted leprosy. So instead of going home, he returned to his work in the leper colony. The news of the missionary's disease spread through the community within hours, and soon the lepers --hundreds of them--had gathered outside his hut. They understood his pain and despair. The following Sunday when Damien arrived at the chapel, the small building was filled to overflowing. It was the beginning of a long and fruitful ministry. What made the difference? Now the lepers knew that he understood their condition. There was no question about whether he cared or not because he became one of them. [Adapted from Moments for Pastors by Robert Strand. New Leaf Press, 1994. Day 11.] Brothers and sisters, Jesus became one of us to save us. And now that He has saved us, He remains one of us to help us. That's what we celebrate at Christmas as we repeat Isaiah's words, *Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel - God with us.*

Vignettes Of Christ's Coming In Isaiah

The Prophecy Of The Child King - Is. 9:6

The second important prophecy concerning the birth of Christ is found in Isaiah 9:6. At Christmas time we often focus on the humbleness of the circumstances surrounding Christ's birth. It seems like the only ones who really realized the significance of Christ's birth were the Wise Men who arrived weeks later. They asked, *Where is He that is born KING of the Jews?* Christ's birth is not only a miraculous virgin birth as we studied in 7:14, it is the birth of a King. We've never had a king, so we don't grasp fully what that means, but in ancient times when a king had a son, a firstborn son, it was an event to celebrate! That child was born to rule. He was heir to the throne. He was born with a destiny and a purpose! Jesus Christ was born King of the Jews, as the Wise Men knew, and, more than that, King over all the earth! And 700 years ahead of time, in **9:6**, Isaiah told us some very special things about Jesus, the Child who was born to be King, *For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.* In the first half of that verse, we are told about:

I. The Coming Of Our King The King we were to look for:

1. He would first be born as a child Christ did not descend full-blown from heaven as a king with an army of angels to conquer the earth, the way that He will at His second coming! Rather, He entered the world as a child through the womb of a virgin. But notice the second phrase; Isaiah says:

2. He would be given as a son Now admittedly, in Hebrew poetry this is simply a parallel statement. To Isaiah, no doubt, a son being given is simply the repetition of a child being born. But we who have the advantage of living after He came, know something more. We know what it means that *a son was given*. We know John 3:16. *For God so loved the world that He GAVE His Only Son.* The son Isaiah is talking about is God's Son, His only Son. And that Son being *given* means far more than being born. God gave His son to us by sending Him to be born as a child and to grow up to be a Son and to go to a cross to die for the sins of the world! What a way for a King to come! Kings are usually born in castles and surrounded by servants and they grow to manhood and take the throne. Our King was born in a stable surrounded by shepherds and grew up to manhood to be crucified as a common criminal! The world laughs at us for believing that. "How can this child, this son, be a king?" But they only know the first chapter of the story. Isaiah goes on to tell us:

3. He will become the King of the whole world, *the government shall be upon His shoulder!* One day, the governing of this whole earth will be His right and responsibility. One day, Jesus Christ is coming back and He is going to rule and reign visibly over this world. Isaiah is declaring clearly that:

a. He was born to be King Jesus and Pilate actually had a conversation about this in Pilate's chamber. Look with me at **John 18:33-37**. Notice carefully what Jesus said, "I am a King. For this I was <u>born</u> (as a baby). For this I <u>came into the world</u> (as the Eternal Son of God). But my Kingdom is not (literally) "<u>out of</u>" this world, that is, it doesn't work like yours; I'm not going to gather a bunch of followers and train an army and fight to take over the government. My Kingdom is not from here; it's from a different place." In fact:

b. His throne is in heaven Flip over with me to **Luke 22:67-69**. He told the Jewish leaders that His throne was not a Roman throne, not an earthly throne. His throne was God's throne in heaven. His rule was not to be carved out below; it was to be imposed from above. And when the time is right:

c. He will come again to establish His Kingdom on earth He went on to tell the High Priest, *...I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven,* in **Mat. 26:63-64**. That's how His Kingdom is going to come. That's how the government is going to be upon His shoulders. One day He's going to return and take over this world. Zechariah tells us that *in that day the Lord [that is, JESUS] will be King over all the earth!* - 14:9. Isaiah didn't realize there was going to be a gap between the time the child was born and

the Son was given and the time the government would be upon His shoulder, but we do. Yet that gap has grown so long now that we've almost forgotten that Jesus is coming to be King over the world and to set up His kingdom on earth! He was born as a child to be our King! But what kind of King is He going to be? Well, in the second half of 9:6, Isaiah unfolds for us:

II. The Character Of Our King using four very special titles. And to fully comprehend what they mean, let's compare these names with what was announced by the angel to Mary in **LK. 1:30-33**. First He is called:

1. Wonderful Counselor A counselor is a very wise person who gives sound advice because of His deep knowledge. *Wonderful* means amazing, unbelievable, beyond human conception. Our King is going to reign with unbelievable wisdom. ***He has an Unbelievable Plan*** which He spelled out again to Mary. Jesus would be born as a child without a human father and actually be God's Son. And one day, Father God will GIVE Him the Throne of David, the Throne of the whole world. To do what? Is. 9:7 says, *Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore.* He will establish God's Kingdom on this earth and He will uphold or sustain it. And the chief characteristics of that Kingdom will be true justice and real righteousness. Who would invent a plan like that? He's got an unbelievable plan to redeem this world because He is a Wonderful Counselor. Second, He is called the:

2. Mighty God In Hebrew, that is *El Gibbor*. A *gibbor* is a mighty man, a warrior, a champion that no one can defeat. God is a Mighty One; Jesus is the Mighty God. This means ***He has Unopposable Power***. The angel told Mary *He shall be GREAT!* Big! Huge! Nobody can stop Him. All the nations of earth will be gathered against Him at His Return according to the prophets, but no one can stop Him from reigning. How? Is. 9:7 ends by saying, *the zeal of the Lord of Hosts [literally, of Armies] will accomplish this!* You don't need to worry about someone overthrowing His Kingdom. Like it or not, the kingdoms of this world will become the Kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ one day! His third title is the:

3. Everlasting Father Now before you ask how the Son can be the Father, just remember Christ's words to Philip, *He who has seen ME has seen the Father!* The real emphasis in this verse is not on the relationship of the Son to the Father, but on His relationship to time. Isaiah is saying that ***He has an Unending Position***. Verse 7 says, *of the increase of His government... there will be no end...* How long will He reign? *...from this time forth and forevermore*! The angel told Mary, *of His kingdom there will be no end!* Our King will never be removed from His throne. And finally, Isaiah calls Him the:

4. Prince of Peace Today the nations of the earth seek peace through negotiations and treaties, but when our King reigns, ***He will bring an Unbreakable Peace***. Verse 7 says that his peace will continue to increase and have no end! Look again at what the angels announced to the shepherds in **Lk. 2:13-14**. The good news of Christmas is that there will at last, one day, be peace on earth and the swords will be beaten into plowshares and the spears into pruning hooks and nation will not rise up against nation, neither will they train for war anymore! Not when our King comes to reign! Speaking of Jesus, Micah 5:5 says, *He himself will be their peace!* His presence and His mighty power will at last bring full and complete peace to this world.

What a glorious future lies ahead for this world. And it is all wrapped up in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger in the person of Jesus Christ! The child who was born is the King who will rule the whole world. The question this morning is, "Is He YOUR King?" Dr. S. M. Lockridge was pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in San Diego for 40 years. His most famous message is called, *"That's My King"* and you can listen to him deliver it much better than I can on YouTube, but I'd like to close by reading you an abbreviated version of it:

The Bible says my King is the King of the Jews …He's the King of Israel. He's the King of Righteousness. He's the King of the Ages. He's the King of Heaven. He's the King of Glory. He's the King of Kings, and He's the Lord of Lords. That's my King! I wonder do you know Him?

My King is a sovereign King. No means of measure can define His limitless love. He's enduringly strong. He's entirely sincere. He's eternally steadfast. He's immortally graceful. He's imperially powerful. He's impartially merciful.... I wonder if you know Him today?

He supplies strength for the weak. He's available for the tempted and the tried. He sympathizes and He saves. He strengthens and sustains. He guards and He guides. He heals the sick. He cleansed the lepers. He forgives sinners. He discharges debtors. He delivers the captives. He defends the feeble. He blesses the young. He serves the unfortunate. He regards the aged. He rewards the diligent. And he beautifies the meek. I wonder if you know Him?....

Well, His life is matchless. His goodness is limitless. His mercy is everlasting. His love never changes. His Word is enough. His grace is sufficient. His reign is righteous and His yoke is easy and His burden is light. I wish I could describe Him to you. Yes, He's indescribable. He's incomprehensible. He's invincible. He's irresistible. You can't get him out of your mind. You can't get him off of your hands. You can't outlive him and you can't live without Him. Well, the Pharisees couldn't stand Him. But they found out they couldn't stop Him. Pilate couldn't find any fault in Him. Herod couldn't kill him. Death couldn't handle Him, and the grave couldn't hold Him. Yeah! That's my King. - Is He yours?

Vignettes Of Christ's Coming In Isaiah

The Prophecy Of The Light In Darkness - Is. 9:1-7

The third picture of Christ's coming in Isaiah is in the whole of the longer passage from which we lifted our text last week. 7:14 is the prophecy of the Virgin Birth. 9:6 is the prophecy of the Child born to be King. But the whole of Is. 9:1-7 is the prophecy of the Light shining in Darkness. In order to give you a bit of a visual aid, this summer my wife and I took two of our grandchildren on a mini-vacation and one of the spots we visited was Indian Echo Caverns in Hummelstown PA. Our tour guide took us deep into the series of caves and at one point when we were in a room 100 feet underground or so, she said, "Now I'm going to turn out the lights and let you see what true darkness is like. So she did, and with no light at all able to enter the cavern, you could see absolutely nothing, not even your hand held in front of your face. It was scary and no one would have even dared to take a step. But when she turned the dim bulbs back on, it was like flooding our whole world with brilliant light. Everything became instantly visible in detail and the cave was totally transformed into a bright and beautiful place. That's the sort of word picture the Spirit is trying to paint for us through the words of Isaiah 9:2, *The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone.* There are two contrasting items in that vignette, great darkness and great light, and we need to understand the first to properly appreciate the second. So let's think for a moment about:

I. The Great Gloom And Anguish That Came Upon Israel Back up and look with me at **8:22-9:1**. The land that was given to the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali was a large area north and west of the Sea of Galilee and the whole region became known as Galilee. In this passage, Galilee represents the entire northern Kingdom of Israel. Isaiah began his ministry in the year that King Uzziah of Judah died, 739 BC, and God sent him north to prophesy to Israel for almost 60 years Those years were a very dark time for Israel. In 732 BC, the whole area fell under the domination of Assyria and finally in 722, the Assyrians came and conquered it once for all. In the process they deported much of its population to Assyria and brought many of their own people to resettle in their place in the land. Galilee actually became "Galilee of the Gentiles", because so many of her people were not Jews and did not worship the God of Israel. In the land there was darkness and gloom of every sort.

1. it was physical The people lived under the oppression of foreigners. Foreign armies marched back and forth over their soil and now owned it. They had no power to resist, but were oppressed and mistreated at will. Their lives were filled with suffering and always hung by a thread. Existence became a desperate thing. **There was no peace for them**, only gloom and anguish. Furthermore:

2. it was moral All this had come upon them, of course, because of their sin and rebellion against God. If you read the prophets, you'll find that Israel's whole culture had become filled with the very things God detested; immorality and infidelity was the order of the day. Dishonesty and greed dominated the marketplace. Regard for human life was at an all-time low. And even after the Assyrians came, there was no repentance and no change. **There was no righteousness** to be found in Israel, only darkness. And that darkness was also:

3. it was spiritual They had already been worshipping false idols for centuries, but after Assyria's colonization attempt, the new people they settled in the land didn't know at all how to worship the God of Israel, so they hired renegade priests to teach them the rudiments of sacrifice to Jehovah. As a consequence, religion in Galilee became this syncretistic hodge-podge of paganism with Jewish overtones and genuine believers in Jehovah were few and far between. **There was no true faith among them**; there was only gloom and darkness and:

4. it came most heavily upon the northern region of Galilee as Isaiah points out in **(1b)**. The invaders came from the north, so Galilee was the first part of Israel to be attacked and conquered, to have armies pass back and forth through it. Of the gloom and darkness that settled upon the land, this was the darkest region of all. However, the darkness Isaiah points to was not only in Israel. This picture that God paints of people walking in darkness:

5. it mirrors the darkness the whole world lies in Just step back and picture the earth of that day for a moment as God sees it. As your eyes scan the entire world, there is one faint flickering candle of true faith in the land of Judah and the whole of the rest of the globe is black darkness! There is no peace anywhere, only anguish and strife. There is no righteousness anywhere, only moral darkness everywhere you look. And that little candle of spiritual light is rapidly going out. Judah is not doing well and is headed for her own captivity. Soon, the only light remaining will be a few glowing sparks like Daniel and his three friends and Esther and Nehemiah. Viewed as a whole, you have the words of **1 Jn. 5:19**, ...*the whole world lies in the power of the evil one*. It has no hope; there is nothing to change it, nothing to save the race from destroying itself. The world itself stands in the shadow of death! But to the people living in that darkness, Isaiah gives a promise of hope. He speaks of:

II. The Great Light That God Would Send Into The Darkness (1-2) Into the midst of that great darkness, Isaiah promises that God would send, not just a tiny glimmer of light, but a great light. The world will not stay in darkness, but a brilliant light will suddenly begin to shine, right in the middle of the gloom! What does that mean? What is he talking about? The answer is in the beginning of verse **6**. God's light:

1. it began in a manger with the birth of a Child Jesus was born! What a small and a humble beginning for a great light which would light the world. God's light came into the world in the form of a baby born in a stable, a baby who was the Son of God. It was He who was the hope of the world. As He grew to manhood and began His public ministry, He openly declared that He himself was the light of the world! And that light:

2. it shined brightly in Galilee through the ministry of Jesus It was no accident that Jesus grew up in the town of Nazareth in the territory of Zebulun and that in the beginning of His ministry, He moved to Capernaum in the territory of Naphtali. The great majority of his ministry took place in the darkest place of all, in Galilee of the Gentiles! Why? Look with me at **Mt. 4:13-16**. It was deliberate! God was sending His light into the darkest place there was, beginning to shine it there in Galilee, exactly as He promised 700 years before, deliberately fulfilling the promise He had made through Isaiah! But the words of Is. 9:6 also hint that God's great light would shine through the giving of a Son and we know from the New Testament that this great light:

3. it comes to us personally since the giving of God's Son at the cross God intended His light, not just to shine in the darkness of the world, but to shine brightly in our own darkened hearts. The problem is that the true darkness was not merely outside us in the world, but INSIDE us. The darkened hearts of human beings are what produces the awful darkness in the world. Look with me at **John 1:4-9, 12**. Every person who comes into this world comes in with darkness in his or her heart, but the Divine Son who was given at the cross and raised from the dead will come to live in our hearts, take away that darkness of sin, give us His life and fill us with His light! All of us who receive Him come to know peace. We are given His righteousness. We now know the true God and have become His children, children of light! *For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. - 2 Cor. 4:6!* God's light now shines brightly in us through Jesus and WE have become the light of the world! *For at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light! - Eph. 5:8.* So, from Jerusalem that light began to spread, as believers went throughout Judea and all Samaria and to the uttermost parts of the earth. Today the light of Christ shines through His followers on every continent and in literally every political nation. Over the centuries and particularly in the last half century, millions upon millions have been swept into the Kingdom of Light, yet by and large the world is still covered in great darkness! There is no peace. Fighting rages in so many places. Genocide has wiped out multiplied thousands in Africa in our own memories. Governments cruelly oppress their people in North Korea and many other lands. Terrorists blow up bombs in concerts in Europe and cafes in Israel and shoot down people in California. There is no righteousness. Greed and might rule and dominate in government and in business. And in a world of 8 billion people, comparably few have come to genuine faith in Jesus and received the light. So the world, for the most part, still lies in darkness. However, God's promise of light through Isaiah does not stop at the promise of the birth of a child or the giving of a son:

4. it will culminate in a future Kingdom where Christ will reign (6c-7) This Son who is given will be King and He will reign on David's throne, not merely over Israel, but over the whole earth! The government of the world will be the royal robe draped upon His shoulders. And when this world becomes His Kingdom one day:

a. the whole world will be filled with peace (4-5) Peace will have no limits, no end. The power of all the oppressors of earth will be broken, like it was in the day that Gideon's little band defeated the mighty armies of Midian. Nation will not lift up sword against nation; neither shall they learn war anymore! The instruments of war will become fuel for the fire! Oppression and hatred will no longer exist. And:

b. the whole world will be filled with justice and righteousness Picture it: a world where justice is not the exception, but the rule, where what is right is done and selfishness and greed are no more, where justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream and the earth is full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea! Hallelujah! This Son is one day going to come back to this earth to rule over a kingdom of light! The return of Christ to set up the Kingdom of God on earth is the ultimate culmination of the meaning of the Christmas Babe in the manger! And:

c. this Kingdom will continue forever Look at Verse 7, *...there will be no end...from this time forth and forevermore.* When Jesus comes, the light will shine and it will fill the earth and it will never be put out! It will continue on forever as God eventually creates a new heaven and a new earth in which dwells righteousness!

Oh, it sounds too good to be true! How can such a thing ever be? How can I know that He will do this? Look at the end of verse **7**:

5. it is guaranteed by God's zeal for His own glory! God did not create this world, He did not create the human race, to be in perpetual darkness. He created it to be a Kingdom of light. He created people to know Him and worship Him and give Him glory and you can bet that one day, He will actually make it happen. His own righteous passion to see that He is glorified the way that He should be will not rest until He brings it to pass! A world full of light is as sure as God Himself! He CANNOT fail to do what He has committed Himself to do! Now, once we are convinced that is true, we are ready to look at:

III. The Great Joy That This Light Brings (3) Isaiah sees that day from afar, that day when the promised Child would be born to Israel. He sees the joy that Christ would bring to Israel when He would come in that day. He sees that the birth of Jesus is truly what the angel announced, *I bring you good tidings of great JOY which shall be to all people for unto you is born this day in the city of David a SAVIOR!* But he is also picturing the great joy there will be in that day when the Son will take the government of the world upon His shoulders and every oppressor will be vanquished That joy will be ours too! When He comes:

1. **we will greatly rejoice before Him in that day** We'll rejoice:
   a. with the joy of those who reap a long-awaited harvest If you are a farmer, it must seem like it takes forever to wait until winter's over and plow the soil and plant the seeds and wait for them to sprout and see them grow so slowly. Then you have to pray for rain and ward off insects and weeds and hope that everything goes just right, until the wheat in the field finally turns a golden brown and the day comes at last for the harvest to begin. And then when the last of the harvest is safely stored in the barn, there is a great joy, a great celebration! Oh, we have waited a long time for the government to be upon His shoulders! Century after century, the faithful have waited for His coming and His Kingdom. Can you imagine the great rejoicing that we will be part of when He comes at last!!! We'll rejoice with the joy of fulfillment of a long-awaited hope, but we'll also rejoice:

   b. with the joy of those who receive the spoils of a hard-fought victory If you're a soldier, it must seem like it takes forever for the battles to end and the war to be won. It takes everything you've got. There is so much ongoing devastation and destruction and people being wounded and dying, so much suffering and hurt. You fight and you fight and you keep on fighting, and then finally one day, the last battle is won and the enemy army is defeated. The war is finally over and in great rejoicing you go out to pick up the spoils the enemy has left behind. Oh, it has been a long, hard battle to reach the nations of the earth. Countless thousands have given their very lives in the process; millions more have suffered greatly. It seems like the battle will go on forever, but on that day when He comes, the battle will be over and we will rejoice with everything in us, because peace has come at last! Oh, there will be great rejoicing in that day, but why should we wait until then?

2. **we should greatly rejoice before Him right now** because:
   a. we are already delivered from darkness and transferred into Christ's Kingdom - Col. 1:12-13 says we should be *...giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son*! We already belong to that Kingdom of Light, because we have the King in our hearts and He's translated us out of the darkness in which we once lived! The light that will one day flood the world floods our souls even now because Jesus, the King, lives in us! The world may be dark, but we have light in Jesus Christ! Therefore:

   b. we are to joyfully proclaim His excellencies because of it - 1 Pet. 2:9, *...you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light*. Since we have been transferred out of darkness into His marvelous light, we are to declare to the world how excellent, how wonderful, how marvelous, He is, and to do it with the joy of those whose lives have been rescued from death to life!

Yes, the world is still a very dark place. One day God will change that, but in the meantime, He has placed His light in us and told us, *Let your light shine before men...* As we enter a new year together I'd like to share with you a video done by the folks at Prayercast. It's a newsreel of the highlights of this year's bad news put together with a prayerful song asking Jesus both to reign and rule in our hearts and to come back and make this world right. Let's enter this new year praying, praying for Jesus to shine through us into the darkness of our world and begging Him to come and make this world right. *[Watch the video here: http://www.prayercast.com/you-reign.html]*

Vignettes Of Christ's Coming In Isaiah

The Prophecy Of The Anointed One - Is. 61:1-3

Thus far in Isaiah, we have looked at the Prophecy of the Virgin Birth in 7:14, the Prophecy of the Child King in 9:6 and the Prophecy of the Light in Darkness in 9:1-7. The last prophecy I want to look at with you is Isaiah 61:1-3, and while this prophecy is not usually associated with Christmas, nevertheless, it tells us a great deal about the purpose of Christ's coming into the world. Because of the great darkness in this world, the world is filled with suffering people. Everywhere you look, people are suffering in one way or another. In fact, suffering invades every one of our lives. None of us can escape it. Yet that is not how God intends things to be and He sent His Son into the world most particularly and specifically to impact those who suffer. We begin in verse 1 by noting:

I. The Person Who Was Sent Into The World *...the Lord has anointed ME.* At first reading and without background, one might naturally assume that Isaiah was talking about himself. He was indeed a prophet whom God had anointed with his Spirit and sent to preach good news to the nation of Israel. But Jesus settled its meaning once and for all at the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth one Sabbath when He was asked to read the Scriptures. Look with me at **Lk. 4:16-**

21. He said, "These words of Isaiah are not primarily about Isaiah; they are about ME! I am the ONE Isaiah was talking about and the ministry that I have right here and now is the ministry Isaiah was talking about!" So these truths from Isaiah are about Jesus, who was to come into the world. Now look what they tell us. First of all:

1. He was appointed to a position That word *anointed* is the Hebrew verb *mashach*, which refers to the concept of a ceremonial anointing with oil. High priests were anointed. Kings were anointed. It was the symbol of appointment, of being chosen for a high position. And it is also the root of the Hebrew word *MESSIAH* which means *Anointed One*, the One chosen and appointed by God. The Greek word in Luke is *chrio*, from which we get *Christ* and has the same meaning. Literally it says, “He has ‘messiahed’ me or ‘christed’ me. He has appointed me the Christ, the Messiah, the Chosen One.” For centuries, ever since creation, mankind, or at least the Jews, had been waiting for a Promised One to come. To Adam, to Abraham, to Moses, to David, century after century, God gave promises of a CHOSEN ONE whom He would send to set the world straight. In Jesus' day, every Jewish woman hoped to be the mother of the messiah. Every godly Jew hoped and waited for Messiah to come. In fact, the whole future hope of every Israelite was pinned on one thing, that one day MESSIAH would come and set all things right! Their only hope to end their bondage and despair and suffering at the hands of their enemies was that Messiah would come. And Jesus boldly announced, "I'm here! The Hope of all the Ages is standing in front of you." Now, the visible sign of that anointing was the Holy Spirit. The oil used in anointing in the Old Testament symbolized the Holy Spirit. But Jesus Himself was literally anointed with the Holy Spirit at His baptism. The Spirit of God descended upon Him in the form of a dove and the Father's voice from heaven said, *This is My beloved Son in whom I am well-pleased*. And John the Baptist said, *I saw and bore witness that this was the Son of God!* So, the first thing we know is that the Christmas baby in the manger was God's Promised Messiah. Wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in the manger was the hope of all the ages and the desire of nations, the Promised One who at last would set all things straight! Next, notice in the middle of verse 18 that:

2. He was sent on a mission *...He has sent Me.* The word *sent* is in the Greek, the word *apostello* which indicates one sent on a mission. The Father sent Jesus, His Son, the Chosen Messiah into the world on a mission, just as we send a missionary across the world. It was David Livingstone who said, *God had only one Son and he made that Son a missionary.* Bethlehem's manger was a missionary arriving on His designated field. And His mission was two-fold. First, He was:

a. to be a Savior to sinners - Gal. 4:4 tells us that, *God sent forth His son born of a woman... to redeem those under law*. God sent His Son to REDEEM! The mission of the Messiah was to redeem us. The cross was His primary mission, to provide for the redemption of the world. But He was also sent forth for another purpose, which is the one focused on by Isaiah in our text. He was sent:

b. to be a Herald to sufferers Notice the verbs, to *proclaim*, to *proclaim*, to *proclaim*. God sent His Son to be a herald, an announcer of good news. To whom? The poor, the broken-hearted, the captives, the mourners. To God's people who suffer! Christmas is for sufferers, for those who hurt. That baby in the manger was sent to deliver to us good news. So, let's look more specifically at:

II. The Purpose For Which He Was Sent Into The World Isaiah says He was sent, first of all:

1. to declare good news And not only did He literally preach good news while He walked on earth, His very coming to earth is a declaration of good news! To whom? Well, he mentions four groups of people. First of all, His birth declares good news:

a. to the struggling To the poor who struggle to have enough to eat and to wear. To the depressed who struggle to make it through another day. To the sick whose days are marked with pain. To those who get pushed aside in the crowd whose voice nobody hears and whose needs nobody cares about. That's what the word means. To you who are engaged in the daily struggle for existence, Christ's coming into the world declares good news: **there is an end!** It will not always be like this. Messiah has come and one day, He will set the world straight! His birth declares good news:

b. to the brokenhearted Those of you whose hearts are crushed, who have lost a loved one, who have suffered a tragedy, who have had to part and say good-bye, who think you just can't go on. Christ's birth is a declaration of good news: **there is comfort**! It will not always hurt. Messiah has come and He will comfort you! It is good news:

c. to the bound *Captives* literally refers to prisoners of war, those who have been carried away into slavery. To those of you who are bound in whatever way, who are imprisoned by your miserable circumstances and can't escape or get relief, who are stuck in a difficult marriage, who are living in a dysfunctional family, who are stuck in a menial job you hate but can't afford to leave. To you, Christ's birth says: **there is release**! Messiah has come and He will set things straight. Finally, it is good news:

d. to the despairing Luke's quote of Isaiah mentions recovery of sight to the blind. That's because the Hebrew word in Isaiah means "to open" and can be used of opening the eyes of the blind as Jesus did. This news is to

those who are in prison and will never get out, to those who are blind and will never see, those who are lame and will never walk, to those who are sick and will never recover. It is to those of you who feel despair, who see no hope for your life or your circumstances, Christ's birth brings good news: **there is hope**! Messiah has come and He will set things straight!

But just how is it that Jesus is going to set all things straight? Is He going to fix all our individual problems immediately so we don't have to go through them? No, not now. He was sent for something even greater. He was sent:

2. to declare the great Day that is coming (2) When all the years of God's plan for this world are completed, God has marked a Day on His eternal calendar, a day when the Messiah, Jesus Christ, will take charge of the world and all *the kingdoms of this world will become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ and He shall reign forever and ever!* That Day will be:

a. the time of favor to His children Notice it is figuratively described as a "year". It is one of those thousand-year days, a whole millennium which stretches on into eternity. And in that day, God will show His favor outwardly to his children. He will change the world. Let me read it to you from **Is. 11:6-10**. Nobody will be sick, nobody will hurt, nobody will despair or be oppressed. Life will not be a struggle, but a rest! That will be the effect of Christ's rule. But that Day will also be:

b. the time of vengeance on His enemies And notice that this is called only a "day". In one fell swoop, all the enemies of Christ, all those outside of His redeeming grace, will be destroyed and removed from the earth. No more oppressors, no more villains, no more men to rise up and shake their fist at God or to cause terror and suffering. No more tyrants and no more bullies. You see, THAT is what Messiah came into the world to do! That is what that Babe in the Manger came to do, not only to redeem us from our sins, but to set the world straight and claim it as His glorious kingdom. He came to change the world and His arrival in the manger of Bethlehem is our guarantee that that DAY is coming. It will come just as surely as His birth came after centuries of waiting. Finally, notice that He was sent:

3. to declare the great change that is coming (3) Here is what is going to happen to all of God's people, to us! To those who grieve and who mourn and who suffer, a great change is coming:

a. our appearance will be replaced with beauty In Israel, when you were sad or mourning, you rubbed ashes on yourself and tore your garments. You appeared sad and downtrodden! Well, many of us who suffer appear downtrodden, even without ashes! We show the effects of it, but our worn appearance will be replaced with absolute beauty. All the wrinkles of age and the lines of worry and pain will be erased from our brows. All the scars of life will be removed. Our bodies shall be made like His glorious body! And, Isaiah says:

b. our sorrow will be replaced with joy All the pain you feel here, you will feel no more. Your broken heart will be healed. All the hurt you feel now, will be gone, and in its place will be eternal joy that never goes away. That's the good news Jesus came to give you! In that Day:

c. our despair will be replaced with praise The hopelessness you know right now will melt away in the presence of Jesus and your heart will well up with an everlasting song of praise to the King. That's the good news Jesus came to give you. And finally:

d. our wavering will be replaced with splendor Our being blown back and forth like willow trees in the wind, the ups and downs of life, the failings and falterings and missteps will be over. We will be towering oaks of righteousness, sturdy trees planted by the Lord and reflecting the splendor of His glory forever and ever! That's the good news Jesus came to give you!

Oh, Jesus came to bring us Good News that there is a glorious future for us! Messiah has come and for those who choose to follow Him, a glorious new existence is coming! Oh, be encouraged by that, but my, how the world needs to hear that news! That's why all our 29 missionary partners have given their lives to take that news to our communities and to the ends of the earth. That's why we gave almost $100,000 to missions last year! We have good news to declare to the billions of suffering people in the world. Let's commit our lives to sharing it! Let me leave you with 2 verses of one of the carols we sing at Christmas:

And ye beneath life's crushing load, whose forms are bending low, who toil along the climbing way with painful steps and slow. Look now for glad and golden hours come swiftly on the wing; O rest beside the weary road and hear the angels sing.

For lo, the days are hastening on, by prophet bards foretold, when with the ever circling years comes round the age of gold, when peace shall over all the earth its ancient splendors fling and the whole world give back the song which now the angels sing!

Wise Men - Mat. 2:1-12

The Enigma Of The Wise Men - 2:1-2

Without a doubt, the strangest characters in the Christmas story are the wise men. Their arrival looking for a newborn King of the Jews is truly an enigma, a puzzling or inexplicable thing. How and why did such a thing ever happen? Only Matthew mentions their visit, and that briefly in 12 verses which include very little detail about the wise men themselves, but focus instead on the commotion that their arrival caused in Jerusalem. However, out of this tiny bit of information has risen a tremendous amount of speculation and tradition over the years which we tend to perpetuate, usually without realizing it. For instance, we have said that they were kings, which Matthew never said. We have said that there were three of them, which Matthew doesn't say; we assume it from the mention of their three gifts. Tradition has even given them names, Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar, and it has pictured one of them as a black man from Ethiopia. In fact, the *Shrine of the Three Kings* is a golden sarcophagus behind the high altar of the cathedral in Cologne, Germany which is supposed to contain the skulls of the three wise men and it has seen a constant stream of visitors for nearly a millennium, but I rather doubt the tradition is accurate. We know so very little about the visit of the wise men and it's best not to try to read into it things that God doesn't tell us. However, if we simply look carefully at the picture the Scripture *does* paint of their visit, we will soon enough be awed by the simple fact that at the birth of Jesus these men actually showed up in the first place. Let's read verses **(1-2)**. First let's talk about:

I. Who The Wise Men Were The Greek word translated "wise men" is *magi*. It is from this word in English we get our word *magic* and *magician* and even the word *magistrate*. The term *magi* refers to a particular class or caste of people who were common in the ancient world. The Greek historian Herodotus in the fifth century BC said that the Magi were a caste or tribe among the Medes who came to exercise a special function during the time of the great Persian empire, which ruled from the shores of Israel all the way to the border of India for over 200 years, from about 500 to 300 BC. It is most likely that these *magi* of ours:

1. they came from Persian origin or at least from the area of Babylon and farther east where they were most common, which would be modern Iraq and Iran. And being Persian means that they were most likely ***followers of Zoroastrianism***, which was the official religion of the Persian Empire. They believed in one good, supreme god called Ahura Mazda, who was opposed by an evil power called Angra Mainu and the man Zoroaster as the prophet of god. They worshipped fire as the living symbol of god. The priests of Zoroastrianism were called *magi* and Zoroaster was said to be of that tribe. It is similar in many points to Judaism and so is in many ways a counterfeit of true biblical faith. These wise men were actually pagan idolaters and more than that:

2. they were priestly astrologers They were leaders in that pagan worship. Many of the ancients were possessed with the idea of divining the future and developed numerous strange ways of reading the fate of people and human enterprises, including the examining of animal entrails. But somehow, from the beginning, mankind has always seemed to believe that his fate is written in the stars. It is this belief in astrology that has led him to close observation of the heavens. These magi were ***sorcerers and diviners,*** religious priestly types who studied the heavens, the planets, the constellations, the movements of stars, to see what was written there that concerned the king and the rulers of the kingdom. They were literally occult practitioners, who knew the secret arts of divining the future and exercised special powers. The word *magus* is actually translated *sorcerer* in Acts 13. It was this practice of astrology and sorcery, divining the future, that focused them upon the star which heralded Christ's birth. Now, because of these powers:

3. they were leaders in their culture They were not kings themselves, but usually ***advisers to royalty***. Every near eastern culture had its wise men, it's priestly spiritual leaders who could divine the hand of god, and every king had his own troupe of them. You can see them in the Bible as far back as:

a. the magicians of Egypt in the days of Joseph and Moses. They were Pharaoh's priest/advisers who practiced sorcery. **Gen. 41:8** tells how Pharaoh had a special dream and how all his magicians and wise men couldn't interpret it for him when he consulted them. Later, when Moses did miracles, **Ex. 7:11** says, *Pharaoh then summoned wise men and sorcerers, and the Egyptian magicians also did the same things by their secret arts.* So Egypt had its corps of wise men. Then at the time of the conquest, Balak, the King of Moab, hired a wise man of his own:

b. Balaam the prophet/diviner, to come and put a curse on Israel for him in **Num. 22:4-6**. We usually call Balaam a false prophet, but in reality, he was a *magus*, a wise man for hire, a sorcerer respected for his ability to curse and bless people, one who was sought out by kings. Then in Daniel's time in the 500's BC, we read about:

c. the wise men of Babylon, actual *Magi* who were advisers to King Nebuchadnezzar, and he used them to interpret dreams and divine the future before embarking on military campaigns. However, once Daniel and his three friends came along, it says in **Dan. 1:20**, *In every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king questioned them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom*. Then moving ahead another century to 400 BC we meet:

d. the wise men of Persia where King Xerxes ruled his great empire, and **Esther 1:13** tells us, *Since it was customary for the king to consult experts in matters of law and justice, he spoke with the wise men who understood the times*, that is, the *magi*. We even find remnants of them in the New Testament. In Samaria there was a man named:

e. Simon in **Acts 8:9-11** who was literally, a *magian*, one who practiced sorcery and used it to control the people, until the true power of God showed him for what he was. And on the island of Cyprus, Paul met a *magus***,** a sorcerer by the name of **Elymas Barjesus** in **Acts 13:6-8**, who was the adviser to the local Roman proconsul and was struck blind when he opposed the truth.

These magi who came to find the newborn king were leaders in their culture, advisers to kings and rulers, and recognized as very important men in their culture. And:

4. they came from the Parthian Empire By the time of Jesus, the land of Israel was the eastern edge, the buffer zone, of the Roman Empire. Everything to the east of it, the remnant of the old Persian empire, was now part of the feared Parthian Empire, ***enemies of Rome*** which somehow they were never able to defeat and so, the two empires coexisted in an uneasy truce. No wonder Herod had a cow when wise men from the Parthian Empire showed up asking about a new King of the Jews! Not only did he respect who they were as *magi,* but they were also representatives from the enemy kingdom next door!

Isn't God amazing? Of all the people that He could choose to have show up to worship His Son, He chooses, not Jewish sages, but *magi*, idolatrous pagan diviners, important leaders from an enemy nation, to fall at His feet! But why on earth did they do that? Well, there were some things that they must have known:

II. What The Wise Men Apparently Knew First of all, it must be that:

1. they expected a Jewish Messiah King because they asked, *Where is He that is born **King of the Jews*** Now you must understand, even astrologers don't see actual words written in the heavens that say, "Stop, a Jewish king was born tonight. Travel immediately to Judea and worship him. That is all." Rather, they observe a constellation or a lining up of planets and take that phenomenon to be a sign of some concept with which they are already familiar. They evidently had already been taught the expectation which the Jews had for centuries, the one expressed in **Is. 9:6-7**, *...to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever...* As part of their accumulated knowledge, the wise men knew that one day a child would be born who would be destined to rule Israel and to impact the nations of the world, a Messiah, a mighty King and Deliverer. And somehow:

2. they connected a star with His birth because they said, *We have **seen His star***. **T**his in itself is not unusual. The night Alexander the Great was born, *magi* are recorded by Cicero to have seen a sign in a constellation which told them that "the destroyer of Asia is born". The Roman philosopher Seneca says that after Plato died, *magi* showed up to offer sacrifices, having seen it in the stars. But these things were often based on prophecies given at pagan oracles. How would wise men in Persia connect a star with the birth of a Jewish King? Well, just perhaps, they had been taught something uttered by Balaam, the reprobate magi in **Num. 24:15-19**, *...The oracle of Balaam son of Beor, the oracle of one whose eye sees clearly, the oracle of one who hears the words of God, who has knowledge from the Most High, who sees a vision from the Almighty, who falls prostrate, and whose eyes are opened: "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel. He will crush the foreheads of Moab, the skulls of all the sons of Sheth. Edom will be conquered; Seir, his enemy, will be conquered, but Israel will grow strong. A ruler will come out of Jacob and destroy the survivors of the city."* It is very likely that the wise men already knew to look for a star, a sign in the heavens, to mark the time of this coming, powerful Jewish King. And somehow:

3. they knew the nations would give Him allegiance because they said, *We are **come to worship Him***. What? Worship Him? Why would you worship an enemy king? Only if you knew you couldn't beat him and wanted to become his subjects! Perhaps they knew something like what is taught in **Zech. 14:16**, *Then the survivors from all the nations that have attacked Jerusalem will go up year after year to worship the King, the LORD Almighty, and to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles.* Maybe they knew somehow that their nation was not going to defeat this King but that He would eventually rule them. So, they came to pay homage and to give allegiance to a baby king!

You see, they had to have all this knowledge in advance. Otherwise, they would never have known to come and never have said the things they did. But where did they get it? You can't read all that in the heavens just by looking at the stars! How could they have been equipped with all this knowledge to tell them what the star meant? Well, if we look closely at what we know from Scripture, we'll see:

III. How God Placed The Knowledge Of Himself In Their Culture First of all, back in 700 and 600 BC:

1. He did it through the dispersion of the Jews The northern kingdom of Israel was conquered in 722 and many of them were carried off and transplanted in Assyria. Later in 587, the southern kingdom of Judah was carried off to

Babylon. Thousands of Jews were scattered all over the lands to the east, and later, all over the Roman Empire. And many stayed there and lived there and little communities of Jews, complete with Jewish scriptures and teachers, developed in all the major cities of the world. By the time of Christ there were many Jews in Persia. At Pentecost we read, *Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. ...And they were amazed and astonished, saying, "...how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia* **- Acts 2:5, 8-9**. God planted the knowledge of Himself in Parthia, in Babylonia and Persia, in all of the east, by dispersing His people to live there. But He did far more than that; He put them in prominent places in those empires. For example:

2. He did it through the life of Daniel in Babylon For 70 years in the 500's BC:

a. he impacted the wise men of Babylon He saved their lives when the king ordered their death in **Dan. 2:10-12**, by his trust in God, and so, according to verse **48**, God actually put him in charge of the wise men, the *magi,* of Babylon for many years. He was their boss, their leader. Don't you think He taught the magi about his faith in the true God? Don't you think He told them of his expectation of a Messiah? Don't you think he told them the visions he recorded in his book, visions of the Son of Man defeating the armies of earth and of the rise and fall of the Babylonian kingdom and the Persian kingdom! It's all in the Book! Surely he shared this knowledge and it was passed on and kept. In fact, Daniel personally:

b. he impacted the kingdom of Persia after they conquered Babylon. His faith got him thrown to the lions, but the result of it was the proclamation of King Darius in **Dan. 6:25-28**, *Then King Darius wrote to all the peoples, nations, and languages that dwell in all the earth: "Peace be multiplied to you. I make a decree, that in all my royal dominion people are to tremble and fear before the God of Daniel, for he is the living God, enduring forever; his kingdom shall never be destroyed, and his dominion shall be to the end. He delivers and rescues; he works signs and wonders in heaven and on earth, he who has saved Daniel from the power of the lions." So this Daniel prospered during the reign of Darius and the reign of Cyrus the Persian.* Every part of the Persian empire heard of Daniel and his God and the Kingdom of His God which was undefeatable! But God did even more. A hundred years later:

3. He did it through the lives of Esther and Mordecai in Persia Further east, in the very capital of Persia, God had planted a large community of Jews who had a tremendous impact there. You can see:

a. the wise men there already had respect for the Jews Haman, the wicked prince, had his own *magi*, his own wise men, and in **Est. 6:13** they told him that he could not overcome the Jews. They somehow knew that the Jews were specially blessed and protected! And true to form:

b. God brought about a great deliverance for the Jews Haman had influenced the King to decree that they were to be killed throughout the whole Persian empire. Everybody knew it. But through Queen Esther and Mordecai, God reversed the King's decree and gave the Jews special status in Persia. Of course:

(1) this had an empire-wide impact - Est. 8:17 says, ...*in every province and in every city, wherever the king's command and his edict reached, there was gladness and joy among the Jews, a feast and a holiday. And many from the peoples of the country declared themselves Jews, for fear of the Jews had fallen on them*. God created a fear and respect for the Jews all over the Persian Empire! And it was lasting! In fact:

(2) it created an ongoing holiday - Est. 8:20-22 explains how every year the Jews in all of Persia celebrated Purim, the Feast of Lots, to remember God's great deliverance. All their neighbors saw them celebrate and knew what it meant. Its memory carried on for centuries. And:

(3) it placed Jews in great prominence Think about it: The Queen of Persia was a Jew. The Prime Minister, Mordecai, was a Jew. Not only did this have a profound impact on spreading the knowledge of the true God while they lived, but **Est. 10:2-3** reminds us that it was written down in the official records for all generations to remember! So here's the point:

IV. God's Preparation For The Visit Of These Wise Men Has A Message For Us Their appearance was not merely a random enigma! Their coming was the result of centuries of God implanting His Word among their people and preparing them for the moment it would come true. Of course, I don't mean to say it was all *only* for these few men and for this particular visit. God was preparing for an even greater purpose than that, that of spreading the Good News of His Son throughout the whole world. However, in the process, God DID use it to prepare these men to come to Bethlehem and tell the whole world who Jesus is, and the record of their amazing visit is doing just that to this very day! Do you get their message?

1. Jesus is the KING God promised to send into the world! He's not just a cute little baby born in a manger about whom we sing sweet songs. He's the long-awaited Messiah King who will one day rule the nations of the earth and all people on earth should bow down, give Him their allegiance and worship Him right now! Have you given your life to Him and His service? Is He your KING? Then don't miss the other obvious part of the message:

2. God always keeps His promises! Down to the very last detail! **Ps. 86:9** says, *All the nations you have made shall come and worship before you, O Lord, and shall glorify your name.* And here in these wise men are the very firstfruits of that promise! Through them, hear God giving a powerful assurance that one day, some from every people, tribe, tongue and nation will come and worship His Son! It WILL come to pass because God is faithful to His Word!

Orville and Wilbur Wright tried repeatedly to fly a heavier-than-air craft. Finally, one December day in 1903, off the sand dunes of Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, they did what man had never done before. They actually flew! Elated, they telegraphed their sister Katherine this message: "Katherine [stop] We have actually flown 120 feet [stop] Will be home for Christmas [stop]" Katherine ran down the street and shoved the telegram - the news scoop of the century - at the city editor of the local newspaper. He read it carefully and smiled, "Well, well! How nice! The boys will be here for Christmas!" [Go Ye... A Command Not An Option, Charles Blackshear, p. 13]. He read the amazing news and totally missed the point! Sadly, almost all who read or hear the story of the visit of the Wise Men miss the point. They think it's just another quaint part of the Christmas narrative, some neat figures to add to our Nativity Scene. No, it is God's announcement to the world that this baby Jesus, born at Christmas, is the King, the promised Messiah who will rule all the peoples of the world and we all should come and bow down before Him! This Christmas, let's not be content to simply receive and enjoy gifts and revel in all the blessings we have. Rather, let's commit ourselves afresh to the task of spreading the news that Christ is King throughout our neighborhood and throughout the world! Let's be wise men and women and boys and girls and carry out our assignment as they did, telling the world that Christ has come and inviting them to come and worship Him!

Wise Men - Mat. 2:1-12

The Visit Of The Wise Men - 2:1-12

(Simple Message Telling The Story, Oriented To Children AND Adults)

This morning I'd like to continue looking at the story of the visit of the Wise Men that we started looking at last week. I want you kids to help me tell the story, but you adults can find it and read along in Matthew 2:1-12 and follow my outline. Now what was the first thing that actually happened in the story? What did the Wise Men see?

I. The Wise Men Saw A Star (1-2) *Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."* The Wise Men were men who studied the stars to try to predict the future and one night they saw an extraordinary star for the first time. And because the Jewish people who lived in their country had taught them that one day a King would be born, a Messiah King who would rule the world, and that his coming would be announced by a star in the heavens, they believed this star they saw was HIS star. Now, where did they see it?

1. where they saw it They said they saw it **in the east**. The Wise Men lived in a country far to the east called **Persia**. It was much more than 1,000 miles away from where Jesus was born. Now here's a tricky question for the adults. When did they see it?

2. when they saw it Well, notice in verse **7** that Herod asked the Wise men the exact time when they had seen the star and verse **16** tells us he used that carefully extracted information to decide to kill all the infants in Bethlehem two years old and under, which seems to me to mean that the time they actually saw the star was at least 1 year and possibly nearly 2 years before they arrived in Jerusalem. So, God put this special star in the sky perhaps a year or **almost 2 years before Jesus was born** and more than 1,000 miles away, where they would see it. Now, what do you think that star was?

3. what it was For centuries, people have tried to explain the star by speculating that it was the special lining up of several of the planets to appear like a specially bright star in the night sky. Others have speculated it was a comet or a supernova. But think about this: if you go outside tonight, or any night, and pick the brightest thing you can see up in the sky, even if it's a moving airplane, can you follow it? Could you follow it to a small town or to one specific house? No, the regular stars in the heavens are way too high up to point out any specific location. The whole point of this story is that the star was supernatural; it was unlike anything they'd seen before. It was a miracle which God did in the sky that was closer and brighter and more pointed than any usual light in the heavens. John MacArthur says the only thing in scripture like this is ***the glory of the Lord!*** Do you remember what the shepherds saw on the hillside the night Jesus was born? **Lk. 2:9** literally says, *...an angel of the Lord [stood above] them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear.* The angel was above them in the sky and the light of the Shekinah glory of God shone, not around the angel up in the sky, but straight down encircling them. It cast its rays down upon them like a circular spotlight, so that they and the things around them were lit up. Isn't this what the wise men saw? Not on the same night, but the same thing. What they were seeing wasn't a regular star; it was an appearance of the glory of God, an explosion of God's supernatural light, and it shook them so deeply that it moved them to leave their homes and go seek the new King! So, what happened next? Where did the Wise Men go?

II. The Wise Men Traveled To Jerusalem Why? Because it was the capital city of Judea, the land of the Jews, and they thought surely everybody there would know about the birth of the King! Well, it was a long way. You can't go from Persia to Jerusalem in a straight line because the Arabian desert is in the middle. You have to travel up and around it and that is a distance of 1,200 to 1,500 miles! That's like riding your camel or your horse from here to Miami, Florida and halfway back again! How long do you think that would take? Till you got ready and gathered all the provisions and all the servants you would need for such a long journey and then rode and walked all that way, at least a year would go by, I'm sure. So, adults, when did they get there? The night Jesus was born? No! They were NOT there at the stable the night Jesus was born. In fact,

1. they arrived more than 40 days after Jesus' birth How do we know that? Well, immediately after the wise men left, verse 13 tells us that Joseph took Mary and Jesus and fled to Egypt and they never went back to Bethlehem but went to Nazareth. However, **Lk. 2:22** tells us, *When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses [which was 40 days] had been completed, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord.* They didn't leave for Egypt until after Jesus was dedicated at the Temple. So, God showed the Wise Men the star at exactly the right time so they would arrive at least 40 days after Jesus' birth, probably in February. So, do you think everybody in Jerusalem was glad to see them when they got there? No! Verse 3 says:

2. their arrival troubled the whole city (3) Why? Because the Roman governor of the Jews:

a. King Herod was a vicious, jealous ruler He had a total of 10 wives and 15 children. One of his wives he murdered and when her two sons found out, he had them both put to death. He killed all the male infants in the family who might have any legal claim to the throne. He crushed any sign of revolt against his authority. They used to say about him, "It is better to be Herod's hog than his son!" So, when three wise men came talking about a newborn "King of the Jews", you can bet he was really upset! And when Herod was unhappy, EVERYBODY was unhappy, because they were afraid of him and what he might do. But nobody had heard anything about a Messiah King being born, so Herod asked the Jewish priests where He was to be born according to the Scriptures and:

b. they learned that Messiah must be born in Bethlehem (5-6) because that's what **Micah 5:2** said, *You, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, ...from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel*. So Herod told the Wise Men to go and look for the newborn King in Bethlehem, but, do you think Herod was going to join them in worshipping Him? No!

c. Herod planned to use them to destroy Jesus (8) He was crafty. Instead of arresting the Wise Men or sending soldiers with them, He told them to go and find the child and then come back and report to him. He wanted to use them and their special wisdom to find the baby so that he could kill Him! Then what happened next?

III. The Wise Men Traveled To Bethlehem (9-10) *After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.* As they left Jerusalem:

1. the same star appeared to them after a long absence They hadn't seen it for months and months, since before they started their journey. No wonder they were happy! And:

2. the star led them to the house where Jesus was Notice that it *went before them*. That means:

a. it moved at their pace It lighted the ground ahead of them like a huge flashlight and moved only as fast as they were moving, something no star in space could do. Step by step, it brought them into Bethlehem until it *came to rest over the place* where Jesus was:

b. it lighted a specific location It stood over and shined down on the very house where Mary and Joseph were living. By shining down His glory, God led them to the very spot where Jesus lay! Wasn't that a miracle? We serve an awesome God, a miracle working God! OK, what did the wise men do next?

IV. The Wise Men Worshipped Jesus (11) *...going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh*. That was the whole point of their long journey; it was the reason they came. Notice that:

1. they bowed down before Him They got down on their knees in front of Him and put their heads on the ground. That's an act of ***submission***; it says "You are my King; I will obey you! I will follow you!" But it also says that:

2. they worshipped Him which probably means that on their knees they repeatedly touched their foreheads to the ground. But that word is translated *worship* because it has a meaning of ***adoration***. They were saying, "I adore you; my heart belongs to you!" And then what did they do?

3. they offered Him all their treasures They had brought expensive, precious gifts and they gave them to Him. That's an act of ***devotion***. It's saying, "Everything I have is Yours! I give you everything that's precious to me!" And in the end of the story, did the Wise Men go back to Herod? No!

V. The Wise Men Returned Home Another Way (12) because God warned them in a dream that night not to go back to him.

God went to an awful lot of trouble to make this special visit happen. What do you think He's trying to teach us? I think He's trying to teach us that we should do what the wise men did! 1) We should **submit** to Jesus. We should obey Him and always do what He tells us, because He's our King! 2) We should **adore** Jesus. We should love Him with all of our hearts, because He came to earth to save us. And 3) We should **devote** everything we have to Jesus. Our money, our house, the things we have, our time, the things we know how to do, we should tell Him all those things are His and use them to serve Him. And if we do that, we'll be truly wise men and women and boys and girls!

Wise Men - Mat. 2:1-12

The Gifts Of The Wise Men 2:11

[Christmas Eve Message]

In church we've been studying the visit of the Wise Men for the past two Sundays. We've learned about who they were and why they came. We talked about their long journey and the star that led them to the very house where Jesus was. We even talked about how they bowed down and worshipped Him, so tonight we want to finish by talking about the gifts that they gave him. Matthew 2:11 says, *And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh*. For many centuries, those who study the Bible have found precious symbolic meaning in these three gifts and I would like to propose to you tonight that these gifts remind us of three very important things about this baby, Jesus, who was born. First of all:

I. They brought Him GOLD The Roman philosopher Seneca tells us that in the Kingdom of Parthia, which is where the wise men came from, it was the custom that no one could ever approach the King without a gift. The Wise Men came seeking a newborn King of the Jews, so it is fitting that they brought Him a gift, and gold, the king of metals, is the gift most fit for a King. King Solomon sat on a throne made of gold; indeed, his annual revenue was 666 talents of gold, an incredible fortune. The ark in the Tabernacle and the Temple was a symbolic representation of the very seat of God, the throne of God in heaven, and it was plated with pure gold. So:

1. their gift of gold reminds us that Jesus is our KING We may visualize Him at Christmas time as a baby, but we must never forget that Jesus grew up, died, rose from the dead and ascended to heaven and He is King! In fact, He is King of Kings and Lord of Lords! Right now, He is seated at the right hand of God the Father on the very throne from which He rules the universe. And what do you give to a King? You obey Him!

2. this gift reminds us that we are to give Jesus our obedience To a King, you respond, "Yes, my Lord!" to whatever he commands. You do His bidding; you carry out His will in your life. Life is not about you getting to do what you want and Jesus helping you get it; life is about doing what He wants in every facet of your life. Will you come to Him like these wise men did and say "Lord Jesus, I will obey you; I will live the way you want me to and follow all your commands"? Then secondly:

II. They brought Him FRANKINCENSE Frankincense is a resin collected from the sap of the *Boswellia* tree that grows primarily in Southern Arabia. The English word *frankincense* is a compound word that means "pure incense" and in that day it was such a valuable thing that it was literally worth more than its weight in gold. When burned, it produces a wonderfully pleasing aroma. The Emperor Nero burned an entire year's harvest of frankincense at the funeral of his favorite mistress. However, in Jewish culture, this aromatic gum was primarily used in worship; it was burned as incense before God. In fact, it was one ingredient of the special mixture that God commanded to be burned in His presence on the altar of incense and it was also presented with the holy bread on the table in the Tabernacle. So:

1. their gift of frankincense reminds us that Jesus is our GOD This little baby they bowed before was no ordinary human being. He was God incarnate, God in the flesh, God taking to Himself a human body to become one of us. He is not only the Son of God, He is God the Son, the second person of our Triune God. And what do you give to God?

2. this gift reminds us that we are to give Jesus our worship In the book of Revelation, we have a vision of things that are happening in heaven and we see there incense being offered and rising up before God and we are told that incense is symbolic of the prayers of the saints. Prayer, adoration, praise, the responses of our heart, these are the worship that we ought to give to Jesus. Will you come to Him like these wise men did and worship Him? Will you reverently read His Word and come before Him in prayer in your home, as well as when we gather together to worship Him? He is God! And finally:

III. They brought Him MYRRH Myrrh is the dried resin from the sap of the balsam tree. It has a wonderful fragrance, like incense, and was often made into an oil and used as an expensive perfume. However, in the New Testament, myrrh was also recognized as having medicinal properties. For instance, it was mixed into wine and offered to Jesus on the cross as

a pain-killer, but He wouldn't drink it. It was also commonly used as a preservative in the embalming process for the dead; Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes to embalm Jesus' body in the garden tomb. So:

1. their gift of myrrh reminds us that Jesus is our SAVIOR That little baby grew up and became a man who died a horrible death on a cross. And why did He do it? John said, *the Father sent His Son to be the Savior of the world.* Peter explained, *He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. - 1 Pet. 2:24.* Jesus was our Substitute. He died on that cross and rose again the third day to save us. Now what do you give to a Savior, to One who has saved your life eternally? You devote yourself to them!

2. this gift reminds us that we are to give Jesus our lives

An unknown author tells the story of a nine year old boy who lived in a rural town in Tennessee many years ago. His house was in a poor area of the community. A church there had a bus ministry and they came knocking on his door one Saturday afternoon. The boy came to answer the door and greeted the bus pastor. The bus pastor asked if his parents were home and the small boy told him that his parents take off every weekend and leave him at home to take care of his little brother. The bus pastor couldn't believe what the boy said and asked him to repeat it. The youngster gave the same answer and the bus pastor asked to come in and talk with him. They went into the living room and sat down on an old couch with the foam and springs exposed. The bus pastor asked the boy, "Where do you go to church?" The young boy surprised the visitor by replying, "I've never been to church in my whole life." The bus pastor thought to himself about the fact that his church was less than three miles from the child's house. "Are you sure you have never been to church?" he asked again. "I'm sure I haven't," came his answer. Then the bus pastor said, "Well, son, more important than going to church, have you ever heard the greatest love story ever told?" and then he proceeded to share the Good News of Jesus with this little nine year old boy. The young lad's heart began to be tenderized and at the end of the story, the bus pastor asked if the boy wanted to receive this free gift of eternal life from God by taking Jesus as his Savior. The youngster exclaimed, "OF COURSE!" So the boy and the bus pastor got on their knees and the lad asked Jesus to come into his little heart and received the free gift of salvation. They both stood up and the bus pastor asked if he could pick the boy up for church the next morning. "Sure," the nine year old replied. Well, the bus pastor got to the house early the next morning and found the lights off. He let himself in and snaked his way through the house and found the little boy asleep in his bed. He woke up the little boy and his brother and helped get them dressed. They got on the bus and ate a donut for breakfast on their way to church. Keep in mind that this boy had never been to church before. The church was a real big one. The little boy just sat there, clueless of what was going on. A few minutes into the service, these tall unhappy guys walked down to the front and picked up some wooden plates. One of the men prayed and the boy, with utter fascination, watched them walk up and down the aisles. He still didn't know what was going on. All of a sudden, like a bolt of lightning, it hit the boy what was taking place. These people must be giving money to Jesus. He then reflected on the free gift of life he had received just twenty-four hours earlier. He immediately searched his pockets, front and back, and couldn't find a thing to give Jesus. By this time the offering plate was being passed down his aisle and, with a broken heart, he just grabbed the plate and held on to it. He finally let go and watched it pass on down the aisle. He turned around to see it passed down the aisle behind him. And then his eyes remained glued on the plate as it was passed back and forth, back and forth all the way to the rear of the sanctuary. Then he had an idea. This little nine year old boy got up out of his seat. He walked about eight rows back, grabbed the usher by the coat and asked to hold the plate one more time. Then he did the most astounding thing I have ever heard of. He took the plate, sat it on the carpeted church floor and stepped into the center of it. As he stood there, he lifted his little head up and said, "Jesus, I don't have anything to give you today, but just me. I give you me!" You see, that's what Jesus really wants. He just wants ME! He gave His life for me, so He wants me to believe that and trust in that and give my life to Him so He can live out through me the life that He has planned. How about you? What will YOU give Him? He is your King. Will you give Him your obedience? He is your God. Will you give Him your worship? He is your Savior. Will you give Him your life?

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NINE INDIVIDUAL CHRISTMAS MESSAGES

CHRISTMAS IS FOR CHILDREN - Gal. 4:4-7

Christmas is for children. How often we hear that phrase used to describe the nature of the Christmas season. An anonymous poet put it like this:

Christmas is for children - at least that's what they say,
It's a time of wide-eyed wonder, a magic holiday.

When candy canes and gingerbread fill tummies with delight
And little sleepyheads try hard to stay up through the night.

Yes, Christmas is for children - anyone will tell you so.
The twinkling, colored lights on trees make youngsters' eyes just glow!

Each package and each stocking is approached with childish joy
And toys bring squeals of laughter from each eager girl and boy.

Yes, Christmas is for children - all they say is true.
How wonderful that at Christmas time - grownups are children, too!

Of course, so many of the holiday traditions that we love, the gifts, the tree, the lights, the cookies, really are primarily special ways that we show love to our children, aren't they? We so much want to make Christmas special for the children and yet, even as adults we find ourselves just as much caught up in the wonder of it as they are, don't we? Sometimes on Christmas Eve when we sing the old songs and hear the old, old story, we almost feel like children all over again. Well, maybe that's because Christmas really IS about children. It's about God's desire to have children! Look with me at Gal. 4:4-7 and listen as I read it to you from the Easy-to-Read Version: *But when the right time came, God sent his Son, who was born from a woman and lived under the law. God did this so that he could buy the freedom of those who were under the law. God's purpose was to make us his children. Since you are now God's children, he has sent the Spirit of his Son into your hearts. The Spirit cries out, "Abba, Father." Now you are not slaves like before. You are God's children, and you will receive everything he promised his children.* At Christmas, we celebrate God sending His Son into the world and God's purpose in sending His Son was that you and I might become His children, in the fullest sense that can possibly mean. So what we see here in verse 5 really is that:

I. God Has A Tremendous Desire To Have Children One of the things that Christmas proves to us is that God wanted children; He wanted human beings who would be related to Him as His real sons and daughters The whole plan of sending His only Son into the world was to achieve that desire. Heb. 2:10 says, *God—the one who made all things and for whose glory all things exist—wanted many people to be his children and share his glory. So he did what he needed to do. He made perfect the one who leads those people to salvation. He made Jesus a perfect Savior through his suffering.* That was God's plan all along, to have many people be His children, to have millions of human beings become His sons and daughters and then ultimately to bring them all to be with Him and share His glory in heaven forever and ever. Now let's think about:

1. why God wanted children You see, God did not want servants to serve Him; He already had a trillion angels to do that. He didn't want slaves who went around doing whatever He said, obeying all His laws and commands. He didn't want students who would sit and learn from Him. He didn't want friends who liked Him. He wanted SONS who shared His heart and His nature; He wanted DAUGHTERS who loved Him and were like Him, not just in their outward behavior, but in their hearts. And do you know what? We find that same desire mirrored in us as human beings, because we're made in His image. Even though our materialistic culture tries to drown it out sometimes, husbands and wives the world over have that same burning desire to have a child of their own. Every month, when the evangelists of Hebron Believers Assembly meet in Nellore India, our partner David Dayasagar calls me and gives me all their prayer requests. Time after time they ask prayer for this one or that one in their little church to conceive and have a child. It is the heaviest thing on their hearts. Why? Why isn't it enough just to become a teacher or a child-care worker and be around children? Because it's in our very nature to want to have our own child who shares our own nature and our own heart, who loves us freely and naturally with all his being, just like we love him or her. People will go to almost any length to have a child. Why? We got that from God; that same desire was in God the Father. He wanted children, and not just one or two. He wanted MANY sons and daughters, millions of them, to share His glory! Now let's think about just:

2. how deep His desire to have children was You see, there was a problem. We could not become God's children and share His nature, because we were sinful. When we were born into this world, we began life with a nature that was passed down to us from our first parents, Adam and Eve, a nature that was perverted and sinful, and we acted like the nature we had inside us. A lion cub eats meat because he's born with a nature to eat meat. A fawn eats grass because he's born with the nature to eat grass. We're born with a nature that drives us to sin and we act like what we are. And so we, all of us human beings, stood under the curse of judgment for sin. But God is holy; we could not come into the presence of His holiness and become His children, because of our sin. Yet God wanted us so much that here's what He did. He wanted to have us be His children so badly that He sent His One and Only Son, Jesus, on a mission into the world. That Son literally became a human being born from a woman like us. He became one of us; He took to His nature as God a human nature and a body just like ours. And then, Paul says, He lived "under the law". Jesus created the world. He made the law, yet He subjected Himself to the law of His own making, to that law which demands that the punishment for sin must be death. And then, it says, Jesus redeemed us. He paid the price which bought our freedom from that law of sin being punished by death, by dying in our place, by giving His life for ours. God wanted us to be His children so badly that He gave His only Son so that whoever believes in Him should have everlasting life. Why? Because God so loved the world of people! His passion to have us become His children was so great that He sent His Son! The apostle John wrote, *How great is the love the Father has lavished on us that we should be called children of God and that is what we are!* We always think about what that means to us, but think about what it means to God. *Pastor Jeff Callender writes this, "During the Christmas season when our daughter was 3 years old, the number of presents under the tree slowly increased as The Day approached. Caught up in the spirit and excitement of gifts and giving as only 3-year-olds can be, one morning she was picking up, examining, shaking, and guessing what was inside*

every package. Then, in a burst of inspiration, she picked up a big red bow that had fallen off one present and held it on the top of her head. She looked up at me with twinkling eyes and beamed a smile as she said, 'Look at me, Daddy! I'm a present!" Every child of God should say that to their heavenly Father [The Pastor's Story File]. YOU are God's present! You are what He wanted most of all! You becoming His child is what He dreamed of and planned for and what He sent His Son to earth to accomplish! Isn't that enough to make you just cry out, "Oh Father, I love you!"? But wait, there's more!

II. God Gave To Us, His Children, Tremendous Privileges and we read two of them in our text. Let me read **verse 6** again, *Since you are now God's children, he has sent the Spirit of his Son into your hearts. The Spirit cries out, " Abba, Father."* Our first privilege is that :

1. God sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts You see, it was not enough for God to forgive us for our sins. He wanted us to have His own nature, to be like Him, so He sent the Spirit of His Son, the Holy Spirit, to live in our hearts! He made a change, a big change inside of us. Now, instead of having a nature that wants to sin all the time, our very hearts, our very spirits, have been made brand new, pure and clean, and have been joined forever to His Spirit who lives in us. Now we actually relate to God the Father the same way that His Son Jesus does. Our hearts now call Him *Abba*, which means *Daddy*! Do you see the difference? He is no longer your Judge, whom you're afraid of. You are no longer some kind of slave or a servant who runs around doing whatever God commands, saying "Yes, boss, Yes sir!" to Him. That's not how you relate to a father, is it? At least not to a good one! No, now you have a heart that cries out "Father, I love you and I want to please you and I want to be with you and do the things You do!" That's how a child relates to his father! Because He made you His child, you have open, free and full communion with Him. *The story is told of a Roman emperor who was parading through the streets of the imperial city in a victory celebration. Tall legionnaires lined the route to keep back the cheering masses. At one place along the way was a platform on which the royal family was sitting. As the emperor approached, his youngest son, who was just a little boy, jumped down, burrowed through the crowd, and tried to run out to meet him. "You can't do that," said one of the guards as he scooped up the lad. "Don't you know who's in that chariot? That's the emperor!" Quickly the youngster replied, "He may be your emperor, but he's my father!"* Dear ones, because God has made us His children, He is our Father and we can run to Him any time our heart wants to and climb into His arms and tell Him anything that's on our hearts! And nothing can stop us from it! Hallelujah! But there's STILL more! Let me read you **verse 7** again, *You are God's children, and you will receive everything he promised his children.*

2. God will give us everything He has If you think about it, we human beings want children for a second reason; we not only want someone who will be like us in our image and share our heart, we want someone we can love and pour ourselves into and give that child everything we have! Our Heavenly Father is not stingy and selfish. He did not create all the glories of heaven and earth and eternity to enjoy them all by Himself. He wanted children to share it all with Him, children upon whom He could lavish all the riches of His glory, so that all that belongs to Him could belong to and be enjoyed by them! That's what it means when the Bible says that we are God's heirs. All that belongs to Him belongs to us and one day, we will experience every bit of it! 1 Cor. 2:9 says, *No one has ever seen, no one has ever heard, no one has ever imagined what God has prepared for those who love him!* The things God is going to give to us, His children, are beyond our very comprehension! Everything He has, everything He created, it will all be ours to enjoy together with Him forever.

Oh, listen, Christmas IS for children; it's for God's children to celebrate the wonder of who we are! It's a reminder to us that God the Son became a child to give us the most wonderful present in the world, to make us the very children of God, with His very Spirit living in our hearts, loving Him as our Dad and making us heirs to everything that is His. *There is a heartwarming story about a father who was moving his family into a splendid new home. The spaciousness and luxuriousness of the new house was so much better than the old house that it was almost impossible for the family to believe it was true. His little boy ran from room to room, scanning everything with surprise and calling out in childish delight at each new object that greeted his sight. As his amazement grew to sheer wonder, he would cry out, "Is this ours, Dad--is this really OURS?" The child did not say "yours," and his father was not offended by the liberty he assumed when he claimed what he considered to be his own. The youngster's glistening eyes revealed a confidence in the things that had been provided for him by his father, and this brought great satisfaction to his father's heart. This same awe and sense of possession should fill our hearts with joy as children of God. We are members of God's heavenly family and can rightfully count all Christ's riches as our own, and we will realize this fully when we are removed from the lowly conditions of our present circumstances on earth. When the glories of Heaven burst upon our view, we will not stand at a distance like some stranger, saying, "O God, what things are YOURS!" Rather, we will bound forward and examine every provision in those blessed mansions, exclaiming, "O Father, all of this is OURS!"* We'll be overwhelmed as we experience, together with Him, all the things that our Heavenly Father has prepared for us, His children! And do you know, THAT is the very thing God Himself wanted the most! That's why Jesus came; that's why there is Christmas.

Emmanuel: God With Us - Mt. 1:23

One day a British scientist discovered a large anthill in his kitchen garden. These were different from any ants he had observed before, so he was eager to study them. However, each time his shadow fell across the anthill, the terrified ants scurried off in terror. "I stepped back," the scientist wrote in his diary, "and sat down on the grass to think out the situation. I had only good will for the ants; I did not wish to harm one of them. But how could I make the ants aware of my good will? My imagination played with the problem. To those tiny ants, I was an all-powerful creature - somehow up there, whose thoughts they could not guess, whose ways and intentions they could not know." "If only I could communicate," the scientist wrote. "But even that would not be enough. Even then, I would be a gigantic being to the ants, and they would never believe that I understood their problems - the minute organization of their anthill, their struggles for food, their battles with other ants." Finally, he mused, "Only one thing could give them complete confidence. That is, if by some magic, I could - for a time - become an ant." ["Beyond Ourselves" from Catherine Marshall]

That was God's dilemma in relating to us human beings and that is exactly what God did to solve it. John 1:14,18, *The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.... No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known.* Jesus, God the Son, left heaven to enter a virgin's womb and take to Himself a human body and become Immanuel - God with us, God walking around in human flesh that we can see and touch and know. He is no longer a God who is far away and distant, above and beyond, out of reach and un-knowable. He is God in a human body with a human voice living a perfect human life that I can understand. Jesus said, *He who has seen Me has seen the Father!* If you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus. If you want to know His compassion, see Jesus relate to the crowds. If you want to know how he feels about hypocrisy, see Jesus chastise the Pharisees. If you want to know how much He loves you, see Jesus die on the cross. If you want to know how powerful He is, see Jesus rise from the dead on the third day and ascend to heaven to rule! Jesus is Immanuel, literally, "with us - God!"

You say, yes, but that was then. What about now? Listen to Jesus' promise in John 14:23, *Jesus replied, "If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.* When anyone comes to Jesus and trusts in Him for the forgiveness of sins, Jesus becomes Immanuel all over again. The Spirit of Jesus comes to literally dwell inside of us very directly and personally, God IS actually with us, every moment, all the time. To us, Immanuel means that in Jesus, God lives in me and is always with me! The blessings that stream from that are too many to number. If God is with me, then nothing He wants me to do is impossible. If He is with me, then nothing can harm me unless He chooses to allow it for His good purpose. If He is with me, then I can endure all things through His strength. If He is with me, then I am never alone. And the list goes on and on. You can add to it yourself and praise Him that He is Immanuel, God with you!

But Immanuel means more than just the fact that God is personally with us in Jesus Christ. The best definition of the meaning of Immanuel is probably found in the words of Rev. 21:3, *And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God*. God being with us and living with us means that we are His people and He is our God. That's how it will be in the new heaven and the new earth one day; but for us that's how it is right now. God being with us means belonging to one another. As the hymnwriter put it, "I am His and He is mine!" To know that God is with us, that He is ours and we are His, changes everything.

In 2 Chronicles, a godly king by the name of Abijah was ruling over God's people in Jerusalem. In his 18th year, a huge army from the north under wicked and idolatrous King Jeroboam moved into position to attack him. But Abijah climbed up on a mountain and shouted this warning to his enemies in 2 Chron. 13:8-12, *"...You are indeed a vast army and have with you the golden calves that Jeroboam made to be your gods. But ...As for us, the LORD is our God, and we have not forsaken him... We are observing the requirements of the LORD our God. But you have forsaken him. God is WITH us; he is our leader. His priests with their trumpets will sound the battle cry against you. Men of Israel, do not fight against the LORD, the God of your fathers, for you will not succeed."* If God is WITH us, He is FOR us and as Paul commented in Rom. 8:31, *...If God is for us, who can be against us?* If Jesus is with us and we are His and He is ours, it makes all the difference in the world as we face life. George Robinson put it this way in his hymn:

Things that once were wild alarms cannot now disturb my rest;
Closed in everlasting arms, pillowed on the loving breast.
O to lie forever here, doubt and care and self resign,
While He whispers in my ear, I am His, and He is mine.

His forever, only His; Who the Lord and me shall part?
Ah, with what a rest of bliss Christ can fill the loving heart!
Heav'n and earth may fade and flee, firstborn light in gloom decline;
But while God and I shall be, I am His, and He is mine.

Are you anxious today? Is your soul disturbed by “wild alarms”? Does it seem as though your world is falling apart? Then remember the truth that this Jesus, whose birth we celebrate today, is Immanuel, God with us! If He is with you, if you are His and He is yours, then your problems are really His problems and He has NO problems! Rest in Him! Pillow your soul on His loving Presence with you! When Jerusalem was under siege later on by the King of Assyria, godly King Hezekiah encouraged his people with these words in 2 Chron. 32:7-8, *Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or discouraged because of the king of Assyria and the vast army with him, for there is a greater power with us than with him. With him is only the arm of flesh, but with us is the LORD our God to help us and to fight our battles.* Against you may be an arm of flesh or a circumstance that seems beyond human endurance, but with you is the Lord your God, and greater is He that is in you than He that is in the world! Jesus in you is Immanuel, “with you is God!”

Fifteen Reasons Why Jesus Came Into The World

I’d like you to ponder with me the meaning of a particular phrase. As Jesus stood before Pilate, He spoke these words in John 18:37, *...for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world....* The two phrases say the same thing; Jesus’ birth was His coming into the world. Yet not in the same sense that your birth was your coming into the world. You only began to exist shortly before your birth. From the moment of your conception, you spent nine months in your mother’s womb growing and then came out into the world. But that’s not what Jesus means. The prophet Micah said in *5:2*, *But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, [though] thou be little among the thousands of Judah, [yet] out of thee shall he come forth unto me [that is] to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth [have been] from of old, from everlasting.* Literally it says, *from the days of eternity*. Jesus has always existed. He enjoyed sharing in the Father’s glory before the world began. He was there at the creation of all things and apart from Him, there was not one thing that was created. But when God’s time was fully come, Jesus came into the world by entering Mary’s womb in a human body and being born. Paul described it like this in Phil. 2:6-7, *who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men*. When we celebrate Jesus’ birth, what we are really celebrating is His coming into the world, the fact that He left the glories of heaven and laid aside all the privileges of His Deity to come into the world as what you and I are, a human being. The question is, Why? There is a reason why He did it, a purpose for which He came into the world. In fact, there are 15 of them that I was able to find stated directly in Scripture. Of course, to study all of them in detail would take too long, but don’t despair because all 15 reasons seem to fall into the same three categories. First of all:

I. The Father Sent Him To Save The World - Jn. 3:17, *God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him*. Jesus came into the world to save the world. First of all, He said that:

1. He came to completely fulfill the law - Mt. 5:17, *Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them*. Jesus came into the world to keep every promise God ever made about His birth, life, death and resurrection in the Old Testament. There are literally dozens of them, from Micah’s prediction about the place of His birth to Isaiah’s portrayal of the manner of His death. He came into the world so that every one of them would come to pass exactly as promised. But it means more than that. God gave His people His law, but not one of them had ever kept it! No human being ever lived fully the life that God intended; all have sinned. Jesus came into the world to be the first morally perfect human being, the first man to completely fulfill everything the Father had commanded in every way. Another way of putting that is reason number two:

2. He came to perfectly do the Father’s will - Heb. 10:5-7, *...when Christ came into the world, he said: "Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased. Then I said, `Here I am--it is written about me in the scroll-- I have come to do your will, O God.*" God was not looking for animal sacrifices and offerings of material things; none of them can actually take sin away. What the Father desired, was a human being *without* sin, One who *never sinned*, One who always perfectly did the Father’s will, who was completely righteous! Jesus came to be that Perfect One! And why did God need a Perfect One? That’s reason number three:

3. He came to serve by giving his life as a payment for sin - Mt. 20:28, *...the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."* His perfect life offered up on the cross was a price, a payment that paid the penalty for the sins all those who believe. He came to live a perfect life, so that He could willingly give it up in a death that would pay the penalty for the sins of others, which they could never pay! That’s why Paul gave us reason number four:

4. He came to save sinners - 1 Tim. 1:15, *Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners--of whom I am the worst*. It was a rescue operation. A world full of sinners who could not be saved, who would have to perish, because the wages of sin is death, eternal death. The human race was all like the pictures you see on the news when there’s a hurricane. The raging flood water has engulfed an entire house and the family is sitting on the rooftop screaming for help, about to be swept away. And then the lifeboat comes and saves them, snatches their lives back from certain death. That’s why Jesus came. He Himself said in reason number five:

5. He came to save the world - Jn. 12:47, *...I did not come to judge the world, but to save it*. It IS about me personally, but it's NOT about only me. The whole world was lost; the whole race was doomed. Jesus came to save the whole world, that all over this world there would be people of every type, every race, every region, who would be rescued from eternal loss.

But again, that's only part of the story. Why did the Father send Jesus to save the world? Because of this:

II. The Father Sent Him To Bring Many Sons To Glory - Heb. 2:10, *In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God... should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering*. The point was not simply rescue; the point was relationship. The Father's desire was to bring human beings to share His own eternal glory, not as guests, but as His own children! He wants an eternal relationship with us, so Jesus came, reason number six:

6. He came to be a light in our darkness - Jn. 12:46, *I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness*. We were all lost in darkness, unable to see God, to know God, to understand God, but 2 Cor 4:6 says, *For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ*. We can see the truth; we can know God and experience His glory. Jesus came to give us that. In fact, number seven:

7. He came that we might live through Him - 1 Jn. 4:9, *This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him*. That is, that we who were spiritually dead and cut off from God might share in the very life of God Himself through Christ. Jesus said that and even more in reason number eight:

8. He came that we might have abundant life - John 10:10, *...I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full*. Abundantly. Literally, beyond measure, life greater than anything we could ask or think. The very life of God Himself. He came to impart to us that abundant never-ending life that He has. Why? Because of reason number nine:

9. He came to procure for us a full relationship as sons - Gal. 4:4-5, *But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons.* A full relationship with God as His own children with all the attendant rights and privileges. Life in fellowship with Him in heaven forever and ever, enjoying Him forever! Jesus came to give that to us!

In one of the orphanages in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan there was a little baby girl named Tabi, whose family had left her there because she was born with a cleft palate. In the orphanage system there is hardly money for food, let alone an operation. She would be deformed forever and who would ever adopt her when there were hundreds of normal children? She was doomed to a childhood of being warehoused in one institution after another, until being thrust out at 18 into a world which would reject her further. But a Christian worker named Tammy came all the way from the other side of the world and saw little Tabi and loved her. She set out against all odds to rescue her. She fought mountains of red tape and found sponsors and got her the life-changing operation she needed to fix her deformed face. But Tammy did not stop there. She said, "I want Tabi to be MY daughter!" and she fought through a legal system that refused her. Then Tabi's mother showed up and wanted to blackmail her for money for the child. But as soon as the papers were complete, she took her new daughter Tabi and fled the country and brought her safely to her new home in the US to enjoy being with her forever with a whole new face. The odds of her rescue? Impossible. Friends, that's what Jesus did for us. We were that poor, deformed, abandoned child. But Jesus came and did a spiritual operation on us and made us new, then adopted us and placed us into the full privilege of being His sons and daughters and one day He'll take us to heaven to enjoy it with Him forever! That's why Jesus came into the world! But there is one final reason:

III. The Father Sent Him To Create An Earthly People For Himself - Acts 15:14 says, *...God ...visited the Gentiles [the nations], to take out of them a people for his name.* That's what God is about on earth in this age. He's gathering out from among all the nations of the world a people who bring glory and honor to His name. Jesus said, reason number ten:

10. He came to call sinners to repentance - Mt. 9:13, ...*I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance*. He came to deliver a message, to issue a call, to summon lost sinners like us to change our minds, to turn from pursuing evil and come to Him for rescue. Further, reason number eleven:

11. He came to declare the truth that He is the King He said to Pilate in **Jn. 18:37**, ..."*You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me*." He came to demonstrate that He is the true and rightful King of the world and everyone must listen to Him, must come to Him. That was His message, *Repent, the Kingdom of God is at hand*. "The King is already here! Come to Me!" And then He said something interesting, reason number twelve:

12. He came to kindle a spiritual fire on the earth - Lk. 12:49-50, *I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! But I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is completed!* That baptism was the suffering of the cross. And that fire that He wished was already kindled was the coming of the Holy Spirit in fire upon His followers at Pentecost, the birth of the church! As sinners come to Him and are transformed and set ablaze by the Holy Spirit, a spiritual fire burns and grows and grows in magnitude and sweeps over the whole world,

like a prairie fire, until the whole world is ablaze with the light of His glory. But of course, not everyone will heed His call, so, reason thirteen:

13. He came to divide the human race - Lk. 12:51-53, *Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.* Matthew's telling of it says, *I came to bring a sword! -* **Mt. 10:34-36**. The burning fire of the spreading of the message divides all the world into two camps, those who believe and become His sons and those who refuse. And that dividing line runs straight through the middle of every human institution, villages, towns, even families. So that finally when He comes again and the whole world is gathered before Him, they are divided simply into sheep who believe and goats who are lost. Plus, those who respond to Him will be opposed by those who refuse and will find themselves divided and cut off, but reason number fourteen says:

14. He came for the judgment of those who refuse Him - Jn. 9:39, *Jesus said, "For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind*." Those who refuse, His enemies, become more and more blind like the Pharisees; they are hardened. If they refuse His offer of rescue, they plunge themselves deeper into their own darkness. It's a sad thing, but that does not stop the process because lastly:

15. He came to preach the news to all who have not heard When people wanted Him to stay in **Mk. 1:38**, *Jesus replied, "Let us go somewhere else--to the nearby villages--so I can preach there also. That is why I have come*." Why? Not to favor the few, but so that every village might hear, so that all those who have never heard might hear. Those are the same instructions He gave His disciples. "Go into ALL the world, preach to EVERY creature, make disciples of ALL nations. Keep going from here until you reach the uttermost parts of the earth." He did not come so we can sit and celebrate His birth alone and satisfied. He came so we would give our lives to taking the news of His coming to every person on earth. He will not be satisfied until they hear also.

Charles Spurgeon wrote, "This great Prince entered our abode. This little planet of ours was made to burn with a superior light among its sister stars while the Creator sojourned here in human form. If for the first time you had heard of the visit of the Incarnate God to this world, you would be struck with a wonder which would last throughout eternity. This is the heart of the Gospel--the incomparable fact of the incarnation of the Son of God, His dwelling upon the earth, and His presentation of Himself as a sacrifice unto God for the sins of mankind." If you had never heard that and were hearing it for the first time, the story of Bethlehem would be so striking! It would touch your heart so deeply. So, as you celebrate His birth this year, keep in mind that there are still many who have never heard for the first time and Jesus came that they might hear also. In this New Year, will you do all you can to join Him in telling them?

FOUR BELOVED SONS

Christmas. I don't think we'll ever comprehend it. God sent His Beloved Son into the world. Try as we might, we'll never fully grasp all that that means. I'm not so much talking about the facts. Those are pretty clear. Those we know. Rather I'm talking about the more personal aspect. What did it really mean to God the Father to send His Son into the world? Some years ago, some Americans sent their sons and daughters off to Saudi Arabia to fight a war against Iraq. We know they went. We know some came back and some didn't. But it would be awful hard for us to know what it meant to the parents to send those sons and daughters, unless we sent our own. Now multiply that a million times and that's how difficult it is for us to know what it meant to the Father to send His Son. However, I'd like to make a feeble attempt at describing it anyway. In the Book of Genesis in the Old Testament, God has recorded three occasions when godly men had to send their sons on a mission. And collectively:

I. The Three Sons In Genesis Picture The SON They are types, Old Testament foreshadowings of Christ. And each one shows a slightly different aspect of Him. First, there was:

1. Isaac - the son of his father's promise He is called that in Gal. 4:28, "the child of the promise". God had made a promise to his father Abraham that he would have a son and that in him all the nations of the earth would be blessed. Isaac was that promised child, that child of destiny, that child who would fulfill everything promised to Abraham. Yet he was sent on a special mission to Mt. Moriah in Gen. 22. Jesus is the real Child of promise, the One who would fulfill everything the Father had planned, the Child destined to rule the nations with a rod of iron. More in a moment. And then there was:

2. Joseph - the son of his father's old age He's called that in Gen. 37:3. We'll talk a little more about what that means in a moment, but he also was sent by his father Jacob on a mission. You'll find it in Gen. 37. He pictures Jesus perhaps the best of any of the three. And lastly, there was:

3. Benjamin - the son of his father's right hand That's the meaning of his name. The right hand was a special place and the person sitting at it occupied a special relationship. We'll see in Gen. 44 more about Jacob's special relationship with Benjamin and how it pictures Christ. He too was sent by his father on a special mission. Now we'll turn all over the New Testament to find precious truths about Christ. The first one we find is that, like all three of these Old Testament sons, Christ:

II. The Son Was Beloved - Mt. 3:17, 17:5 On these two occasions, at Jesus' baptism and on the Mt. of Transfiguration, God the Father spoke directly and audibly about His Son to the ears of men. He said, "This is My Son, WHOM I LOVE" or "MY BELOVED SON". God the Father loved the Son. Sometimes we forget that. We remember that He loved the world and gave His Son, but we forget that He loved the Son more than He loved the world. You see:

1. He was the Father's ONLY Son (Gen. 22:2a) I love this verse. Isaac was his ONLY son. That's not literally true. Physically, he had another son, Ishmael. But not in God's eyes. Ishmael, born of the flesh through a servant girl was not on the same plane as Isaac. Isaac was unique. There was no other who enjoyed the full relationship and privileges of sonship with Abraham like Isaac did. Likewise, Jn. 1:14 calls Jesus "the only-begotten of the Father" or in the NIV, "the One and Only!" Some of us who have more than one child may not appreciate what it is like to ever have only one. It means that all your love, all your hope, all your dreams and expectations center around that one. To the Father, Jesus was EVERYTHING. In fact:

2. He was the Father's GLORY (Gen. 37:3) While it may not have been right in Jacob's case, he loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because he was born in his old age. I don't think that means simply because he was an old man (age 91 if you figure it out) when he had him and that made him feel special. You see, he had fallen in love with Rachel 14 years earlier. All he had ever wanted was to marry her and have a child and live happily ever after. So, he waited patiently seven years to marry her and then got tricked. Then the other wife and the servant girls kept having babies, but Rachel couldn't. Finally, after 14 years, each one of them diminishing his hope, Rachel had Joseph. He was his father's glory, the goal of his life, what his father's heart was set on. Heb. 1:3 tells us, *the Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His being*. God's highest glory is in His Son. In fact:

3. He was the Father's LIFE (Gen. 44:20, 30) Once Joseph was gone, Benjamin became Jacob's beloved. In fact, his life was bound up with the boy's life. The boy WAS his life. To lose him was to lose everything worth living for. That's what the right-hand relationship meant. There was a unity that extended to life itself. And in Jn. 10:30 Jesus declared, *I and my Father are ONE*. They were one in essence; they shared the same eternal Divine life. It's not just a question of affection. The very LIFE of the FATHER was bound up in the LIFE of the SON. And it is in that context that:

III. The Son Was Sent - Gal. 4:4 God sent forth His beloved Son. The Greek word is *apostello*, to send on a mission. And the mission was not an ordinary one, not a safe one, but in fact a very dangerous one. Oh, the agony it must be to send a beloved son or daughter off to battle. Yet how much more agony it must have been for the Father to send His Son, knowing His destiny. You see, like Isaac:

1. He was sent to be a sacrifice (Gen. 22:2b) "Abraham take your only son, your beloved son, to Moriah and kill him as a sacrifice!" It was to be done at his own hand. Can you imagine Abraham taking Isaac up to Moriah and laying him on the altar and raising the knife? His own son, his beloved son, by his own hand, yet it had to be! Well, listen to Mt. 20:28, *The Son of Man came to give His life a ransom for many*. The Father sent His Son to be a sacrifice, to die. It was His own plan; it was by His own hand. Yet it had to be. There was no other way! Then:

2. He was sent to his brethren (Gen. 37:12-14) Jacob sent Joseph to his own brothers to care for their welfare, to meet their need, to see how they were doing. He should have been well-received, but he wasn't. His own brothers hated him. And Jacob was too blind to see it. But the Father wasn't; read Jn. 1:10-11. The Father did not send Him to some strange culture. He was sent to His own people, the Jews, to His brethren according to the flesh. And just like Joseph, they didn't receive Him either, and the Father knew it would be that way. He knew they would hate Him and everything that would follow from it. How hard it must have been to let Him go! Then:

3. He was sent to redeem the race (Gen. 43:8) Perhaps you may not know Benjamin's story so well. His brothers had been sent down to Egypt to buy food, while he stayed home. There they were accused by the ruler of the land (who was actually Joseph in disguise) of being spies and told that they had to bring their youngest brother back down or they could not return. There was a famine going on; their families had no food. There was no place to buy it, except Egypt. The choice that Jacob faced was simple; either risk Benjamin's life by sending him to Egypt or sit and watch everyone in your whole family die! So at last he sent Benjamin down in order to save his whole family. Jn. 3:17 tells us that God sent His Son to redeem the whole world. The whole world was perishing in the famine of sin, everyone. There was no other way to redeem them, except to send the Beloved Son and so He did. But:

IV. The Son Was Ill-treated - Acts 2:22-23 God sent Him, but:

1. He was slain (Gen. 22:9-10) Abraham placed his son on the altar and raised the knife to kill him. Then God stopped him, in order to prevent the abhorrent human sacrifice, and substituted a ram which was killed in his place.

So, in type and figure, he was actually slain there on Moriah, which is also the very same place where God's son was slain, only for Him there was no substitution permitted! God's beloved Son died there. The manger is only the first step on the way to the cross. That's where Christmas points! But even before that:

2. He was mistreated (Gen. 37:28) Joseph's brothers grabbed him and threw him into a pit. Then they handed him over to a bunch of Gentiles who carried him off to Egypt as a slave, where he was falsely accused and spent two full years buried in a prison. Likewise, Jesus' own brothers, the Jews, hated Him and arrested Him and handed him over to the Gentiles who, though He was innocent, sentenced Him to death and He lay for two days buried in the tomb. And like Benjamin:

3. He was falsely accused (Gen. 44:1-5) Joseph had his cup planted in Benjamin's sack and then sent his steward to accuse him and find him guilty of stealing it. He was innocent. Of course, we know this was Joseph's way of testing his brothers' hearts and was for a good purpose. But Jesus was falsely accused and not for a good purpose! He was innocent. They found no fault in Him, but they killed Him anyway. It would be one thing to send your son to die in battle for a just cause. But how would it be to have him accused of some crime he didn't commit and be executed? Oh, but let's not forget the ending:

V. The Son Was Rewarded - Heb. 1:3b Once it was all over, once He had provided purification for our sins, He sat back down at the right hand of the throne of God. You see:

1. He is risen - Heb. 11:19 tells us that Isaac's walking away alive from that altar on Moriah was a type or a picture of the resurrection of Christ. Peter declares His resurrection in Acts 2:24 and in Acts 3:15 he says, "You killed the Prince of Life but God raised Him from the dead!" The Father raised His Son, but more than that:

2. He is reigning (Gen. 41:41-43) Joseph, the son sent to his brethren, was set upon the throne, not only over them, but over the whole kingdom, in effect, their whole world. Look at what God says about His Son in Phil. 2:9-11. Oh friends, He is reigning even now and one day we'll see it ourselves. But best of all:

3. He is reunited (Gen. 45:12-14) Benjamin was reunited with his brother Joseph and eventually with his father. Picture the joy of that reunion, of Isaac seeing Benjamin again and Joseph again, the tears of great joy. In John 17:4-5 Jesus prayed about His reunion. After His resurrection, He was restored to all the glory He had with the Father before the world began. The Father sent His Son on a mission, a terrible mission, a horrible yet necessary mission, but today it is all over. He is restored to glory, still the Child of promise, still the Son at the right hand, still the Father's glory.

Oh my friends, Christmas is wonderful for us but it came at a tremendous cost to the Father! *G. Campbell Morgan told of a miner who came to him at the close of one of his services and said, "I'd give anything to believe that God would forgive my sins. But I just can't accept the idea that all I have to do is trust him. It's too cheap!" Morgan looked at him, "My dear friend, have you been working today?" "Yes, I was down in the pit" "Did you pay to get back out?" "Of course not. It didn't cost me anything. I just got in the cage and was pulled to the top." "But weren't you afraid? Wasn't the ride too cheap?" "Oh no," he said. "The ride was free, but the company paid a lot of money to sink the shaft and make it safe." Suddenly the truth broke upon the miner's soul. He saw that salvation was free. But he also realized that it had cost God a tremendous price to come down from Heaven and rescue fallen man.* Let's remember that this Christmas. It cost Father God everything, His Own Beloved Son, to redeem us.

A Better "Christmas Carol"

Every year at Christmas time, without fail, we always end up watching the classic Charles Dickens tale, "A Christmas Carol". It's been redone umpteen times, both for adults and for children There is "Mickey's Christmas Carol", "Muppet Christmas Carol" and one I saw a new takeoff where Scrooge was a lady! So we all know the basic story. Ebenezer Scrooge, an elderly, rich and miserly man, looks down at the squalid poverty of 19th century London and despises the poor masses and disdains giving to them, but in the end, his heart is transformed and he ends up loving and giving to the poor and keeping Christmas in his heart always. That theme of caring about the poor is always in our minds at Christmas, even if we never think about it at other times. And the truth is that by and large we don't. It's hard for us to get a bigger picture of the world than what we see at our doorstep. Yet in our world, vast masses of people live in abject poverty and struggle to survive. To try to give you a visual idea, Philip Harter, a Doctor at Stanford writes:

If we could shrink the earth's population to a village of precisely 100 people with all the existing rations remaining the same, it would look something like the following. There would be:

57 Asians, 21 Europeans, 14 from the Western hemisphere, 8 Africans

70 would be non-white, 30 would be white,

6 people would possess 59% of the entire village's wealth and all 6 would be from the United States

80 would live in substandard housing, 70 would be unable to read, 50 would suffer from malnutrition, 1 would have a college education and 1 would own a computer.

Makes you think, doesn't it? That's our world. And the spiritual poverty would be even more tragic. After living in suffering all their lives, only 11 would actually go to heaven when they die because they know Jesus. 70 of them would either never hear about or be utterly opposed to His Name. If you could look down and see things from God's perspective in heaven, that's what our world is really like today. But at Christmas time we re-tell over and over again an even greater story, a "better Christmas carol" where the Lord Jesus Christ looked out the windows of heaven at the squalid physical and spiritual poverty of the entire world and instead of despising it and closing the windows in disdain, His heart was broken and He embarked on a daring course of action that Scrooge would never have dreamed of. The outline of it is found in **2 Cor. 8:9**, *For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.* However, in order to understand that journey from riches to poverty, let's look at another text which spells out the details more clearly. **Gal. 4:4-7**, *But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father." So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir.* It's a story of riches to rags and rags to riches, or perhaps from prince to pauper and pauper to prince, but it is the greatest story ever told. So let's put the two passages together and tell it again, perhaps in a fresh way. You see at that time:

I. Our Lord Jesus Christ Was Rich He was wealthy. He was abounding in possessions. How so? Well:

1. He was God's Eternal Son And that means He was God THE Son. He was eternal Deity, the Supreme Being of the entire universe, which was created by Him and for Him and belonged to Him. He was enjoying wonderful, absolute unity with the Father and the Spirit from eternity past. At that time:

2. He dwelt in the glories of heaven, seated on a throne of gold in the midst of an emerald rainbow, shining with celestial glory, surrounded by ten thousand times ten thousand and thousands of thousands of angels crying, "Holy, holy, holy!", a sea of glass beneath His feet. He lacked for nothing and earth had nothing to offer that could compare to the riches of glory He enjoyed. And in the midst of it all:

3. He ruled as the Divine Lord The angels all did His bidding. The world ran according to His purpose and plan. What He determined to be, would be and if any opposed him, a mere word would be enough to destroy an entire kingdom. He knew no limitations and no power in the universe could hurt or oppose Him! That's just a little piece of what it means that He was rich! The glory that He shared in heaven with the Father before the world began is beyond our wildest imagination! Yet when He looked out the windows of heaven at the poverty of this old world, an amazing thing happened. If you were Him, if I was Him, I'm sure I'd have chosen to stay; I'd have pulled the shutters tight and gone on enjoying my riches, but:

II. Our Lord Jesus Christ Chose To Become Poor Nobody took those riches away; He left them all behind! *"J. B. Phillips tells the story of an angel describing the splendors of the universe to a newcomer. Past whirling galaxies and blazing suns, they crossed the infinite distances of space to a galaxy of 500 billion stars. The senior angel pointed to a small sphere turning slowly on its axis. It looked as dull as a dirty tennis ball to the little angel, whose mind was filled with the size and glory of what he had seen. `Watch that one particularly,' said the senior angel, pointing with his finger. `It looks very small to me,' said the little angel. What's special about that one?' He listened in stunned disbelief as the senior angel told him that this planet, small and insignificant and not overly clean, was the renowned Visited Planet. `Do you mean that our glorious Prince stooped so low as to become one of those creeping, crawling creatures of that floating ball?' `I do, and I don't think He would like you to call them creeping, crawling creatures. For strange as it may seem to us, He loves them. He went down to visit them to lift them up to become like Him.' The little angel looked blank. Such a thought was almost beyond his comprehension."* And it's almost beyond ours as well. Our Lord Jesus:

1. He chose to take the poor limitations of humanity, to be born of a woman, to be limited to dwelling in a human body, to feel the pain and hurt that a human being feels, to walk on legs to get around and lift with hands, and be sustained by eating food and to work to earn a living. All those things which a poor human being is bound to, but which He had never known as the Son of God, He chose to take by becoming a true human being, one of us. That is poverty enough, but He descended even further:

2. He chose to dwell in poor material circumstances One of my favorite carols says, "How should a king come?" and you know the answer, "riding on a white horse while the servants bow down and the crowds make way. He should dine upon summer strawberries and milk and lie upon garments of satin and silk. That's the way for a king to come." But not our Lord Jesus. He chose to be born in a stable and laid in a cattle crib for a bed. He chose a peasant girl and a carpenter to raise him, so poor that they could only afford two turtledoves for his dedication. He never owned a house and in adulthood, literally had nowhere to lay His head, always staying with others wherever he was. He literally trusted the Father for His daily bread as He went about doing good. In our 100 person example world today, He chose to be one of the 50 who lack food, the 80 who have no housing and the 99 who have no education, rather than the 6 white Americans. He chose to know and endure the plight of the poor. And what's even more incomprehensible is that:

3. He chose to accept the penalty of law on the cross The Divine Lord and Judge became subject to the law of sin and death. The law that He Himself had put in place said, "The wages of sin is death; the soul that sins will die." He was holy and pure and never committed a single wrong deed, yet He made Himself subject to that law by choosing to take our sins on Him, to suffer our penalty and die in our place in the most heinous way imaginable, on a cruel cross. He chose the utter bankruptcy of being made sin for us as the eternal anguish of hell rained down on Him at the cross. He chose to number himself with the plight of those who had never heard and didn't care, with the lost, by dying like they do, but for them. What a story! Who could conceive of it? But the effect of His action is just as incomprehensible:

III. Through His Poverty We Have Become Rich Scrooge's newfound generosity may have kept Tiny Tim alive for a few years and made old Bob Cratchit a partner in the business, but our Lord Jesus has made us far richer than that. You see, everything that was His in glory has now been made ours. First of all:

1. we have been redeemed from the penalty of law We, who were so spiritually poor that we deserved to die, who were slaves to sin, are now set free and transformed by His power. The handwriting of the ordinance that was against us, Jesus took out of the way by nailing it to His cross. So we are justified, sanctified, clean, pure and holy in His sight. We who were sinners, have been transformed into saints by the power of His death! And not only that:

2. we have become the very children of God We who were His enemies are now His Sons and His daughters, children with His Spirit living in our hearts, children who can run into His presence shouting "Daddy, Daddy, I love you!" We are made one with the Father, just as the Father and Son are one! And then, as His children:

3. we have become the very heirs of God, joint heirs with Jesus Christ. Everything that is His is ours, all the riches of glory, the dwelling place in heaven with many rooms, the glorious throne, the myriads of angels and the shining glory. All of it is ours, even though at this moment we may live in a mud hut at the edge of a garbage dump. It all belongs to us! By His choice of poverty, we have been made rich forever! But now think about the most important thing. Why? Why did this happen to us? Why this love that He has lavished upon us? Look back to 2 Cor. 8:9, *You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ...*

IV. We Have Become Rich By His Grace He did not leave the portals of glory for anything that He saw down here that was better or that was deserving of His journey. *Out of the ivory palaces, into a world of woe, only His great eternal love made My Savior go!*

1. we did not deserve any of it Scrooge looked at a poor world and said, "Are there no workhouses? Let them die and decrease the surplus population!" He felt the poor deserved what they got. But spiritually speaking, in our human case, that is actually true. We did deserve it. The human race is in this mess because we chose it; we turned from God and chose sin. We did not deserve for Him to reach down to redeem us and yet because of His grace, His love for us, which we did not earn or deserve:

2. He did this for our sake Stop and contemplate that for a moment. *Though He was rich, yet **for our sakes** He became poor*. Philip Yancey observes*, "It is almost beyond my comprehension, too, and yet this is the key to understanding Christmas. I believe that we live in parallel worlds. One consists of lakes and barns and politicians and shepherds watching their flocks by night; the other of angels and sinister forces and places called heaven and hell. One night in the cold and dark, those two worlds came together. God, who knows no before or after, entered time and space. Could it be true, this story of a Creator descending to be born on one small planet? If so, it is a story like no other. Never again need we wonder whether what happens on this dirty little tennis ball matters to the rest of the universe. Little wonder a choir of angels broke out in spontaneous song, disturbing not only a few shepherds but the entire universe." [Servant, Winter 1996. Page 7.]*

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ is what makes us sing, "Joy to the World, the Lord is Come!" It boggles our minds, but it thrills our souls. And I hope that this Christmas that it will do something else. I hope that re-telling the story of His grace will make us consider our own hearts. I hope that it will make us see the lost and weary world as He sees it, with a heart of grace and compassion. I hope that we will open the windows of our hearts and look out at the multitudes who are both physically and spiritually in utter poverty and decide, as recipients of His grace, to give our lives to making a difference, that we will risk leaving the comfort of our familiar safety to bring to others these glorious riches He died to give them! *Fritz Kreisler (1865-1962) of Austria was one of the greatest violinists of all time. He thrilled audiences around the world with his skillful playing. Although he could have commanded the highest fees, he refused to do so and never became rich. Kreisler once said, "I never look at the money I earn as my own. It is public money. It is only a fund entrusted to my care for proper disbursement." Speaking for his wife as well as himself, he said, "I feel morally guilty if I order a costly meal, for it deprives someone else of a slice of bread--some child perhaps of a bottle of milk... In all these years of my so- called success in music, we have not built a home for ourselves. Between it and us stand all the homeless in the world!" What a challenge to disciples of a Master who voluntarily left the ivory palaces of glory, and who had no place to could call His home here on earth.* I'm not saying we shouldn't order a meal or own a home, but are we as concerned as Fritz Kreisler was about people who are physically hungry and homeless? And even more than that, do we really care about people

who need the Bread of Life, those who will have no eternal home unless they hear and believe the gospel? My friends, you know the greatest "Christmas Carol", the greatest story ever told, *the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.* The question is, will you be like Him?

Why The World Missed Jesus
(And Why Many Will Miss Him This Christmas Too!)

I read *the story of a woman who was out Christmas shopping with her two children. After many hours of looking at row after row of toys and everything else imaginable. And after hours of hearing both her children asking for everything they saw on those many shelves, she finally made it to the elevator with her two kids. She was feeling what so many of us feel during the holiday season: overwhelming pressure to go to every party, every house-warming, taste all the holiday food and treats, getting that perfect gift for every single person on our shopping list, making sure we don't forget anyone on our card list, and the pressure of making sure we respond to everyone who sent us a card. Finally, the elevator doors opened and there was already a crowd in the car. She pushed her way into the elevator and dragged her two kids in with her and all the bags of stuff. When the doors closed, she couldn't take it anymore and said loudly, "Whoever started this whole Christmas thing should be found, strung up and shot!" From the back of the car everyone heard a quiet, calm voice respond, "Don't worry, we already crucified Him." For the rest of the trip down the elevator it was so quiet you could have heard a pin drop*. You see, she was celebrating Christmas, but was missing the whole point of what it was about, the whole glorious message that Christ had come into the world to save us from our sins. She was missing Jesus! However, she's not alone in that. The whole world missed Jesus when He came. The Jewish nation who was waiting for Him to come, the Romans who controlled Judea and the known world, they all missed Him, not just at the time of His birth, but through all the years of his life and ministry. They never got the message; they never understood who He was or why He came, though they knew He did. That hasn't changed much down through the centuries. Fully 1/3 of the world celebrates His birth, possibly 2/3 knows the fact that He came, but still so very few, even among those all around us, grasp the significance of it. Have you ever stopped to consider why that is? Why did the world miss Jesus? Why did nobody but a few understand and respond? And why is it still like that today? Well, there are four reasons that I can think of from Scripture (though there are probably many more). The first is that:

I. God's Plan To Send His Son Was A Mystery - 1 Cor. 2: 6-10 The term translated *secret wisdom* in the NIV is the Greek word for *mystery*. God had a mystery, or as Dr. Clarence Mason used to say, a sacred secret. He had a hidden plan that He was working out. It's expressed clearly for us in **Gal. 4:4-5**, *But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons.* That was the plan of God, to redeem human beings and make them His own children by sending His Son to be born of a woman. Now this plan, Paul says:

1. it was ordained before time began It was not an afterthought. It was not something God came up with because mankind fell into sin. God already knew they would. So, before He ever created them, before He ever created the world, before time as we experience it ever started, the Father had already planned and decided to send His Son into the world. He is truly the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. That had always been God's plan, but:

2. it was kept hidden for ages and generations God did not spell it out clearly. Yes, He foretold the birth of His Son in places here and there throughout the history of Israel, through this prophet and that, but only in disconnected pieces, enough to give hope, but never a full picture. There was just enough to look forward to the coming of a Savior, a Messiah, but not enough to explain clearly that God the Son would take a human body, be born of a virgin and grow up to die on a cross to provide redemption. It was God's sacred mystery. So, when the time finally came and God did send forth His Son:

3. it was not understood by the leaders of this world Not the Jewish leaders, let alone the Romans. None of the smartest and wisest people in this world had any idea that Jesus was indeed God's Son come to save them. They didn't know who He was; they wouldn't believe who He was, even though He told them, or else, Paul says, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. Why couldn't they grasp it? Why couldn't they see it? Why couldn't they put 2 and 2 together; miracles plus prophecies plus direct statements taken together equal the fact that this man is God the Son! Why not? Because, Paul tells us:

4. it cannot be comprehended by the natural mind No eye can see it, no ear can hear it, no mind can conceive it! Look down to **verse 14**. When we read God's plan or tell it to people, it doesn't even make any sense! How could God become a man? Why would God become a man? So what if God did become a man! What difference does it make? Why does it matter that He died on a cross? How can that impact me? How could He take my place? The very good news of Christmas seemed like foolishness to the world and it still does today! Just imagine standing on the corner of Keswick and Easton, stopping people that pass by and saying, "Jesus was God and He became a man for you at Christmas and died for your sins!" Imagine the reactions you'd get. Even if people were polite, what would they be thinking, "Boy, that person's a religious nut!" And if they actually tried to take what you said seriously, it is so far

removed from anything they can conceptualize that you might simply get a confused, "Huh?" God's plan is so far "outside our box" that nobody would ever grasp it, except that:

5. God reveals it to those who believe by His Spirit We'll see how in just a moment, but the point is that it takes an act of God, an opening of the mind, a Divine act of grace, simply to grasp it. That's one reason so many people missed Jesus and still do. They are not a place where the Spirit of God is at work in their lives! And that leads us to consider a second reason. People missed Jesus because:

II. People Were Spiritually Blinded - John 12:37-42 This is in the last week of Jesus' life on earth, after the triumphal entry. It was after three years of going about healing lepers and multiplying bread and casting out demons and opening blind eyes. It was after raising Lazarus from the dead and many in the crowd He was speaking to had actually seen that, according to verse 17. But, John says, *Even after Jesus had done all these miraculous signs...they still would not believe!*

1. they saw plain evidences that He was God, **but were not able to believe them** You would think, "How could anybody stand there and watch Him call a dead body to life out of a tomb and not believe?!" John explains that they couldn't. Their eyes saw, but they were blinded to the real nature of what they saw. Plus, their hearts were deadened, so even though they saw, it didn't affect them. How did that happen? Well in the first place:

2. a history of sin and indifference makes people callous to the truth That was what happened with Israel. If you trace the history of this quote from the prophet Isaiah, it goes back to the fact that Israel was stubborn and obstinate. God sent them prophets to warn them to repent time and again, but they refused to listen; they chose sin and idolatry repeatedly. Over time, their hearts grew callous and hard until God's truth made no impact on them at all. The people in Jesus' day and all around Him were raised in that blind, indifferent and callous culture where, for instance, the most devotedly religious person would be careful to tithe the herbs in his garden, but could foreclose on a poor widow's house and put her out on the street without a second thought! So they couldn't hear Jesus; what they saw made no impact. Why can't people all around us see what God is doing in the world? For one reason, they were raised in a culture that says everything happens by natural causes. There are no miracles; everything has an explanation. Right and wrong are relative, not absolute, and standards change over time. Anything biblical is part of an ancient and antiquated worldview. And so, when the Good News of Jesus comes along, they hear, but they can't hear. Even though He still heals. Even though He answers prayer. Even though He still does undeniable miracles. Their hearts have been made callous. And the second reason for that is that:

3. Satan works hard to blind the minds of unbelievers - 2 Cor. 4:3-4 Satan has a lot to do with that. He is the one who builds insulating and protecting cultures around people to blind them. It may be a religious culture like Saudi Arabia, for instance, or a secular culture like ours. But more than that, he works hard in individual lives to fill them with experiences that teach us lies about God, ourselves and the world, lies that cause us to be blind to the truth when we do hear it. We were all blinded and that's why:

4. God must speak into the darkness of human minds - 2 Cor. 4: 6 Just as on the day of creation God said, "Let there be light" and there was light in the universe, so His Spirit must speak to our minds and say, "Let there be light!" He must enlighten us to hear and see and understand the truth. And until He does, nobody understands His plan, nobody receives His Son.

That's why the world missed Jesus! That's why people miss Him today. God's plan makes no sense; it seems like foolishness and even when people do hear it, their hearts are calloused and blinded against it. That's why we must pray for the Spirit to open their eyes! It's part of our responsibility! But there's a third reason why the world missed Jesus:

III. People Were Absorbed In The Daily Activities Of Life - Luke 17:25-30 Before you ask, "Why is he reading that?", just look at the pattern. In the days of Noah, people were fully absorbed in the daily activities of their lives. They didn't listen to Noah; they didn't heed His warning until it was too late. They just went about their daily business and ignored spiritual truth. It was the same in the days of Lot. People were absorbed in their daily business and they didn't listen to Lot, who vexed his soul among them because of all their evil deeds. They didn't listen until it was too late and fire was raining down from heaven. Jesus said it will be the same way when He returns some day; people will be absorbed in all the "stuff of their lives" and it will keep them from heeding spiritual truth until it's too late. If it has been so in the past and will be so in the future, don't you think that's what also happened in the day when Jesus came the first time? Many of the people in the land of Israel were simply too absorbed in daily living to pay attention to Jesus and the message of God's plan. And is that not true today as well? Look at:

1. the kinds of things that absorbed them There were:

a. bodily concerns: they were ***eating and drinking*** How much of our lives is spent just taking care of our bodies, shopping for food, preparing and eating meals, doing the laundry, bathing, exercising, taking care of all the things that keep our bodies alive and healthy. Then on top of that there are:

b. romantic concerns: they were ***marrying and giving in marriage*** How much of our lives is taken up with the opposite sex. Finding the right person and dating and dreaming and building relationship, marrying and all the million preparations that go into that. Romantic concerns are hugely absorbing to us. But not as much as:

c. business concerns: they were ***buying and selling, planting and building*** Making money is always at the top of everyone's list. How many hours of our lives do we work, do we spend at our job, do we spend finding ways to earn a living. It absorbs us!

All these things do! They fill up our lives; they expand to take up any available space in our time. They fill our thoughts. Often to the place where we are virtually catatonic about spiritual things. But here is:

2. the effect of being absorbed: *they didn't realize what was happening* until it was too late. There was not only no room for Jesus in the inn; there was no room for Jesus in people's lives. There was too much to do, just living. There was no time to listen, no time to consider, no time to change. The "here and now" mattered more than the "hereafter" and they didn't realize the opportunity that was passing by them until He was gone! So many of the people around us miss Jesus simply because they don't even realize how absorbed they are in the daily activities of life. But there's a final reason why the world missed Jesus and it's this:

IV. People Chose Not To Heed God's Invitation Jesus Himself explained this one in the form of a story in **Luke 14:16-24**. God prepared a great banquet. In the fullness of time, He sent His Son into the world so that people might come to Him and believe and receive His life and be redeemed. And the people who were first invited to the banquet were the nation of Israel. You see:

1. they heard God's call to them in many ways. They heard it:

a. through the events surrounding Jesus' birth The shepherds spread the story of the angelic announcement and the birth of Jesus all over Bethlehem. All of Jerusalem, we're told, was disturbed when the Wise Men arrived with the news that the Messiah, the King of the Jews, was born. These things were known and they were calling to people. Then they heard:

b. through the ministry of John the Baptist God sent him to publicly announce that Jesus was the Christ, the Lamb of God come to take away the sins of the world. The whole nation heard the message of John and then they heard:

c. through the 3 year ministry of Jesus and His disciples For 3 years Jesus walked among them. He did miracles; He taught huge crowds. He traveled from Jerusalem to Galilee, always calling people, inviting them to come and follow Him, to believe in Him. But, like the people in the parable:

2. they deliberately chose not to respond to His invitation It wasn't that they *couldn't* go to the banquet; they didn't want to. They made a deliberate choice. They could go or not go; they could believe or refuse. But:

3. they made flimsy excuses to cover their utter lack of concern The King makes a banquet for His Son, but "I just bought a new house and I have to go look at it and examine it. I can't come." "I just got a new car and I have to go drive it and try it out. I can't come." "I just got married, you know, and the wife needs me. I can't come." The Jews had all kinds of excuses for not believing. They didn't want to get in trouble with their leaders; they might get thrown out of the synagogue. They didn't want to get in trouble with the Romans who ruled their country by joining some new movement. One said, "First, let me go and bury my father", meaning "I'll come later after my father is dead and I don't have to take care of Him anymore." Isn't that what people do still? They make up excuses. "There are too many hypocrites in the church." "I knew this man once who said he was a Christian and he cheated me." "I'm too busy." "I'm a single mom..."

You see, the invitation has been given all over America. The news is out there. Bibles and Christian books are on every bookstand, even in Walmart. It's all over the radio and the television. Churches are on every street corner. God has called us to the banquet to honor His Son, the Savior of the World. But the bottom line is that we don't want to come. We choose not to. We make excuses. We let ourselves be absorbed in the things of life so we don't have to face the truth about ourselves and our need for Jesus. Otherwise, God's Spirit would begin to work in our lives and He would turn the light on and it would all make sense and we would see and believe. *Aaron Burr, the third Vice President of the United States, was reared in a godly home and was admonished to accept Christ by his grandfather, Jonathan Edwards. But he refused to listen. Instead, he declared that he wanted nothing to do with God and said he wished the Lord would leave him alone. He did achieve a measure of political success in spite of repeated disappointments. But he was also involved in continuous strife, and when he was 48 years old, he killed Alexander Hamilton in a duel. He lived for 32 more years, but through all this time he was unhappy and unproductive. It was during this sad chapter in his life that he declared to a group of friends, "Sixty years ago I told God that if He would let me alone, I would let Him alone, and God has not bothered about me since." Aaron Burr got what he wanted.* The children of Israel got what they wanted; Christ sent His disciples out and invited the rest of the world to the banquet, while the Romans destroyed their nation. It's Christmas. God's banquet table has been spread for His Son; the invitation has been sent out and is even now being sent out through you to the people

all around. And yet, sadly, many of them will miss Jesus, simply because they don't really want to come to Him. What can you do? Tell them! Pray for them! But above all, beware lest you become like them! Lest you find yourself In a "Christmas coma" absorbed by a life filled with activities and full of excuses as to why you have no time for Jesus. Lest you find yourself celebrating a season, instead of worshipping a Savior. Even if you know Christ personally as your Savior, don't miss Him this Christmas!

The Purpose Of Christmas - Luke 2:8-14

Most of you are familiar with Rick Warren's best-selling book *The Purpose Driven Life* and you know that PURPOSE is his keyword. Well, he also wrote a book entitled *The Purpose Of Christmas* and he put together a sermon by the same title and made it available free to every church in America. I'm not going to preach his sermon this morning, but I did steal his title and his three point outline (with his permission, of course!), because I think that in all the hustle and bustle that surrounds us during the Christmas holiday, it's really helpful to remind ourselves what Christmas is really about. A little boy expressed his disappointment like this, *Daddy took me to the store yesterday to see the creche in window so I could see what the first Christmas looked like. He told me about Jesus at his birth and about his father and mother, and how he was born outside in the cold in a place like Grandpa's barn, only open. But, when we got there, I couldn't see Jesus and His mother and father in the place like Grandpa's barn because of all the stuff in the way. There was a train set with lights and a road with a railroad gate that worked, and a big doll in the window. There was lots of pretty packages, and a big Christmas tree, boxes of candy, and pretty clothes. And I forgot all about looking at Jesus and His mother and His father in the barn like Grandpa has because of all the other stuff in the way. And when I got home, I was sorry I never got to see Jesus and His mother and His father in the barn like Grandpa has because of all the stuff in the way.* And if all the "stuff" gets in your way and you don't see and celebrate what Christmas is really all about, you'll be sorry too! So, let's turn to that most familiar story of the very first Christmas in Luke 2 and let the very angels of God tell us about the purpose of Christmas. First of all, we need to remember that:

I. Christmas Is A Celebration (8-10) That first Christmas night in the fields when the angels appeared was, in fact, a celebration and the angel started the celebration off by making an announcement. Now maybe you think announcements are boring; I can tell by the way some of you look when we make them in our service! But not this announcement!

1. it is the grand announcement of good news You know, centuries ago, before there was electronic communication or mechanical transportation, important news often traveled by couriers. In Kyrgyzstan there was in each area someone called a *chabarman*, a trusted messenger who could ride well. And when there was important news, the *chabarman* would ride as swift as possible from one village to the next and stop in the main square to make a grand announcement of the news he had to tell. Back in the early '90's in the Kyrgyz church there were a few known as "superevangelists". The evangelist would fill his backpack with all the Bibles and literature he could carry and go into a new village where people had never heard of Christ. And he would go into the marketplace like the *Chabarman* of old and begin to yell *"Soon Choo, Soon Choo! Good News! Good News!"* And as he yelled, he would hand out materials and keep on walking. By the time people figured out that it was Christian literature they'd been handed and got angry, his pack was empty and he was out of town before they had time to react! Christmas, both then and still today, is the declaring of a great announcement of good news. What news?

2. it is the news of a great joy to be celebrated When the announcement came that WWII had ended, the United States went nuts with celebration. The ending of that war was a great joy for the whole country and the news of it sparked celebration wherever it was announced! Likewise, the birth of Jesus is a great joy, not just for one country alone, but, the angel said, *for ALL PEOPLE!*

3. it is a celebration intended for everyone, for the whole world, for every person alive on planet earth! God wants the good news of the great joy of His Son's coming to earth to be taken to every individual on the planet in every generation, so that literally everyone can join in the celebration! He wants it announced in every language, in every inhabited location, from the most remote mountain or jungle village to the teeming millions in the largest cities of the world. He wants everyone to hear the news from poor shepherds out in a field, to the rich and famous who dwell in the limelight, to the rulers who bend whole nations by their power. It is good news for the homeless guy on a steam grate in Philadelphia and for the contented suburbanite who lives next door to you. Christmas is God's grand announcement that the whole world should celebrate! But why? The angel goes on to explain:

II. Christmas Is A Celebration About Salvation (11-12) A Savior has been born, someone to save us! Now we would appreciate that immediately, if we knew that we were deeply in trouble. Years ago, many waited and prayed as three young mountain climbers were missing on Mt. Hood in Oregon. If we were in that position, lost, cold and hungry, maybe injured and facing death from exposure each night, and somebody announced to us that a Savior had come to rescue us, how we would celebrate with every remaining ounce of our strength! If we were on trial in Iran for espionage like three young American hikers who wandered across the border accidentally one year, and facing life in an awful prison or maybe even a death sentence, and someone announced to us that a Savior had come to rescue us, would we not celebrate and

shout to the heavens? If we were a starving child in Africa whose parents had died of AIDS and whose belly was swollen with hunger and we cried ourselves to sleep every night, and somebody told us that a Savior had come to rescue us, oh, how we would shout for joy! But the salvation that we celebrate at Christmas is not about any of those kinds of physical things; it's about being rescued from a plight that is even worse!

1. it is about salvation from our sins The angel told Joseph in **Mt. 1:21**, *[Mary] will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.* There's the part we fail to see. Our sins often don't look so bad. We're fairly nice people; our flaws seem minor. What's there to be saved from? Well, I was watching a hunting show on TV some time ago and they had actual footage where a lion charged out of the bush and got to the hunter before he could fire. His gun went flying and he was helpless in the jaws of a monster who was quickly killing him. That is, until a savior showed up! Everyone else went running off, but his tracker grabbed the spare rifle and literally shot the lion off top of him just in time! Beloved, if we could only see with spiritual eyes, we'd be terrified. Sin is worse than that lion! The lion can kill the body and after that has no more that he can do, but the Bible says the wages of sin is DEATH, certain death, sure death, ETERNAL death in a lake of fire and burning sulfur, tormented in flames forever and ever! Sin was killing every last one of us; it had a death-grip on us, dragging us surely to that pit where the wrath of Almighty God would be poured out on us forever. But then we got the great news that there is One who can save us, One who can rescue us from the eternal damnation that was coming upon us and before which we stood powerless! Listen, we have reason to celebrate! The angel said salvation has come for us! Then notice that the angel says:

2. this salvation has been accomplished through a person, through A SAVIOR (singular). It is not through a process. It is not through trying as hard as you can with all your strength to pull your body out of the lion's mouth! It is not through doing as much good as you possibly can to make up for the sins you've committed; they will not be erased! It is not through following some system of religion or praying rote prayers every day or doing any kind of religious deed to impress God. If you could do it yourself, you wouldn't need a SAVIOR. You might need a friend, an encourager, even a helper, but not a SAVIOR. God did something about our problem; He sent us a PERSON and look at the Person He sent us! He sent us His own Son, **Jesus**! And what does the angel say about Him?

a. He is the Messiah, the Christ, the One whom God has chosen and appointed to save His people. Now that's a Jewish term and because we're not Jewish, it's sort of lost on us, yet when it comes to us in some other context we get it right away. In 1939 T. H. White published a novel called "The Sword In The Stone" which Disney later popularized in cartoon form. The concept is simple; there is a sword magically stuck in a stone and a plaque in front of it reads, *Who so Pulleth Out This Sword of this Stone and Anvil, is Rightwise King Born of England.* Nobody can pull it out; for centuries hundreds have tried. But finally, a gangly young lad named Wart up and pulls the sword out by accident, because he is the chosen one born to be King. And he proves to be the legendary King Arthur. The same thing is in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings;* only ONE man can be King. Only one man, Isildur's rightful heir, can defeat evil in Middle Earth and sit on the throne and deliver the Kingdom. That we get, but that's exactly what it means to be the Christ! The Jews had been waiting for centuries for God's chosen Messiah to come; only ONE guy can do it, only ONE man is qualified, only ONE can save and rule and reign. So, when that ONE shows up, you celebrate! Peter challenged the Jews in Acts 3:20 to believe so *... that [God] may send the Christ, who has been appointed for you--even Jesus*. Jesus is the Appointed One, the Chosen One, the One Savior for whom mankind has been waiting through all its history to shoot the lion and pull us out of the flames! But He is not only Christ! The angel says:

b. He is the Lord We often use that word like it's a common first name as we talk to God, but it literally means *the supreme one*. Thayer's lexicon says it means, *he to whom a person or thing belongs, about which he has power of deciding; master, lord; the possessor and disposer of a thing; the owner; one who has control of the person, the master.* It was a title that the Roman Emperor took to himself! Listen, the Savior that God sent to rescue us from our sins was not some flunky assistant, not some dedicated servant and not even His wisest general! He didn't send a lowly gunbearer to shoot the lion! He sent the Lord, the King of Glory, the Supreme Being of the Universe, the One to whom it all rightfully belongs because He created it! Jesus! Oh, doesn't that make you feel better? Look who God sent to save you! Hallelujah! Now how did He do it? Well, the angel tells us:

3. how this salvation has been accomplished *Today in the town of David a Savior has been born for you.*

a. it began with the miracle of His birth We call that His **incarnation**. He, the Lord, the Supreme One who created the worlds, took to Himself a human body and nature and became one of us, in every point like we are, and not just a man, but a baby! Oh, just think of the miracle that is! The real miracle of Christmas is not that a virgin can have a baby; that's simple for God. It is that God can become a man, that God WOULD become a man! He chose to be one of us because that was the only way to save us! That was the beginning of our salvation but:

b. it was completed by the sacrifice of His life on the cross at Calvary where *He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. – 1 Pet 2:24.* We call that **substitution**. He took our place! He jumped into the lion's mouth and let the lion eat Him instead of us and in doing so, killed the lion! *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. - 2 Cor. 5:21*.

On March 5, 1994, Deputy Sheriff Lloyd Prescott was teaching a class for police officers in the Salt Lake City Library. As he stepped into the hallway, he noticed a gunman herding 18 hostages into the next room. With a flash of insight, Prescott (who was dressed in street clothes) joined the group as the nineteenth hostage, followed them into the room, and shut the door. But when the gunman announced the order in which hostages would be executed, Prescott identified himself as a cop. In the scuffle that followed, Prescott, in self-defense, fatally shot the armed man and the hostages were released unharmed. - [Greg Asimakoupoulos Concord, California] Oh, do you think they celebrated coming out of that building, coming home to their families? Do you think they celebrated the fact that a savior came among them? Listen, Jesus, the Lord of all the universe, dressed Himself in street clothes and intentionally entered our world. He joined us, the line of hostages about to be executed, but unlike Lloyd, He stepped to the front of the line and let Himself be the ONE to die! Yet the result was the same; in that death all the rest of us are set free! That's what Christmas is about! It is a celebration about our salvation! But there's a third thing:

III. Christmas Is A Celebration Of Reconciliation (13-14) The King James rendering of those words is *Peace on earth, good will to men.* And as soon as we hear that, our minds think "world peace and universal harmony". *I heard the bells on Christmas day their old familiar carols play, and wild and sweet the words repeat of peace on earth, good will to men*. But about the fourth verse, even the hymnwriter has to get honest and say, *And in despair I bowed my head "There is no peace on earth," I said, "For hate is strong and mocks the song of peace on earth, good will to men."* And the reason is that's not what Our Savior came to give us, at least not this first time, and that's not what the angels were shouting. The NIV says it much more clearly: *On earth peace to men on whom His favor rests!* It's not saying that God has brought world peace, but rather that:

1. God has made peace with us! We don't realize it but our plight was even worse than we described it before. Not only was the lion of sin killing us and dragging us toward the eternal doom of the pit, but we were at war with the only guy who had a gun and could shoot the lion! We were His enemies! Paul said, *...when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son! - Rom. 5:10.* The Good News of Christmas is that God has reconciled Himself to us; He has made peace with us! The death of Christ has removed the barrier of sin that stood between us and made us enemies. And *therefore*, **Rom. 5:1** says, *since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ!* God is not our Enemy anymore! He is not our opponent standing against us, standing to condemn us, standing to punish us. Rather, we are now on the same side! How did that change? ...*God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. - 2 Cor. 5:19*. That's the Good News the angels were singing about! And what they're saying is not that we must be men of goodwill, but that:

2. God has favored us with the offer of this peace Oh, what an amazing thing that is. We are at war with the King of the Universe, breaking His laws, loving His creation, but not loving Him and HE turns around and says, "I am reconciled to you! I am ready to receive you! I want you to come into My court and be in My Presence. My favor rests upon YOU. I have chosen YOU! I want to have a relationship with you!" And all you have to do is say, "Yes!" Accept it! Receive it! You don't have to meet any preconditions; you simply take the gift of relationship and life that is so freely offered! What should our response to that be? Well, look at the response of the angels when they announce this great news of salvation and reconciliation! The whole sky fills with them and they shout, not in unison like some choir, but more like the cheering crowd at a football game when the home team scores a touchdown, *GLORY TO GOD! GLORY! GLORY!* And that's the kind of celebration that should erupt from us!

3. our response should be glory, the highest glory It's an exclamation of joyous praise! We're looking at a true celebration, at a crowd of beings who understand the news and can't control their joy, shouting with all their hearts in praise to God. THAT'S what Christmas is! It's a celebration, a celebration that God has sent us a Savior to rescue us from death and to reconcile us to Himself so we can belong to Him forever!

That's the purpose of Christmas! And every Christmas since has been about the exact same thing, celebrating that Jesus came to save us and to reconcile us to God! Dear friends, what is YOUR Christmas about! *I read a story about a little girl many years ago. She was from one of the poor districts of a large city and became ill on Christmas Day, so she was taken to the hospital. Lying in her bed there, she heard carolers singing. She listened intently while someone told the wonderful story of Christ who came to redeem a lost world, and in simple faith, she prayed and asked Jesus to save her and received the gift of salvation. Later that day she said to a nurse, "I'm having a good time here. I know I'll have to go home as soon as I'm well, but I'll take Jesus with me. Isn't it wonderful why He was born? He came to save us!" "Yes," said the nurse wearily, "that's an old story." With surprise the girl replied, "Oh, do you know about Him too? You didn't look like you did." "Why, how did I look?" she asked. "Oh, like a lot of folks--sort of glum," replied the girl. "I thought if you really understood that He came to bring us to Heaven, you'd be glad!" The child was soon well and the nurse never saw her again, but her heart had been touched by the true message of Christmas.* Listen, if you really understand the purpose of Christmas, if you really understand that He came to bring us to heaven, you'll be glad! You won't let all the stuff get in the way! You'll celebrate with all your heart!

What Child Is This?
(And Why It Matters!)

Have you ever stopped to ponder the fact that, at its root, Christmas is simply the joyous celebration of the birth of a child. Is it not ironic that the most important event in the history of the human race is not a military victory, it's not a technological invention, it's not the building of an empire, but rather it's the simple birth of a child? Certainly, the birth of any child is a landmark event in our individual families. We give gifts, we give out candy, we send pictures, we even post them on the internet! For a few moments we gaze on the tiny face and ponder the miracle of birth. Yet the celebration is soon forgotten amid the sleepless nights and bottles and diapers and doctor visits and life goes back to some semblance of normal. Yet the birth of this child is still being celebrated 2,000 years later and that, by nearly 3 billion people all over the earth! A friend in the military in Iraq once wrote me that everybody there celebrates Christmas, even the Muslims! Trees and decorations are all over! One is almost forced to ask, "What child IS this, that all the world celebrates His birth?"! Well, one person did that literally.

William Chatterton Dix was born in Bristol, England on June 14, 1837, the son of a surgeon. As a boy he attended the Bristol Grammar School to prepare for a commercial career and then became the manager of a marine insurance company in Glasgow, a vocation which he followed to the end of his life. However, his heart was in the poetry of worship. It has been said of him, "Few modern writers have shown so signal a gift as his for the difficult art of hymn-writing." He wrote more than 40 hymns over the course of his life and also many Christmas and Easter carols. But his most widely known hymn was a poem written about 1865, which was later sung to the then-popular tune of "Greensleeves". We still sing it every Christmas, "What child is this who laid to rest on Mary's lap is sleeping?" I'd like to ask that question with William Dix through his hymn this morning as we ponder the miracle of the birth of Jesus and look at the answers the Scripture gives us to that question. Why don't you read the first verse with me:

What Child is this who, laid to rest, On Mary's lap is sleeping?
Whom Angels greet with anthems sweet, While shepherds watch are keeping?
This, this is Christ the King, Whom shepherds guard and Angels sing;
Haste, haste, to bring Him laud, The Babe, the Son of Mary.

The first question the hymn is really asking is actually:

I. Who This Child Is (His Identity) The verse is based upon the biblical text in **Luke 2:8-14**. What child is this whose birth is announced in the heavens to a field full of trembling shepherds? What child is this for whom a multitude of angels appear in the sky and sing sweet anthems of glory to God? Who is this child? Well, the Scripture says that:

1. this child is Immanuel Look with at **Matthew 1:20-22**. You see, the child the angels are singing about:

a. He was not conceived by human means He has no earthly father. Joseph is not his father. Mary, his betrothed wife, has conceived this child, but neither he nor any other man has had anything to do with it. He is to take Mary home as his wife and he is to take this child home and name Him and adopt Him as his child, but this child was conceived by an act of the Holy Spirit. He is virgin born. Why? Because this child is actually Immanuel, God with us:

b. He is eternal God now with us in human flesh Oh, that's worth pondering. The Almighty God, the Creator of the universe, the Great I Am, is now in the body of a human child, a newborn baby! *Mary, did you know that your baby boy is Lord of all creation ...and the sleeping child you're holding is the Great I Am! Did you know your baby boy has walked where angels trod and when you kiss your little baby, you've kissed the face of God!* Jesus was eternal God Almighty who dwelt with the Father in glory from eternity past. So just think about what it means for God to become a child. Solomon said, *But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built! – 1 Kings 8:27.* How much less a human being, a tiny baby! What a miracle! What a glorious thing! *J. B. Phillips tells the fable of a senior angel describing the splendors of the universe to a new angel. Past whirling galaxies and blazing suns, they crossed the infinite distances of space to a galaxy of 500 billion stars, where he pointed to a small insignificant planet that looked like a dirty tennis ball and said, "That planet is the renowned Visited Planet." The junior angel listened in stunned disbelief and said, "Do you mean that our glorious Prince stooped so low as to become one of those creeping, crawling creatures on that floating ball?" "I do, and I don't think He would like you to call them creeping, crawling creatures. For strange as it may seem to us, He loves them. He went down to visit them to lift them up to become like Him"' The little angel looked blank. Such a thought was almost beyond his comprehension."* Philip Yancey comments on this tale: *"It is almost beyond my comprehension, too, and yet this is the key to understanding Christmas. Could it be true, this story of a Creator descending to be born on one small planet? If so, it is a story like no other. Never again need we wonder whether what happens on this dirty little tennis ball matters to the rest of the universe. Little wonder a choir of angels broke out in spontaneous song, disturbing, not only a few shepherds, but the entire universe." [Servant, Winter 1996. Page 7.]* This child was Immanuel, God with us! But not only that, the angels themselves answered the question by saying:

2. this child is Christ the Lord *Christ* means Chosen One, Messiah. See what Gabriel said to Mary in **Luke 1:31-36**. You see, this child:

a. He is the promised Messiah of Israel He is the, *long-expected Jesus, born to set Thy people free!* They had waited for Him. They had longed for Him. Decade after decade, century after century, they had waited for the one who would sit on David's throne and rule over the house of Jacob forever! A thousand years had gone by since the promise was made to David, five hundred years since the last of David's descendants had sat on any throne anywhere! There were centuries of longing for this child. Every Jewish girl cherished the hope that one day she might have the privilege which Mary had at last, to be the mother of the Messiah! Here on Mary's lap lies the hope of a nation, the future of a people, the hopes and fears of all the years met tonight in the little town of Bethlehem in the body of a child. Could it be? Yes, because this child:

b. He is the very Son of God The angel said, "This child will be born of you, but He is not your child; He is God's child. He does not inherit the sinful nature of a human father but the holy nature of His Heavenly Father. He is God's Son, the Lord, the Master of the Universe, now to be delivered through you as a baby. No wonder Elizabeth exclaimed, "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the child you will bear!"

Then, when the angels left them, the shepherds ran to Bethlehem - **Luke 2:16** And so, William Dix' hymn goes on to ask a second question. Would you read the second stanza with me?

Why lies He in such mean estate, Where ox and ass are feeding?
Good Christians, fear, for sinners here, The silent Word is pleading.
Nails, spear shall pierce Him through, The cross be borne for me, for you.
Hail, hail the Word made flesh, The Babe, the Son of Mary.

Now the author addresses the question of:

II. Why This Child Is Born (His Mission) Why would God come as a baby? And on top of that, why to such a mean estate, to such a poor couple? Why on a cold winter's night that was so deep? Why to a manger of hay in a stable? Why would the Son of God leave all of the glories of heaven, why would He leave His throne and His kingly crown to come to earth this way, as a child? The Scripture gives several answers to this question. First it says:

1. this child is born to save His people from their sins That's why Joseph was to name Him Jesus in **Matthew 1:21**. Jesus means *Jehovah is salvation*. Unto us is born a Savior! But notice that the focus of what He will save us from is <u>not</u> what Israel was expecting. They were looking for the birth of a Messiah who would deliver them as a nation from the ruling Romans who oppressed them and restore Israel to the status of an independent kingdom once again. They wanted to be saved from their circumstances and so do we! We want someone to save us from suffering, to make life better somehow. But this child was born to save us from our sins! This child was born that we who were sinful, lost human beings might receive forgiveness for our transgressions and enter into the eternal life of God. Look in the manger. *Good Christian, fear*... stand in awe, fall on your knees, *for sinners, here* in the manger, *the silent Word is pleading*. One child born to take away the sins of the world, your sins and mine and millions like us! But how? Well, the Scripture says that:

2. this child is born to suffer and die This child was brought up to the Temple later on and an old man named Simeon was there in **Luke 2:29-35**. Do you see it? This child is Himself God's salvation. When your eyes see Him, you see salvation, but that salvation will come through rejection, through a suffering so terrible that it will pierce Mary's loving soul like a sword. Peter prayed in **Acts 4:27-28**, *Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy child Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.* The rulers took God's Holy Child, His very Son, Jesus, whom He had chosen and anointed, and conspired against Him and nailed Him to a cross. Yet, unknown to them, that was the plan; that was God's purpose. That is how our salvation was wrought. *Nails, spear pierced Him through; that cross was borne for me, for you!* God made Him, the Holy Child, who knew no sin to become sin for us so that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him. He Himself bore our sins in His own body on that tree! *Mary did you know that your baby boy was Heaven's perfect lamb?* The Lamb of God that would be offered for the sins of the world. Did you know that the *child you've delivered will soon deliver you!* But the Scripture goes on to tell us:

3. this child was caught up to the Throne In his vision in the Book of Revelation, John saw Israel as a woman travailing in childbirth and he says in **Rev. 12:5**, *She gave birth to a son, a male child, who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter. And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne.* God raised His child, Jesus, from the dead on the third day, because it was not possible for death to keep its hold on Him! And He was caught up to heaven, exalted high, so that today this Child sits at His right hand to wait until His Father's plan is accomplished and then:

4. this child will come one day and rule the nations We already read it in **Rev. 12:5**. Isaiah said in **Is. 9:6-7**, *For to unto us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and*

righteousness from that time on and forever. This child Jesus is one day coming back to rule all the nations of the world and set up the Kingdom of God on earth.

And it all starts in that manger in Bethlehem. That's why He lies in such mean estate! It is for you, it is for me, it is ultimately for the whole world. Our salvation is wrapped up in this child. That's why the hymn concludes:

So bring Him incense, gold and myrrh, Come peasant, king to own Him;
The King of kings salvation brings, Let loving hearts enthrone Him.
Raise, raise a song on high, The virgin sings her lullaby.
Joy, joy for Christ is born, The Babe, the Son of Mary.

Now the hymn-writer raises the issue of:

III. How We Should Respond To This Child (His Adoration) That verse finds its inspiration in the arrival of the wise men in **Matthew 2:9-11**. The wise men knew what to do. They knew:

1. this child should be the object of our worship They bowed down and worshipped Him. They fell on their faces before Him. They owned Him; they acknowledged who He was and professed their allegiance to Him. Wise men, advisers to kings, came to own Him. Peasant shepherds came to own Him. Have you done that? Have you come to this child, this Jesus, now in heaven exalted high, and bowed your knee before Him? Have you owned Him? Have you cried out in your heart, "Jesus, I take You as My Savior! I accept the gift of salvation which you provided for me at the cross!" And then, once we own Him:

2. this child should fill our hearts with joy The wise men were filled with joy when they arrived to own, to acknowledge, this child. **Luke 2:20** tells us the shepherds left the stable glorifying and praising God because they had come to see and to own, to acknowledge, Him. When we know who this child is and why He came, when we have bowed our knees to worship Him, we should be so filled with joy that we *raise, raise a song on high*. And sing, *Joy, joy for Christ is born!* True worship is the expression of the joy in our hearts. Joy should flood our souls as we ponder the birth of this child for us. And then, one final note. Just like the wise men:

3. this child should be offered our finest gifts Out of their treasures, they brought the finest gifts they had, gold, frankincense and myrrh. And so the hymnwriter says, *Now bring Him incense, gold and myrrh!* Bring Him your finest gifts, lay everything you have, all your money, all your time, all your talents, all your possessions, at His feet and let them be used to bring about His glory. Lay yourself at His feet, a willing servant. Lay your life at His feet for Him to direct and use as He chooses. Our salvation brought the King of Kings to become a child. Let our loving hearts enthrone Him.

A Pastor by the name of Jeff Callender told this personal story: "During the Christmas season when our daughter was 3 years old, the number of presents under the tree slowly increased as The Day approached. Caught up in the spirit and excitement of gifts and giving as only 3-year-olds can be, one morning she was picking up, examining, shaking, and guessing what was inside every package. Then, in a burst of inspiration, she picked up a big red bow that had fallen off one present and held it on the top of her head. She looked up at me with twinkling eyes and beamed a smile as she said, 'Look at me, Daddy! I'm a present!'" Every child of God should say that to His heavenly Father. All Jesus wants for Christmas is you, ALL of you. Won't you gladly give Him that as you ponder the miracle of His birth?

The Wonders Of Christmas - Luke 1-2

On the coffee table in the cabin in the Poconos, to which I belong, was a book called, “Why Do Clocks Run Clockwise?” You can hardly put it down once you pick it up. It’s a book about what the author calls “imponderables”, trivial mysteries of everyday life that you never think about like, “Why does the water swirl clockwise when going down the drain?” and “Why do hot dogs come 10 to the package and buns come 8 to the package?” His quest to provide answers to these everyday unknowns has now led to a series of 11 books. Recently I read another little book entitled, “Why A Manger?” and realized that Christmas has its own set of “imponderables”, its own set of mysteries that we so often take for granted, because they are so familiar to us. Yet they are so amazing that I prefer to call them Wonders, and if you ponder a bit as you read the familiar story of the birth of Christ in Luke 1-2, they just jump off the page at you. For instance, let’s begin with 1:26-30. If you ponder that a minute, the question that jumps out at you is:

1. *Why Mary and Joseph?* (1:26-30) Out of the millions of people that have existed or even out of the millions of Jewish people who lived all through their history, God came to Mary and said, “God has chosen YOU! YOU have found favor with Him!” What we’re pondering is **The Wonder Of God’s Selection**. You know that Israel had believed for centuries that the Christ, the Messiah, would be born one day and it was the dream of every young Hebrew woman to be the mother of the Messiah, to hope that of all the women in Israel that God would choose her to bring into the world the one who would save His people. And here that honor is; that privilege is offered to one young teen-aged girl from Nazareth named Mary, who at that time was already engaged to be married, probably to a much older man whose name was Joseph. Why Mary?

Why Joseph? Were they so different from the rest, so much better than others as to deserve that honor? Honestly, I don't think anyone will ever know the full reason why God selected them, but there a couple of clues worth noting. The first is:

a. the willingness of Mary to obey Him Think about this from her point of view. This was not offered to her as an option; God did not ASK her if she would. He TOLD her she would become pregnant and bear His Son. But she's already engaged. Nobody is EVER going to believe that she conceived through a Divine miracle. Joseph is going to be appalled and cast her aside; she'll lose him. Her father is going to be disappointed and disgusted, her mother heartbroken that their daughter turns up pregnant. She is going to shame their family before the whole town and be forever known as a loose woman. Her entire future is at risk. What if it had been you? Wouldn't you have at least said, "Wait a minute!" But look what she says in **1:38**. Mary knew who she was, God's servant. She existed simply and only to do His will; self did not matter. What a challenge to us! Are you willing to do whatever God tells you to do, regardless of the consequences and without hesitation? But God saw even more than that in Mary; He saw:

b. the faith of Mary to believe Him Mary then goes to visit her cousin Elizabeth for three months in the hill country and Elizabeth makes a Holy-Spirit-inspired comment as she arrives in **1:45**. Ladies, if someone told you that you were going to become pregnant tomorrow without a husband by a Divine miracle, would you believe it, even if an angel told you? Not many would! Are you willing to believe what God says, even if it looks humanly like an absolute impossibility? Absolute submission and complete trust are two of the main qualities that God looks for in choosing who to use. And Joseph was pretty much like-minded. Of course, He did not believe Mary at first - who would? The angel had not appeared to him yet. Yet at the same time, the Scripture does point out:

c. the righteousness and caring of Joseph - Mt. 1:19 He was a righteous man. He could not overlook and tolerate or condone what was sin in his eyes. He could not marry Mary. And yet he could not throw her to the wolves either; he could not expose her to public disgrace and get even with her for her unfaithfulness by hurting her through humiliation. He cared about her well-being, even in her presumed "sin". That is the very heart and character of God! However, once he WAS told the truth by the angel, notice:

d. the willingness of Joseph to believe and obey Him - Mt. 1:24 He believed what God said without hesitation and obeyed without question. He was cut of the same cloth as Mary. He was willing to shoulder the shame and disgrace that would have fallen on her and take it as his own, to cast aside what everyone else would think and simply do God's will, just as she was. What a special couple! They would be a rarity in our generation and I'm sure they were in theirs. No wonder God chose them! Well, now we come to the second wonder in verses 31-33. When you read that aren't you just dying to ask:

2. *Why A Baby?* (1:31-33) If you were God and were going to send your Son into the world, would you do it like this? If He is to rule the world forever and ever, would you send Him into the world as a baby? Would you have Him experience the trauma of birth and all the struggles of childhood and adolescence? We're talking about **The Wonder Of Christ's Incarnation**, of His coming to us as a true human being like us, who began life the way we all do, as a growing embryo in the womb of a woman and experiencing all the stages of human development exactly as we do. Why that? Philip Yancey says, *I learned about incarnation when I kept a salt-water aquarium. Management of a marine aquarium, I discovered, was no easy task. I had to run a portable chemical laboratory to monitor the nitrate levels and the ammonia content. I pumped in vitamins and antibiotics and sulfa drugs and enough enzymes to make a rock grow. I filtered the water through glass fibers and charcoal and exposed it to ultra-violet light. You would think, in view of all the energy expended on their behalf, that my fish would at least be grateful. Not so. Every time my shadow loomed above the tank, they dove for cover into the nearest shell. They showed me one 'emotion' only: fear. Although I opened the lid and dropped in food on a regular schedule, three times a day, they responded to each visit as a sure sign of my designs to torture them. I could not convince them of my true concern. To my fish, I was deity. I was too large for them, my actions too incomprehensible. My acts of mercy, they saw as cruelty; my attempts at healing, they viewed as destruction. To change their perceptions, I began to see, would require a form of incarnation. I would have to become a fish and 'speak' to them in a language they could understand...* That is exactly the problem that God faced with us. Through incarnation, taking to Himself a human body and becoming a true human being, Christ revealed God to us in a form that we could comprehend! But the book of Hebrews goes even beyond that and tells us that ***Christ <u>had to</u> become one of us*. - Heb. 2:14-17**. It was absolutely necessary for Him to become a human being for three reasons. First:

a. to be able to offer Himself for us as a sacrifice of atonement before God You see, lambs and goats can't actually take away sin. They're just symbols. Human beings are the ones who sinned against God. Human beings are the ones who must suffer the penalty of sin, which is death. If anyone is to take our penalty for us, to become our sacrifice that satisfies the wrath of God, it HAS to be a human being! So Jesus became one in order that He could offer Himself in our place! Secondly, Jesus had to be human:

b. to be able to defeat Satan's power of death by dying and rising Satan held the power of death over the human race through our sin. By dying and canceling our sin debt and then rising from the dead, Jesus put Satan out of business! We still die, but when we do, His death guarantees us both heaven and a bodily resurrection, so we need not be afraid anymore. But to die and rise, Jesus had to be human, to become a baby. Thirdly, it was:

c. to be able to fully experience all we do so that we might come to Him We have a God to come to and worship who knows us because He BECAME one of us! He has experienced everything that we do from the human standpoint and He is touched with the feeling of our weaknesses. Our struggles move Him because He experienced them. That's why He came as a baby! Now we move to verses 34-37. And we have to ponder:

3. *Why A Miracle?* (1:34-37) Why a Divine conception, totally outside the natural order of life. It is **The Wonder Of Christ's Virgin Birth**. Who ever heard of such a thing? Indeed, it is impossible and the more that we know biologically about genes and reproduction, the more impossible we know it is! In fact, it is so impossible that many today are willing to discard it as an article of faith; it is simply asking too much of us to believe that. Why is it so important that Christ was born of a virgin without a human father? Well, for one thing:

a. it guarded the truth of God being His Father and He the Son of God. It is because of this Divine miracle, verse **35** says, that He would be called the Son of God. No human father, not even Joseph, could say, "This is MY son! I brought Him into the world. I caused him to be conceived." If there had been a human father involved, NOBODY would have believed that He was the truly the Son of God! But since God alone was the cause of this pregnancy, He is truly the Child of God! Plus, this miracle:

b. it freed Him from original sin to be the perfect sacrifice for us You see, sin is not merely something we do; it is a nature we are born with. Human beings come into this world with the presence of sin and the nature to sin already inside them and pervading their being. We get it from our parents. They pass it along to us as a heritage. By skipping the human procreation process, God broke the chain that ran all the way back to Adam and Eve and created for His Son a body and a nature that was WITHOUT SIN. **Rom. 8:3**, *For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did, sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and [as an offering] for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh*. The fact that He was human like us enabled Him to be our substitute; the fact that He was absolutely sinless, both in nature and deed, enabled Him to be our Perfect Sacrifice. But, you might say, couldn't Christ have inherited a sinful nature from Mary? Surely, she was also a sinner like us! True, and the Roman Catholic church invented a dogma to try to solve this, called the Immaculate Conception, which says that Mary was also miraculously conceived without sin. That is simply not true. My own opinion is simply that God created a body for His Son in Mary's womb. Hebrews says that when the Son came into the world He said, ... "A body YOU have prepared for Me." He used Mary's womb to be the incubator in which to grow the perfectly created body of His Son. Whether that is exactly how He did it or not, the miracle of the Virgin Birth is what makes His Son, the "Holy One", the Sinless Pure One, who was born of Mary. Now let's move over to chapter 2 and read verses 1-5. This is a fluke. Mary and Joseph had to take a week-long trip because of this census and she ends up, instead of delivering her baby at home in Nazareth where she was prepared, delivering him on the road in Bethlehem. Now we have to ponder:

4. *Why Bethlehem?* (2:1-5) Why not Nazareth, his home to be? Why not Jerusalem, the capital; after all, He is to be the King! Why did God choose this sleepy little village, five miles south of Jerusalem? Well, most obviously, it was David's home town and since the angel told Mary that her son was going to sit on the Throne of David and rule, this really identified Him with the house and lineage of David, but very directly:

a. it fulfilled God's Old Testament prediction When the Wise Men arrived and asked where to find the newborn King of the Jews, the Jewish leaders answered, *"In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: `But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel'".* - **Mt. 2:5-6**. 700 years earlier, God had specified the location of the birth of His Son and He moved powerfully to keep His Word, bringing Mary and Joseph there. But that is still not the root of the question; what is so special about Bethlehem? The answer is that:

b. it was the place where sacrificial lambs were born (2:8-11) Every day, morning and evening, a perfect year-old male lamb was offered to God, 365 days a year. Those shepherds out in the fields near Bethlehem were keeping the Temple flocks that were the continual source of lambs for sacrifice. **Micah 4:8** says, *As for you, O watchtower of the flock, O stronghold of the Daughter of Zion, the former dominion will be restored to you; kingship will come to the Daughter of Jerusalem.* In Aramaic, those words, *watchtower of the flock*, are *migdal eder.* This was a specific stone watchtower north of Bethlehem on the road to Jerusalem, used in that day by the Temple shepherds as protection for themselves and their flocks. All the Jews believed that it was here that Messiah was to be first announced and He was, by the angels. What we are talking about is **The Wonder Of Christ's Sacrifice**. How appropriate, that the Lamb of God who would take away the sins of the world was born among flocks destined for sacrifice and attended by shepherds who cared for those sacrificial lambs! Bethlehem is really a statement by God that His Son did not come that first time to be a King ruling from Jerusalem, but a spotless Lamb destined to give His life. And again, that is the last thing we would expect of God's Son. We would expect Him to rule, to reign, to set the world straight, to vanquish evil and injustice. We would not expect Him to be born, like all those lambs, to die for our sins! Now finally, let's look at 2:6-7. Of course, the obvious thing to ponder here is:

5. Why A Manger? **(2:6-7)** The word *manger* could mean a feed rack or perhaps an animal stall. To be truthful, we don't know the exact circumstances of Christ's birth. All traditions seem to point to the fact that it was actually in a cave, probably one used for the keeping of animals. But the exact location or type of facility isn't really the issue. What we're really pondering is **The Wonder Of Christ's Humility**. If you were going to send your Son into the world, wouldn't you send Him into the midst of comfort and finery? Why not a palace and rich parents who could care for Him? Wouldn't you send him at least into a real bed and clean facilities? And even when He grew up, Christ was, by all definitions, poor. He never owned a house, never had any savings, never owned a horse or donkey of His own, as far as we know. He had no place to lay His head, but relied on God's provision through the generosity of others. He had no suitcase, let alone a closet, and seems to have only owned the clothes on His back. Hardly a place in life we would accept for ourselves, let alone for our children! Why would He choose such humble circumstances? Well, you remember that the Bible says that:

a. He became poor for our sakes - 2 Cor. 8:9, *For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich*. It was a choice, a choice made out of grace, a choice to leave behind everything to come into the world and have nothing. Why? So that you and I, through the giving up of His very life, would have everything, all the riches of glory. You see:

b. He came into the world to serve, not to be served - Mt. 20:28, *...the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.* The point of His coming into the world was not to demand service, to lord it over us, but to serve us by giving up, not only everything material, but His very life for ours. The humble circumstances of His birth point to that. He didn't come for Him; He came for us!

You see, the manger, for us, means life. *Bodie Thoene tells this story: It was Christmas 1985. I had grown and had a family of my own. We stood together inside the lambing barn as the vet shook his head sadly over the orphan lamb who bleated miserably beside its mother. She had been a beautiful young ewe our son Jake had hoped to show in 4-H. Now she was dead. How would her baby survive? We looked hopefully into the pen across the corridor. It had been a hard night for our flock. Our oldest ewe had also given birth. Her lamb was stillborn. She fussed and worried over her limp baby, trying to rouse him. Maybe she would adopt the orphan. We attempted in vain to present the motherless lamb to the grieving ewe but she would not accept the baby. She growled and stamped her hooves and ran the little fellow into the corner. Brock snatched him up a moment before she trampled him. "Why Mama?," nine year old Jake asked me. "A dead lamb in the old girl's pen. Why won't she take the poor little guy?" I wrapped my arms around Jake. "He isn't her own and she knows it." The vet attempted to calm the angry ewe. He rubbed his head and said, "There's one thing left, if you're up for it. The shepherds used to know a trick to help an orphan lamb be adopted by a different mother. But it isn't pretty. It means hiding the live lamb beneath the fleece of the dead lamb." We all agreed it was worth a try. While Jake and I comforted the grieving mother sheep, Brock and the vet removed both lambs. When they returned, the orphan was swaddled in the fleece of the ewe's offspring. Once again, we offered the orphan lamb to the ewe. Just as the shepherds from ancient times would have done, we placed the lamb in the feed trough for the mother to discover on her own. The mother sniffed, catching the scent of her baby's fleece. Then, with a joyful bawl, she began to lick the orphan as if he were her own! She nudged him hard, pushing him out of the manger and directing him toward his first supper. He began to nurse immediately! We all knew everything would be all right. "Merry Christmas!" Brock hugged Jake and me. "Once again we find life in the manger." It was, I thought, a special gift God had given us that harsh winter's night. For it was a perfect symbol of how Jesus, the Lamb of God, by His own death covers our sin and makes us acceptable to our Heavenly Father. [Why A Manger, Bodie and Brock Thoene, p. 63-65]* The bottom-line answer to all the "Why" questions of Christmas is simply this: through the manger of Bethlehem and the baby who came out of it, we have life.

EASTER

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Our Union With Christ - Rom. 6:5
We Have Been United With Him In His Death

Some years ago, I ran across an article published in 1879 by the well-known theologian Augustus H. Strong entitled, *The Believer's Union With Christ* **. It is actually a summary of a chapter in Volume 3 of his famous book series, *Systematic Theology* with a similar title, but the thoughts expressed in it struck me so powerfully that I just had to take the opportunity to share some of them with you. It helped me to gain a new and deeper understanding of just how God provided salvation for us through the crucifixion and the resurrection of Christ and there is no better time to share that understanding with you than during the two Sundays of this Holy Week as we focus our minds on these two events. We'll base our study around the two thoughts expressed in Rom. 6:5, *If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection.* We have been united with Him in His death AND we have been united with Him in His resurrection. That's how God saved us. So let's begin by exploring exactly what it means to say that:

I. We Have Been United With Jesus. The first thing I need to explain is that:

1. it is a real personal union, not a theological concept When I say something like, "We are united with our brothers and sisters around the world in condemning acts of terrorism!", that is a concept. When Paul says we are united with Jesus, he doesn't merely mean that we are *identified* with Jesus somehow in a symbolic sense; he is talking about an actual real thing that happened to each one of us when we believed. I ate breakfast this morning and now my breakfast has been united with me. In my stomach it was digested and its nutrients are even now fanning out through my bloodstream and being absorbed by my cells. It is now literally part of me! I guess people are right when they say, "You are what you eat!" When we believed, the Holy Spirit was actually given to each one of us; He literally came to live and dwell inside us and **1 Cor. 6:17** says:

a. the Spirit of Jesus has been joined as one with our spirit *...he who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him.* That's not a concept; it's a reality. His Holy Spirit and our individual human spirit join together as one spirit. They are spiritually attached, welded, fused, joined, use whatever word you like, so that you don't have two spirits in you, but one, a spirit that is you directly joined to the Holy Spirit. The Scripture says that:

b. we are literally made one with the Father, Son and Spirit This is what Jesus prayed for in **John 17:21**, *May they all be one, as You, Father, are in Me and I am in You. May they also be one in Us, so the world may believe You sent Me.* In other words, "The way that I am one with You, Father, make them one with both of us!" And that's just what happened through the Spirit being joined to us. Just as the Father, Jesus and the Holy Spirit are One, yet three, so we have entered into that very union and our spirit is actually joined as one with all three of them; we have the same unity of relationship with them as they have with each other! Isn't that unbelievable? Now here comes the tricky part. This union:

c. it happens at a point, yet transcends time into the past and into the future Even though we only begin to exist at specific point in time and are joined to Jesus at the specific moment when we truly believe, we are joined together with a Being who is eternal, whose life extends all the way backward in time forever. His eternal life becomes ours, or to put it in reverse, because we are now joined to Him, we were there with Him! That's how we could be chosen before the foundation of the world; we were chosen IN Him, Eph. 1:4 says. We were there through our union with Him. That's how we could be crucified with Him and buried with Him and raised with Him. We were there because we are joined to Him. And the same holds true of the future. We are seated in heaven right now because our spirit is joined to His and we will reign with Him forever and ever. That is guaranteed because we are joined to Him, so whatever happens to Him happens to us! Got that? Now here's a second point:

2. it is a union that preserves our distinctness We are not melted into and absorbed by Jesus in the way that Buddhists hope to lose their personal identity and be merged into the energy of the universe in their Nirvana. Just as the Father, Son and Spirit are still distinctly three, even though they are one, so we are still distinctly ourselves, even though we are joined to Him. The New Testament uses several common analogies to try to help us understand this unity. We are joined to Jesus **in the same fashion that:**

a. a building is joined to its foundation - Eph. 2:19-22 He's the Cornerstone, the apostles are like the foundation layer and we're all bricks, living stones Peter says, in the building that God is building. The walls and the foundation and the cornerstone are all one; there is only one building, yet they are distinct portions of that building. Perhaps the deepest illustration of this is found in marriage:

b. a husband and wife become one flesh - Eph. 5:31-32 They are distinct and separate and different, a husband and a wife, a male and a female, yet they are joined together as one, and that fact is most directly displayed in their

physical union. Paul says that is a great mystery, but it is a picture of Christ and believers, made completely one, yet distinct. We are made one the way that:

c. a vine and its branches share a common life - Jn. 15:4-5 Jesus is the whole grapevine; we are the branches of that vine. The life of the vine, the life-giving sap, flows through the vine into each of the branches and it is their attachment, their being joined to the vine, which gives each one of them life. And the last illustration is what you see every time you look in a mirror:

d. the members of a human body are one with their head - Col. 2:19 You have only one body. All your parts are distinct and fulfill vastly different functions, yet they are all joined together in such a literal and complete union that they are one. And the head, though it is distinct and gives direction to all the rest of your body, is still organically one with the body. So, Christ is one with all of us, His very members, who form one body together with Him.

The best example I can think of is Siamese twins. Two persons, two minds, two personalities, sharing common organs, a common body and a common life together inseparably! That's us and Christ! Now why am I belaboring this? Well, Dr. J. W. Alexander called it "the central truth of all theology and of all religion".

3. this union is the basis of all that God has done for us and in us Our being united with Christ is what makes salvation possible from beginning to end and what actually gives it to us. I want you to look with me at **2 Cor. 5:21**. Here is what we call the Great Exchange. Our sin ended up on Christ; His righteousness ended up being ours. God "switched" us; He exchanged what was mine to Him and what was His to me. But how could He do that? By joining us together as one! Joining us together:

a. it made us participants in all that is true of Him His life, His nature, His righteousness, His past and His future, we become part of it all! But sadly, the reverse is also true. Joining us together:

b. it made Him a participant in all that was true of us Our sin, our rebellion, our evil, our punishment and our hell, He became part of all of that. And that's what it really means when we read:

II. We Have Been United With Jesus In His Death That's the side of this doctrine that we want to focus on today. Look again carefully at the first half of **2 Cor. 5:21**, *God made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us.* This is what theologians call the doctrine of imputation:

1. through union with us, our sin was "imputed" to Him What we usually think that means is that God allowed Jesus to voluntarily "stand in" for us, to step into our place and take the punishment for our crimes, as it were. Well, just suppose I commit murder and my brother wants to save me from the death penalty, can he just volunteer to take my sentence and the judge will let me go free? Why not? What's wrong with that? It's not justice; in fact, it's INjustice! Any judge that would allow that would not only be dismissed from office, but be charged with a crime himself! Justice demands that the punishment MUST be meted out to the one who did the crime! Yet that's how we usually see what God did for us; He let an innocent third party stand in and be punished for our sins. As I was reading Exodus, I was struck by **Ex. 23:7** in the NLT which says, *...Never sentence an innocent or blameless person to death, for I never declare a guilty person to be innocent*. God says, "I never kill the innocent and I never acquit the guilty and you shouldn't either." If that is true and God doesn't lie, then how could He let Jesus die for our sins? You see:

a. our punishment was not merely "assigned" to Him in an external fashion. God didn't just say, "OK Son, You go be killed so I don't have to kill them!" It goes so much deeper than that. Imputation means that:

b. through uniting us with Jesus, the Father made our iniquity His You know **Is. 53:6**, *All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned - every one - to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all*. God caused, not our punishment, but our iniquity itself to light upon or land upon, to be laid upon, Jesus. When His Spirit joined ours, our iniquity became His. God actually made Him to BE sin, made Him to BE what we were! Martin Luther wrote, *By faith thou art so glued to Christ that of thee and him there becomes as it were one person, so that with confidence thou canst say: 'I am Christ — that is, Christ's righteousness, victory, etc., are mine ;' and Christ in turn can say: 'I am that sinner — that is, his sins, his death, etc., are mine, because he clings to me and I to him, for we have been joined together through faith into one flesh and bone*. He could die for us because, in being joined to us, our sin became His and even though I was only joined to Him in 1970, because He is eternal, I was already in Him and my sin was already in Him on the cross 2,000 years earlier! I admit this is a great mystery of God, but this explanation of it makes the most sense that I've found! So, if our sin became His, then, secondly:

2. through union with us, He died the death that belonged to us That awful, cruel, horrible death of the cross, that separation from the Father and enduring of His eternal wrath on sin, THAT belonged to US. That was OUR punishment. Yet He died that death. How? Not simply in place of us, but in UNION with us, so that in His being punished, WE were actually receiving the just penalty for our sins! Look with me at what Peter says in **1 Pet. 2:24**. Look carefully at those words. It says that:

a. He carried our sins IN His body as He died When we read this, we usually think of it in an external way, that God lifted our sins off of us and somehow piled them upon Jesus there on the cross. We sometimes picture it by

transferring an object from one hand to the other, letting that represent our sins. But that's not how He did it at all. Because we were joined to Him as one, our sins were IN His body when He died on the tree. He was carrying them already. And notice who dies in the verse: *that WE might die*! How? In Him! And then, in the end of the verse, Peter quotes the end of **Is. 53:5**, *...he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed*. You see:

b. in His punishment, our transgressions were actually punished because we were joined to Him. The penalty for every evil thing we ever did or ever will do, the penalty for the sin that dwells in us, the wrath of God was poured out upon it as He was pierced, as He was crushed, as He was chastised. We were actually and justly punished because we were one with Him! And because our union with Him is complete:

c. on His cross the debt record of our sins was removed - Col. 2:13-14 says, *...God made [us] alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses... A*nd how could He do that? *...by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.* Because we were joined together with Christ, He was able to forgive ALL our sins, because the record of all that we had done that deserved punishment was fulfilled. All the items on the list to be punished were crossed off, pun intended. That record was nailed to the cross in the person of Jesus and satisfied completely, so that NO part of it remains any longer! We are FREE because we were in Him when He died our awful death! OK, so He became our sin and He died our death; where does that leave us? Dead, actually! Look with me at **Gal. 2:20**. Paul says, *I have been crucified with Christ...* How?

3. through union with us, we were crucified with Him Because I am joined to Him, when He died, I died in Him. Thus, I am dead. Paul says, *I no longer live!* Yet here I am walking around! So what does that mean. Well, listen to **Rom. 6:6**, *We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin.*

a. my old self was crucified and died along with Him What part of me is *my old self*? The Greek says *old man*, which doesn't help much. I've only got three parts, a physical part (my body), a mental part composed of mind, will and emotions (my soul) and a spiritual part (my spirit or nature). My body seems to still be alive, barely; my mental part is at least still functioning. My *old self* must be my old spirit, my old nature, that old core of my being which was saturated by evil and kept me separated from God. When He died, that old part of me, that old person who I was, died, literally, and in its place, a new self, a brand new spirit, a brand new nature created out of that union with Christ, has taken its place. I haven't just made a new start; I have literally been born all over again at the core of myself. I'm a new me! The old me is dead and gone; it died in Him when He died. And therefore, Paul says:

b. I no longer live; my life is now derived from His - Col. 3:3, *For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.* The life that I now live comes from a new source, the very life of Christ to which I have been joined, a life that can't die, a life that is eternal. My life no longer exists apart from Christ; it is concealed within the person of Jesus, because we are joined together as one!

Most of the time, we have been taught that this "dying" or "putting to death" of our old self is something that we actually have to do ourselves. Or we're told to "reckon", that is, "count" ourselves as being dead. In his book *The Normal Christian Life*, Watchman Nee writes, *For years after my conversion, I had been taught to reckon. I reckoned from 1920 until 1927. The more I reckoned that I was dead to sin, the more alive I clearly was. I simply could not believe myself dead and I could not produce that death. Whenever I sought help from others, I was told to read Romans 6:11, and the more I read Romans 6:11, and tried to reckon, the further away death was: I could not get at it... For months I was seeking and at times I fasted, but nothing came through. I remember one morning—one I can never forget—I was upstairs sitting at my desk reading the Word and praying and I said, "Lord, open my eyes!" And then in a flash I saw it. I saw my oneness with Christ. I saw that I was in Him and that when He died, I died. I saw that the question of my death was a matter of the past and not of the future, and that I was just as truly dead as He was because I was in Him when He died. The whole thing had dawned upon me. I was carried away with such joy at this great discovery that I jumped from my chair and cried, "Praise the Lord, I am dead!". I ran downstairs and met one of the brothers helping in the kitchen and I laid hold of him. "Brother", I said, "do you know that I have died?" I must admit he looked puzzled. "What do you mean?" he said, so I went on. "Do you not know that Christ has died? Do you not know that I died with Him? Do you not know that my death is no less truly a fact than His?" Oh, it was so real to me! I longed to go through the streets of Shanghai shouting the news of my discovery. From that day to this I have never for one moment doubted the finality of that word: "I have been crucified with Christ". [from The Normal Christian Life, Watchman Nee, Ch. 4]*

Beloved, we have been united with Christ in His death! That union is what saves us and that union is what transforms us, whether we realize it or not. The real question is, "Have YOU been personally united with Christ, joined to Him as one?" If you have, then all of this is yours. If you haven't, then why wait? Come to Him today!

** Augustus H. Strong, Philosophy And Religion: A Series of Addresses, Essays and Sermons Designed To Set Forth Great Truths In Popular Form, Ch. 17, pp. 220-225 - Printed in the Examiner, June 12, 1879. Found at http://www.biblestudytools.com/classics/strong-philosophy-religion/new-item/

Our Union With Christ - Rom. 6:5
We Have Been United With Him In His Resurrection

The Resurrection of Jesus Christ is THE core central truth of our faith. Paul said, *...if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins - 1 Cor. 15:17.* Therefore, it is not only through the death of Christ, but it is also through the Resurrection of Christ that God saves us and takes away our sins. I have always believed that and you probably have too, but the deeper question is, "How did He do it?" How can the resurrection of Jesus 2,000 years ago genuinely impact and transform a life today? And the answer to that question is the magnificent truth we began to study last week; We have been united with Jesus! Now for those who may not have heard that message and also to remind all of us who did, let me briefly give you:

I. A Recap Of The Truth That We Have Been United With Jesus At the moment that we believed, the instant that we placed our trust in Jesus as our Savior, something amazing happened:

1. the Spirit of Jesus was joined as one with our spirit - 1 Cor. 6:17 says, ...*he who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him*. At that moment, the Holy Spirit comes to take up residence inside of us and joins Himself, attaches Himself, unites Himself, with our Spirit, so that we become one spirit with the Father and the Son. To illustrate, we are like Siamese twins, distinct beings with different personalities, yet inseparably sharing common organs in a common body. We are individually and personally joined together with Jesus that same way in our spirits, that innermost core part of ourselves, so that we are no longer two, but one. That being joined together:

2. it happened at a point, yet it transcends time into the past and the future I was joined to Jesus in 1970, but He is eternal, so since my life and His life are now united, I was already there in Him before the foundation of the world; I was already there in Him at the cross when He died and in the tomb when He rose. I am already there in Him, now that He is seated in heaven and I am already in Him reigning forever in the future. I know it sounds strange, but that is what God did by uniting us to Him:

3. this union made us participants in all that is true of Him To put it very simply, because my spirit is joined to His, what happened to Him, happened to me! He bore MY sins in His own body on the tree, because I was joined to Him. He died MY death and all my sins were actually and justly punished in that act because I was in Him, dying with Him. And when He died, I died. I was crucified with Christ, Galatians says; I died and my life is now hidden with Christ. I no longer live; the "old me", the "old self", my "old nature," died with Him and I was born all over again into a brand new life. And that's where I want to begin this morning, with the second half of the wonderful truth in our theme verse, Rom. 6:5, *If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection*. This morning, we not only celebrate the wonderful, joyous fact that Christ rose from the dead, but also the glorious truth that:

II. We Have Been United With Him In His Resurrection When He rose, we rose with Him, or as He Himself promised, *...Because I live, you also will live - Jn. 14:19.* I'd like you to turn with me to **Eph. 2:4-5** where Paul states so very clearly that:

1. through this union God made us alive with Christ When Paul says *we were dead*, he is not talking about our dying with Christ; he's talking about the state in which we came into the world and in which we were, until we trusted in Christ. We were spiritually *dead,* in trespasses and sins. For me, the definition of spiritual death is found in 4:18, which says we were ...*separated from the life of God.* 2:12 says we were *...without God.* God wasn't IN us; His life wasn't in us. Sin was; it was at the core of our being, in our spirit. Our human spirit was dead, cut off and separated from God, even though it was the very place that He created for Himself to dwell. But God made us alive! And how did He do it? By sending the Spirit of His Son into us and joining Him to our spirit when we believed. And the moment that He did that:

a. His own eternal life became ours You know, most believers think that they receive eternal life simply because God says so, because He declares that we have it, because He says, "Here, I give it to you!" when we believe. And that in itself would be enough, but that is not how He gave it to us. Look with me at **1 John 5:11-12**. Did you get that? Where is eternal life? It is in His Son, in Jesus! Jesus has life that is eternal. So how did God give life to us? By giving us HIM! By having the Spirit of His Son enter us and join Himself to our spirit so that His life became our life! That's why he who has the Son has life and he who doesn't have the Son doesn't have life! We get it by literally being joined to Him, so that His life becomes ours! Oh listen! In case you're a person who thinks that God weighs all your deeds and if you've done more good than bad, when life is over, He will let you into heaven and give you eternal life, you're sadly mistaken. You can never get eternal life that way! Life is in Jesus! You can only get life by getting Jesus, by coming to Him, by believing that His death paid for all your sins, and giving your life to Him as your Lord. If you come to Him trusting in Him alone to save you, He will put His Spirit in you RIGHT NOW and join you to Himself and His eternal life will become yours! Now in that same moment that we were joined to Him:

b. His very nature was placed within us - 2 Pet. 1:4 says that through His great and precious promises we became *partakers of the Divine nature*, partners who share the very nature of God Himself. In that moment our "old

self" died and God created within us a ...*new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness*. - ***Eph. 4:24.*** He birthed in us a new nature, a new spirit, made in His very own image, pure and holy. He not only gave us His life; He gave us His own nature, so that we are no longer identified as *sinners*, but we are everywhere in the New Testament called *saints*, literally, *holy ones*, beings who have a nature that is holy like His. So how did that happen?

c. His perfect righteousness was "imputed" to us Remember that verse we focused on last time, **2 Cor. 5:21**, *For our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.* God didn't just say, "OK, now that Christ has paid for your sins, I declare you to be righteous like He is." No, He joined us to Christ so that our sin literally became His and His righteousness literally became ours! It's not just a declaration; it is REAL. His righteousness was actually infused into the core of our very being; we literally became what He was, just as He became what we were.

And when did all of this happen to us? Ephesians 2:5 said, *He made us alive together with Christ*! When God flowed life into Christ's dead body in that tomb, He flowed His life into our very souls, because in being joined to Him, we were there! We were co-resurrected! His resurrection from the dead was my resurrection to the very life of God that cannot die, receiving the very nature of God which is perfectly righteous and having it placed within me! All of that happened to me when it happened to Him, even though in the way that I experience time, it only happened to me in 1970! Oh, I don't understand the mystery of it all, but I love it! Hallelujah! Now here's a second thing that being united with Him in His resurrection means:

2. through this union God raised us to a new life - Eph. 2:6a God not only *made us alive* together with Him, but He literally, *raised us up* together with Him. How are those two things different? The meaning of being raised up with him is spelled out for us in **Rom. 6:4**. Baptism is the symbol through which we joyfully declare what actually happened to us in reality; when He was raised, we were raised with Him to walk in newness of life, that is, to live a brand-new kind of life, a life like His! You see, now that we have been joined together as one:

a. He lives His life out through us - Gal. 2:20 in the NLT says, *My old self has been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. So I live in this earthly body by trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.* Because I have been joined to Jesus, He uses His power, which now dwells in me, to live out through me the life He wants me to live. And yet I'm not simply a puppet; I'm not merely moved by the hand inside of me with no will or choice in the matter. When I choose to trust in Jesus, who is joined to me, to live and act through me, He does just that, and I live the life He intends me to live, His life, in that moment. When I make my own choices and decisions or try to do things in my own strength instead of trusting in Him, I fail to live His life and I grieve His Holy Spirit who is joined to me. It's a whole new way of living, Jesus inside of me, by His Spirit empowering my words and my actions, so that they become, not mine, but His! So many Christians think that the Christian life is about them trying harder and harder to live the way the Bible says they should and they often fail repeatedly and become frustrated. Listen, Jesus did not simply TELL us to live the life He wants us to live; He joined Himself to us so that He could give us the very power inside ourselves to live that life and could actually live that life for us, with our participation and consent! And the more we learn to trust in Him, the more:

b. He shines His glory through us in an ever-increasing fashion The NLT says, ...*the Lord—who is the Spirit—makes us more and more like him as we are changed into his glorious image* in **2 Cor. 3:18**. The more that we learn to allow the Spirit to empower us and live through us, the more we are changed, step by step and little by little, into His image. That means that our lives look more and more and more like His life. That's the real definition of spiritual growth! It's not that we LEARN more and more, but that we LIVE more and more like Him, because He lives out His life through us more and more. Kevin Emmert says, *I understood this more deeply after I went tandem skydiving a few years ago. Though I couldn't see my instructor—he was strapped to my back—as we jumped from 13,500 feet and whipped through the sky at 120 miles per hour, I knew he was there. After 60 seconds of freefall, he pulled the chute, and we soared. Every twist and turn we made, we made together. We were on the same trajectory. Skydiving provided me an image of life with Christ. We are now "strapped" to Christ. He's always with us, even though we can't see him. And his story, his life trajectory, is also ours. [Christianity Today, July/August 2015.]*
Now here's something else. In that process of living our life, because we are so joined together, the Bible says that:

c. He suffers our weaknesses and is afflicted in our afflictions Whatever happens to us happens to Him because we are one. **Heb. 4:15** says that Jesus, our High Priest *sympathizes*, He literally *suffers together with us* in our weaknesses. Whatever we feel, He feels. Whatever frailty, whatever suffering comes our way, He is one with us in experiencing it. **Is. 63:9** says of Israel, *In all their affliction he was afflicted*... and that is so much more literally true of us. When we suffer, when we agonize, when we experience tragedy or become a victim of some evil deed, He is not simply "with us" in some external sense; He is "in us", joined to us, and experiencing everything that we experience exactly as we do! He is not aloof from us, somewhere out there; we suffer in this life together with Him. What a great measure of comfort that should be to us!

Truly, the life that we now live in this body, we no longer live, but Christ lives it in us! So, we are made alive together with Christ, we have been raised to a new life with Him, and, lastly:

3. through this union God guarantees our future Let's look back at Ephesians one more time, to **Eph. 2:6b-7**. We've looked at the past and at the present, but now let's look to the future. Paul says that because we are joined to Him:

a. we are already seated in heaven with Christ Turn with me to **Col. 3:1-3**. After His resurrection, Christ ascended to heaven and He is seated there at the Father's right hand right now. So where am I? Because I am joined to Him, where He is, I am. So, I am there seated with Him in heaven, right now. And Paul's point is that I ought to start thinking that way, His way, instead of the way earthly people think. The great question that people often have is, "Will I get to heaven when I die?" The Christian's answer to that is, "I'm already there!" Jesus is there and I'm joined to Him so I'm there right now. But, speaking of dying, all of us, except those who happen to still be living at the moment Jesus returns, will die. In that instant, our spirits will be where they already are, in heaven with Jesus, while our lifeless bodies return to dust. But **Col. 3:4** goes on to look forward to that future day and says that:

b. when Christ appears we will appear with Him On that great day when He comes again, when He returns in the glory of the Father to set up His Kingdom, we shall appear with Him. Why? Because we're united to Him! Paul said, ...*since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. - 1 Thes. 4:14*. We died with Him, we were raised with Him, we're in heaven with Him both before and after we die, and we'll come back with Him! What happens to Him happens to us and when He comes, WE will come with Him! Then, of course, there is one more little detail that remains. Our bodies are missing, left in the dust, but:

c. at His coming our bodies will be raised And why is that? Listen to **1 Cor. 15:21-23**, *For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ*. Our bodies die because in our old life we were united with Adam. But now we are in Christ, united with Christ, and all of our bodies must be made alive as His was. However, in this matter of our bodies being resurrected, God has chosen to do it progressively, in an exact order. Christ was the first and the primary One to be raised and God has decided that all the rest of us only get to experience that at His coming. And when we do, **Phil. 3:21** says, He *...will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body*. Our bodies will be transformed to be like His, because we are joined to Him. Then what? **Rom. 8:17** says that:

d. we are heirs of God together with Him, ...*heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ...* When we hear that, we often think that we get an equal share of all that is His. But that's not what it says. Because we are joined together with Christ, we are co-heirs with Him of all that is God's. Everything that is His is ours; all that the eternal future holds for Him, it holds for us and:

e. we shall reign together with Him forever Literally, **2 Tim. 2:11-12** YLT says, *Stedfast is the word: For if we died together--we also shall live together; if we do endure together--we shall also reign together*... We died with Him, we lived with Him, we endured with Him through this life and we shall reign with Him to the ages of the ages! Why, because we are IN Him, joined to Him as one! Our future is guaranteed by His.

And all of that is what it means when it says that we have been united with Christ in His resurrection! Rory Shriner describes it using the illustration of an airplane and you'll have to pardon his destination city because he's from Australia! He says, *Imagine yourself at the airport, about to board a plane. The plane is on its way to sunny Melbourne, and Melbourne is where you want to be. What relationship do you need to have with the plane at this point? Would it help to be **under** the plane, to submit yourself to the plane's eminent authority in the whole flying-to-Melbourne thing? Or would it help to be **inspired by** the plane? To watch it fly off and whisper, "One day, I hope to do that too". What about **following** the plane? You know the plane is going to Melbourne, and so it stands to reason that if you take note of the direction it goes and pursue it, then you too will end up there. Of course, the key relationship you need with the plane is not to be **under** it, **behind** it, or **inspired by** it. You need to be **IN** it. Why? Because, by being in the plane, what happens to the plane will also happen to you. The question "Did you get to Melbourne?" will be part of a larger question: "Did the plane get to Melbourne?" If the answer to the second question is yes, and if you were in the plane, then what happened to the plane will also have happened to you. [Rory Shiner, "Union With Christ" in The Briefing at http://matthiasmedia.com/briefing/2011/06/union-with-christ/]* Folks, our true need is not to be **under** Jesus, doing what He said because He said so. It is not to be **inspired by** Jesus to try to be like Him or to **follow** Jesus in the sense of merely following His instructions. If we ever want to arrive at that glorious future in heaven as heirs of God to reign forever and ever, we must be **IN** Jesus! We need to be joined to Jesus, the living, real Person of Jesus Himself. And we are only IN Jesus when Jesus is IN us, when that real, living Person comes and takes up residence inside of us, in our very spirit, by His own Holy Spirit. Let's go to prayer and if you know that you have been united with Jesus, thank Him for all that He has done for you by joining you to Himself. If you know that you don't have Jesus, please know that Jesus is waiting to join Himself to you, to come into your very spirit, give you His eternal life and transform you forever. The condition is simple: you must give yourself completely to Him.

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Seeing Jesus: The Road To Emmaus (Part 1)

Did Not The Christ Have To Suffer These Things? - Lk. 24:13-27

The writer of Hebrews talks about the Exodus, about the way in which Moses left Egypt. It seemed as though the children of Israel were successful and safe. Everything was going according to plan. God had displayed His mighty power in their behalf. Egypt was ruined and they were enroute to the Promised Land. But then suddenly the Egyptian army was behind them and the Red Sea was in front of them and they were trapped. To many it seemed as though their glorious dream of freedom was crushed and death was imminent. Yet Moses, the writer says, left Egypt *by faith, not fearing the king's wrath*. And then he adds this insightful statement, *[Moses] persevered because he saw Him who is invisible!* You know, the events of the last week of Jesus' life on earth were a lot like that. Everything had been going according to plan. There were great miracles, huge crowds, evidences of the hand of God at work everywhere. But then came Gethsemane. Jesus was arrested and by early morning He was publicly tried and convicted. By 9 AM He was hanging on a cross and by 3 PM He was dead. His body was buried in a sealed stone tomb by sundown. Imagine the catastrophic impact these traumatic things had in the lives of His disciples. They rested in emotional agony on the Sabbath Day, like all the Jews did, but on Sunday, they got up to somehow go on with their lives. Two of them set out to leave Jerusalem that Sunday. We meet them in Luke 24 walking slowly along on the road to Emmaus and the first thing we see is:

I. The Discussion Of The Disciples On The Road (13-16) One was named Cleopas, about whom we know nothing more, and the other is unnamed. But:

1. they were going on a journey (13) They weren't just out taking a walk trying to clear their heads. They were literally "journeying", it says, to the small town of Emmaus which lay a little more than 7 miles west of Jerusalem, the better part of a day's journey. Why? It seems clear that they were leaving the band of the disciples. They were going home; they were going back to wherever they had come from and to the lives they had known before. And as they went, we're told:

2. they were talking with each other (14-15a) What were they talking about?

a. the subject: all the things that had happened What things? The betrayal of Judas, “How could he do that? We didn't trust him all along.” The arrest in the garden, “Why wouldn't Jesus let us fight? Why didn't He use the same power that healed the servant’s ear to crush those rabble soldiers?” Those horrible trials, the mocking, the beating and the scourging. “How could the religious leaders of our people be so cruel and unjust? How could the crowd turn on Him like that and cry for His blood.” And then they nailed Him to a cross. He hung there in agony. “Oh, how could it be? How could the Master die? How is it possible? What does it mean? Were we mistaken? Was He really not the Son of God?” Notice:

b. the process: talking and reasoning together They told the story to one another over and again. They re-examined what they missed. And they reasoned with each other; they tried to make sense out of something that didn't make any sense. They tried to figure out the nature of something that was purely evil and unexplainable from a human perspective. But as they walked along, we're told that:

3. Jesus came and walked with them unknown (15-16) A fellow-traveler walking along in their direction caught up with them and fell in step with them and began to listen in to their conversation. And it was none other than Jesus Himself, the very One about whom they were talking! However, Luke says literally:

a. their eyes were prevented from recognizing Him He did not want to be recognized just yet, so His power took hold of their eyes and distorted their perception so that they thought He was someone else, a stranger. Mark says simply that:

b. He appeared to them in a “different form” - Mk. 16:12 His appearance to them was different from what they remembered.

Have you ever wondered why He did that? Why didn’t He just appear normally as He did later on and let them fall at His feet in worship and show them He was alive? Well, Moses persevered because he had learned by faith to see Him who is invisible. These disciples couldn’t even see Him who WAS visible and walking beside them! They had to learn Moses’ secret and that’s what Jesus invested a whole day in teaching them. So let’s examine:

II. The Disillusionment Of The Disciples On The Road (17-24) That phrase in verse 17 struck me. When He asked, they just stopped walking and hung their heads. The mention of it by a stranger and the thought of having to retell it stopped them in their tracks and nearly brought them to tears. They were depressed, they were in shock, they were disillusioned. It was more than the grief of the unexpected death of someone they loved. Their whole world was falling apart. And:

1. it was because of the things that had happened to Jesus (18-19a) It was Jesus. He had become everything to them. They had cast their lives and their eternities in with Him, but look what happened to Him! They tried their best to explain simply:

a. they had seen God mightily at work in Him (19) He had walked on water. He had healed the sick. He had even raised the dead. When He commanded sickness to be healed, it was, or a demon to depart, it did! But this one who was a mighty prophet:

b. they had seen Him sentenced to death and crucified (20) They could hardly get the words out. The memories all rushed back, mocking crowds screaming for his death, blood flowing from His beaten back, thorns pressed into His brow, the agony of hours of hanging on a wooden cross, nails literally driven through hands and feet, struggling to breathe. At last, His head falling limp on His chest. Hear them tell the story, see their tears, feel their pain. It's still raw. This is only Sunday mid-day after Friday. But just that very morning something else happened that confused them further:

c. they heard unverifiable reports that He was alive (21b-24) These women visited the tomb and it was empty and they had a vision of angels who said He was alive. "But some of our men, Peter and John, ran to look and the tomb was indeed empty, but there was no Jesus anywhere to be found." They didn't know what to make of it. The women's words seemed like nonsense, like hopeful old-wives' tales. "But we knew better. We saw Him die."

These things, these events, had deeply impacted their lives. In fact, there are two key phrases in what they said that seem to show the depth of:

2. the effect of those things First:

a. the circumstances killed their hope (21a) It was not just that Jesus was their friend and they loved Him. It was not just that He was their leader and they followed Him. They had staked all their hopes on the fact that He was their Savior, the Redeemer of Israel, the Promised Messiah. They had placed all their faith in Him, they had believed what He said, they had left all to follow Him and become part of His kingdom. And His death killed that hope dead. In their minds it was over. Life as they knew it, as they had invested their souls in it, was over. All that was left was to go back home and hoe the crops and wait to die. Circumstances tend to do that, don't they? More than a hundred American families sent their or 20 or 25 year old son or daughter or husband or wife off to Iraq for a noble purpose, but they received them back in a flag-draped coffin. "But we had hoped... we thought.... we planned...." and suddenly those dreams died with their loved one. I imagine the same thing is true in many hundreds of Iraqui families. It happened to many more of us on Sept. 11, 2001. Todd Beamer kissed his wife goodbye in the dark and headed to the airport. By 10 AM his life was snuffed out in a field in Pennsylvania and hers was changed forever. Rehmat Masih was a janitor at the Civil Secretariat in the city of Lahore, Pakistan. He had a wife, Martha, and 5 kids. He was arrested and accused of stealing 300 law books from his employer, simply because he was an outspoken Christian. He was detained and severely tortured for 17 days and finally sent to the hospital where he died. His wife said, "My husband was uneducated and his only means of transport was a bicycle. Why would he steal 300 law books and how could he carry them on a bicycle?" Now she's a single mother of 5 in a country hostile to believers. Circumstances like these can kill your hope. A death, an accident, an injury or a stroke that debilitates you, sudden loss of a job, you fill in the blank. And what makes it worse is that:

b. the circumstances obscured their vision of Him (24b) Neither the men who went to look at the tomb, nor the two on the Emmaus road saw Him. He was standing right there in front of them in the midst of their circumstances and was even working at that very moment in their lives, but they couldn't see Him because they believed that He was dead. They could see the pain, but Him they could not see. To them He was invisible.

Maybe by this time we've touched a chord in your own life. Maybe you've been there, disillusioned, with hopes dashed and unable to see God, only painful circumstances. Maybe you're there right now. And if not, I can virtually guarantee that at some moment or other in life you will be there. So look carefully with me at:

III. The Discovery Of The Disciples On The Road (25-27) The first thing Jesus did was:

1. Jesus exposed the root of what they were feeling (25) At first reading that doesn't sound very good, but please understand that Jesus did not use the more derogatory word for *fool* [which by the way comes from the same root as our word *moron*]. The word He used literally means "without knowledge". Jesus is admonishing them that:

a. they were slow to perceive (they were **lacking understanding)** They failed to grasp what Jesus had been teaching them all along. They failed to really listen and appropriate the very truth that Jesus had been giving them about Himself and about His purpose and Kingdom. Instead, they were listening to a lie being told to them by their circumstances and it was keeping them from seeing what He was doing. And along with being slow to perceive:

b. they were slow to believe (they were **lacking faith)** They were unwilling to trust what Jesus had said when circumstances told them otherwise. This is another "O ye of little faith" statement like the one Jesus had made to the disciples in the boat who were afraid they were going to sink. When the winds and the waves of life scream at us, "You're going down; what God said isn't true!" and we falter in believing what He has told us, that's when we fail to see Him at work and we end up in the state of disillusionment these disciples were in. So:

2. Jesus explained the fact that they were missing He declared:

a. it was necessary for the Christ to suffer these things! (26) It had to be! It was not out of God's control; it was all part of His plan! While they were watching the Savior die in agony, God was saving the world, right before their very eyes! He was accomplishing the redemption of the human race for all who will believe and preparing for a reign of eternal glory in the outward appearance of a cruel Roman cross and a cold stone tomb! But without these things there was no salvation. They were necessary! And that fact:

b. it is declared in all the Scriptures! (27) He held a Bible study with them there on the road as they walked. He took them back to Moses who said, *...`The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you must listen to everything he tells you. - Acts 3:22.* Jesus took them back to David, who described the agonies of the crucifixion in Psalm 22, which Jesus quoted when He cried out, *My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?... I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint. My heart has turned to wax; it has melted away within me. My strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth; you lay me in the dust of death. Dogs have surrounded me; a band of evil men has encircled me, they have pierced my hands and my feet. I can count all my bones; people stare and gloat over me. They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing. But you, O LORD, be not far off; O my Strength, come quickly to help me. Deliver my life from the sword...* But then Jesus took them to the end of the Psalm ...*You who fear the LORD, praise him! All you descendants of Jacob, honor him! Revere him, all you descendants of Israel! For he has not despised or disdained the suffering of the afflicted one; he has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help.... All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations will bow down before him!* Jesus took them back to Isaiah 53 and showed them how He was the man of sorrows acquainted with grief, how He was pierced for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities, how the Lord laid on Him the iniquity of us all and by His stripes we are healed, how he was assigned a grave with the wicked and with the rich in His death. And then Jesus took them further on where Isaiah said, *Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the LORD makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand. After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light [of life] and be satisfied!*

For hours He went on. Passage after passage; promise after promise, saying, "See, this is what God said! This is what Jesus promised. This is why Jesus died. This is where it says, just as He said, that He would rise again! And as He did it, according to verse 32, their cold hearts began to warm; their hearts began to burn within them. Hope began to rise up from the ashes. Faith began to flare up from the smoldering embers. They could begin to see and understand the plan. They could almost believe it. Maybe the women's words weren't idle tales after all! They were beginning to see that which was invisible. They had been through a cold night of the soul, but now they were on the road to Emmaus which means "warm baths", "hot springs". And pretty soon, the fire of God would begin to flow inside them once again, but we'll have to finish their story next time.

Meanwhile, if you're the one who is going through that cold night of the soul, let Jesus remind you that this painful trial you're enduring, no matter how awful, no matter how senseless, no matter how confusing, is not some strange thing happening to you. God has not lost control, His promises have not failed, hope is not dead. This thing is, for whatever reason, part of His plan and necessary to all that He has decreed to accomplish. If you will immerse yourself in the promises of His Word, if you will trust what He has said, if you will say "I don't care WHAT the circumstances are screaming at me, I believe Jesus!", then you'll discover Moses' secret. You'll endure because you'll learn to see Him who is invisible. *A distressed believer once said to a Christian counselor, "It's hard for me to trust God when everything looks dark." The man replied, "Well, Brother, if you can't trust someone when he's out of your sight, he isn't worth much. So, if you can't trust God in the dark, you really don't consider Him trustworthy."* You can actually trust God when you can't see Him at work, when everything looks so dark. But the real key to it is to learn to see Him who is invisible, because even though the darkness seems to veil His lovely face, He is right there on the road walking with you. If you will rest in what He has said, you'll learn to see Him who is invisible.

Seeing Jesus: The Road To Emmaus (Part II)

He was known by them in the breaking of the bread... - Lk. 24:28-35

Let me retell the first half of our story from last week. It was Sunday morning. Two of Jesus' followers had left Jerusalem and were traveling to the village of Emmaus. They were going home disillusioned, crushed by the death of the One they had hoped was their Savior. But as they walked, that very One, came and walked beside them, yet they didn't recognize Him. They couldn't see Him for who He was; they were blinded by their circumstances. But as they told this "stranger" their tale of woe, he chided them a bit and launched into a lengthy Bible study, showing them from all the Scriptures that it was absolutely necessary for Jesus to die and that He would indeed rise from the dead. Now this must have been quite some study, visiting passage after passage, because it lasted for several hours, and they were intent, hanging on every word. Almost before they knew it, the sun was going down and the day was coming to a close. The dusty buildings of Emmaus had come into view. So we pick up the story with:

I. The Invitation Of The Disciples On The Road (28-29) Jesus had shown them what the Scripture said and now the ball was in their court. Before them lay:

1. their opportunity: It says **Jesus would have gone on from them** This "stranger", who seemed to have all this knowledge they so much needed, also seemed to be planning to keep right on walking past their town. He was not going to presume upon their hospitality, nor was He going to fully reveal to them that which they weren't interested in knowing. They had to choose. You see, when you walk through tragic and difficult circumstances that seem to hide God from your view and you can't seem to see what He's doing, Jesus is always there walking with you and is always at work in your life. But He won't MAKE you see Him! He will warm your heart through His Word; He will draw you toward the truth of what He's doing, but He won't force Himself on you. Like these men, you have a choice. Do you want to see Him? Do you want to experience Him or not? Well:

2. their choice was this**: they urged Him strongly to stay with them** They didn't know that this stranger was Jesus, but they sure knew that he was showing them more and more of Jesus through the Scriptures and they didn't want to lose that. So they begged him to stay with them. They insisted; they wouldn't take "NO" for an answer. They wanted with all their hearts to know and experience the truth, rather than continue to tell themselves, "Jesus is gone, our lives are ruined, there's no hope left!" The spark of faith had begun to rise up in them and they clung to it passionately. They said, "We want more, oh, show us more!"

The time when your world seems to have fallen apart, when tragedy has struck, when the unthinkable has happened and God seems to be nowhere around, is a time when you have a choice. This is the very time when He wants to reveal Himself to you in a way that is beyond your comprehension, in a way that is opposite everything you ever thought or dreamed of. Jacob was coming back from Syria to Canaan with his wives and 12 children and flocks and herds. For 20 years he'd worked hard and largely relied on himself to build it all. But now his brother Esau, who had vowed to kill him when he left, was coming out to meet him with 400 armed men. It was not likely to be a welcoming party and he was more scared than he had ever been in his life. He came to the ford of the river and sent his family over ahead and so was left alone that night to wrestle with God. "God, where are you? Why is this happening? What about my children, Lord, they're innocent! I can't protect them!" He was on his own "Emmaus Road" of despair, and a stranger came to him too. A man came and wrestled with him all night, until his strength was gone and his thigh was out of joint. But as he wrestled, he began to figure out that this man was God. As daybreak approached, this man made as if he would go away and said "Let me go..." and Jacob did what these two did. He clung for dear life to what he could see of God and said, *I will not let you go unless you bless me!* "I want to know You; I want to experience You! I want to see YOU in my troubles". So Jesus, the Angel of the Lord who was walking with Jacob on his road, blessed him and Jacob said, *I have seen God face to face!* A few hours later, his brother Esau came, and instead of killing him, fell on his neck weeping. Jesus is walking with you in the darkest hours of your life; He will reveal Himself to you! But you have to want it. You have to say, "No, I will not let You go! I want to know You in this trial; open the eyes of my heart - I want to see You!" These disciples responded to the invitation that was theirs on the Road. They chose to strongly urge Him to stay with them and that's what led to:

II. The Revelation Of The Savior At The Table (30-31) You see, what was actually going on was that:

1. they invited Him into their home (29b) Where would He stay with them? Where would they get a table all set and provisions so quickly. There were no Holiday Inns in Emmaus, not even a Palestine Hotel. The only conclusion I can reach is that they lived there. That's where they were specifically journeying to. "Stay with us" means "come stay at our house", "abide with us". Jesus saw Zacchaeus up the tree and said, "Come on down, I must stay at your house today, I must abide in your house today!" But the strange thing about this whole encounter is that when they came to the table:

2. He assumed the role of host (30) It is the host, not the guest, who takes the bread and gives thanks and breaks it and gives it to his guests. But when Jesus entered this home, He took over. He became the host. It became His table, not theirs. That's how it is with Jesus; if you invite Him to stay with you in your circumstances, to come and abide with you in the place where you are; it becomes His place. The circumstances become His circumstances. He will not come just to sympathize with you in blindness and wrong thinking. If you truly want Him, He will come to take over. He is Lord. And as He took over their table:

3. He revealed Himself to them in the breaking of bread (31) Suddenly they knew who He was; instantly they could see Him who before had been invisible, hidden by the gloom of their circumstances. How did it happen? Well, it seems likely that first there was:

a. the human recognition of the action I don't know whether these two were there, but surely they heard how Jesus took 5 loaves of bread and looked up to heaven and gave thanks and broke them and fed 5,000 people. I know these two weren't there in the Upper Room on Thursday night when Jesus took bread and gave thanks and broke it and gave it to His 12 disciples and said, "Take; eat... This is My body which is broken for you!" But they had been with those disciples Friday and Saturday and I'm sure that the story had been told. So, when Jesus took over the table in this unusual move and lifted up the bread to give thanks and to give it to them, I'm sure that humanly they couldn't miss the connection, but there was also:

b. the Divine revelation in the action Their eyes were opened; the Divine force that was holding them from seeing was released and suddenly they knew Him! It was Jesus! *Liz Curtis Higgs writes about vacationing one summer with her family in Rocky Mountain National Park in Colorado: "We picked the foggiest day ever recorded, I think, to drive the scenic Trail Ridge Road, the highest completely paved road in the United States. We just knew there were mountains out there somewhere, but we sure couldn't see them. We'd drive past signs for scenic overlooks, and the only thing to look over was more fog. We were quite certain we were heading up the mountain, though, because there was snow piled along the side of the road six to eight feet high...in June! That night we crawled into bed in our cabin at Longs Peak Conference Center, still surrounded by the damp, chilly fog, never dreaming what we'd find when we woke up the next morning. The sun was peeking around the window shade, so I reached out a sleepy hand to raise the shade...and almost fainted. We had a mountain in our backyard—a big mountain! Longs Peak is 14,255 feet high, and the sun made every snow-covered inch of it look like it might fall on us at any moment. What a humbling experience. Although I knew intellectually that the mountain was there—after all, it was on the map and probably hadn't moved lately—because I couldn't see it with my own eyes, it was not a reality to me. During those 27 years I spent apart from Christ, He was just like that mountain. Enormous, immovable, right there, right next to me, but I was in a fog and saw Him not. Then one day the fog cleared and BOOM! Look up, Liz! In truth, He was there all along, but now I had eyes to see Him." [Reflecting His Image by Liz Curtis Higgs. Thomas Nelson, 1996. Pages 101-102.]* Imagine the impact of that moment on these two disciples! Imagine their amazement, their wonder, their joy! That morning, Mary thought through her tears that He was the gardener who had taken the body away from the tomb, but when He said her name and she looked up into His face, she knew Him! It was Jesus and she fell at His feet and clung to Him for joy! Later, Peter was on a boat off the shore of the Sea of Galilee and a stranger yelled to them and told them to cast the net on the right side of the boat and it came up full of fish. And suddenly Peter knew it was Jesus; he screamed with joy, "It's the Lord!", threw off his robe and dove headfirst into the water to get to Him! What a reaction of joy there must have been in the souls of these two as He broke the bread and they KNEW Him! But in their case, they never even got a chance to react outwardly because we're told:

c. once they "saw" Him, He literally **became "invisible"!** He vanished; He disappeared. They didn't get to utter a word, to extend a hand, a hug, to fall at His feet, nothing. The moment they knew Him, He was gone and they were left with their mouths hanging open! This is the only post-resurrection appearance of Jesus where He did that. Other times He ate and fellowshipped and they touched Him and He talked with them and stayed for hours. This time He vanished and one has to ask why?

It is as though Jesus was saying, "Now that you have experienced Me and know Me, you don't need to see Me!" I think of the lesson Jesus taught later to Thomas, the one who refused to believe unless he saw Jesus with his own eyes. Jesus appeared and said, "Here I am! Touch me and see for yourself! Stop doubting and believe! Then Jesus added this truth in **John 20:29**, *Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."* For most of us, "seeing is believing". That's the earthly way. God says the opposite, "believing is seeing". You don't have to see to believe! Most of us are never going to get to see Jesus with our physical eyes while we are on this earth like the disciples did, but when we trust in Him as our Savior and invite Him to come into our lives and dine with us, He comes in and we *experience* Him in our hearts. We don't need to see Him with our eyes! The same is true of our journey through life. When we're on our road to Emmaus, when we pass through a dark night of the soul, when there is suffering, pain, tragedy and loss and Jesus seems to be nowhere around, we can choose to cling to His Word by faith and invite Him to stay with us. And He will reveal Himself to us in the midst of our suffering. Our eyes will be opened; we will "see" Him; we will experience His love and grace and comfort and direction, even though we may not see Him with our eyes. He will reveal Himself to us, if we invite Him, just as Jesus revealed Himself to these two disciples. And look at:

III. The Reaction Of The Disciples To The Risen Lord (32-35) All of a sudden:

1. they now saw His ministry to them on the road (32) They could look back at the 7 mile walk of sorrow and could see that it was Jesus who came alongside and Jesus who spent hours telling them about Himself from the Scriptures. Jesus came to *them!* He was there with *them* in their hour of need and despair. He was bringing *them* peace and comfort and working in their lives. So:

2. they had an immediate desire to share their experience with others (33) By this time, it was already dark. The road back to Jerusalem was 7 miles long. Yet they didn't care. They jumped up and ran as fast as they could. They HAD to tell the others; they HAD to let them know that Jesus was alive and that He had explained to them the meaning of their dark night of suffering. They had a message of comfort and joy to share, but when they got there, all out of breath, it turns out that:

3. they were encouraged by others experiencing His resurrection (34) In the meanwhile, Jesus had already appeared in person to Peter and he had shared with the rest and they believed him, even though they hadn't seen Him. What a joy it must have been to hear that Jesus was doing the same thing for others on their Emmaus roads that He did for them; how they must have been encouraged to hear this, even before they could blurt out their own story. But in a moment their turn came and:

4. **they shared what they had experienced (35)** Notice that they shared two important things. First, they shared:
   a. their new understanding of His work What had happened on the way was a several hour long Bible lesson! And you can be sure it wasn't lost on them! Listen to them saying, "Jesus showed us this: Psalm 22 predicts His death but it said that God would hear. Isaiah 53 was talking about Jesus...He died for us, but Isaiah said after His suffering He would see the light of life! He had to die on the cross and rise again to pay for our sins, to save the world!" Oh, at last they understood what Jesus had been telling them all along and they shared it freely. But they also shared:

   b. their new experience of His person, how they knew Him when He broke the bread! "We saw Jesus in our suffering. He came to us. We knew Him; we experienced Him! Our hearts are on fire; we'll never be the same!"

Today is Easter Sunday. We all dressed up and came to church. We hear again the story that Jesus Christ rose from the dead and He is alive right now! But are they words or have we genuinely experienced Him? *Max Lucado tells the fascinating tale of the Taj Mahal: "The favorite wife of the Mogul emperor Shah Jahan died. Devastated, he resolved to honor her by constructing a temple that would serve as her tomb. Her coffin was placed in the center of a large parcel of land, and construction the temple began around it. No expense would be spared to make her final resting place magnificent. But as the weeks turned into months, the Shah's grief was eclipsed by his passion for the project. He no longer mourned her absence. The construction consumed him. One day, while walking from one side of the construction site to the other, his leg bumped against a wooden box. The prince brushed the dust off his leg and ordered the worker to throw the box out. Shah Jahan didn't know he had ordered the disposal of the coffin—now forgotten—hidden beneath layers of dust and time. The one the temple was intended to honor was forgotten, but the temple was erected anyway. Could someone build a temple and forget why? Could someone construct a palace, yet forget the king?*

Max adds: "The next time you enter an assembly of worship, position yourself where you can see the people. Then decide. You can tell ones who remember the slain one. They're wide-eyed and expectant. They're children watching the unwrapping of a gift. They're servants standing still as a king passes. You don't doze in the presence of royalty. And you don't yawn while receiving a gift, especially when the giver is the king himself! You can also tell the ones who see only the temple. Their eyes wander. Their feet shuffle. Their hands doodle, and their mouths open—not to sing, but to yawn. For no matter how hard they try to stay amazed, their eyes start to glaze over. All temples, even the Taj Mahal, lose their luster after a while. The temple gazers don't mean to be bored. They love the church. They don't mean to grow stale. They put on hats and hose and coats and ties and come every week. But still, something is missing. The One they once planned to honor hasn't been seen in a while. "But those who have seen Him can't seem to forget Him. They find Him, often in spite of the temple rather than because of it. They brush the dust away and stand ever impressed before His tomb—His empty tomb." [Spirit of Revival, Apr 1994. Pages 4-5.]

How about you? Maybe you say Jesus is your Savior, but are you experiencing Jesus on your road? Are you seeing Him who is invisible? Has He been making Himself real to you in your suffering and the dark night of your soul as you pass through it? Or has the One you planned to honor not been seen in a while. He will make Himself known to you in the daily experience of your life, if you will cling to Him and ask Him to, if you will cling to His Word and let your heart burn with desire for Him. And when He does, you'll want to share it. The words of an old song say this: *Somewhere between where you are and Emmaus, a stranger wants to come and walk with you. Somewhere along the way, your heart will be burning, drawn into the holy flame of truth. Right now He may be a stranger to you; what will He be when your journey's through? Somewhere between where you are and Emmaus, a Savior wants to walk with you!* Maybe you don't have a clue what I'm talking about. Let me ask, "Have you met the Risen Christ?" I don't mean, "Have you heard the story that says He rose?" I mean, "Have you met Him, have you experienced Him, has He come into your heart and life personally to be your Savior?" If not, why don't you invite Him to come in and stay with you this morning, to live in your heart?

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The Central Event

The Centrality Of The Cross

If I were to ask you what the most universal symbol or emblem of Christianity is, you would all immediately say, "*the cross"*. We wear crosses around our necks and on our earrings. We put them up in our churches. We Protestants print crosses on our bumper stickers and sing song after song about the cross while Catholics trace the sign of the sign of the cross over their own bodies when they come into a sanctuary. The symbol and the mention of the cross has become so commonplace to us that we forget that it was not always so. The early Christians regarded the cross as an instrument of terror and death. Thousands of them died on crosses under the hand of Rome. It was the common means of public execution for criminals and one would no more think about a cross as a positive symbol then than we would an electric chair or a hangman's noose today. It was only after the conversion of the Roman Emperor Constantine the Great in 313 AD that the cross first came into use as an emblem of Christianity. Whether it's true or not, he claimed that at a critical moment on the eve of battle, he saw a flaming cross in the heavens bearing the inscription, *In hoc signo vinces*, *In this sign conquer*. Then on the following night, he claimed that Christ himself appeared and ordered him to take for his standard the sign of this cross. And so a new standard or flag incorporating the cross, called the Labarum, was made and was borne

by the Roman armies till the downfall of the Western empire. And thereafter, the symbol of the cross became the central emblem of Christianity for all time. But whether Constantine's vision was real or not, the truth is that God transformed that horrible symbol of pain and suffering into the most precious symbol we have of our faith because the event which it represents is central to all of human history, it is central to our salvation as followers of Christ and it is central to our personal lives. Without the cross, there is no Christianity, there is no salvation and there is no purpose for our lives. First of all, let's understand that:

I. The Cross Is Central To The Plan And Purpose Of God In God's eyes, all of history before the cross looked forward to it. Everything anticipated and led up to it. All of the law anticipated it, all the sacrifices pointed forward to it and the whole of the prophets looked forward to it. And all of history since looks back to it. The mission of the Church is rooted in the cross and the Kingdom will come because of it. The Bible mentions three things that declare just how vital the cross is to the plan and purpose of God in history. ***Through the Cross...***

1. God accomplished the reconciliation of all things - Col. 1:19-20 When sin came into the world through Adam and Eve, the entire world and everything in it was affected at its very core. It was thrown into disharmony and felt the effects of the curse. The ground brought forth thorns and thistles and only by the sweat of his brow, by hard labor, can man get it to produce the wonderful good things that it did in the Garden so easily. The animals, who once were docile and let Adam name them, now bite and devour one another with tooth and claw so that only the fittest survive. Human beings who were originally pure and sinless, now come into the world, every last one a sinner with a nature inside that is bent on sin and self. How can you fix all that? How can you put it all back? How can you restore it to harmony and put it back into the relationship that God created it to have with Himself and within its own self? I once saw a poster that said, "Some people use duct tape to fix everything; God used nails!" He used the Cross! The death of His Son on the cross reconciled all things to Himself. It is because of the cross that one day the desert will blossom like a rose. Because of the cross, the lion will lie down with the lamb and the little child will play on the serpent's den. Because of the cross, mankind one day will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruninghooks and never learn war anymore. And because of the cross, verses 21-22 say that we who were alienated from God through sin have been reconciled to Him and made holy and brought into His very presence without blemish or accusation. And Romans 8 says the whole of creation is groaning in labor and waiting with anticipation for the day when God displays us in His glory so it too can be set free. We will see, in the end of history, all things restored, because they were reconciled at the Cross! Secondly, through the cross:

2. God destroyed the barriers which separate men - Eph. 2:14-16 Did you see that? He put hostility to death through the cross. One of the effects of sin has always been hostility and division between people. For 1500 years, the division had been Jew and Gentile, but instead of the Jews, who had knowledge of the true God, reaching out and including the Gentiles and drawing them to Him as He intended, they built an attitude of superiority and a dividing wall of hostility against them. They hated and despised the Gentiles and that attitude was pretty much returned in kind! But, surprise, when Jew OR Gentile came to the cross, what did they find? The hostility is all gone and now Gal. 3:28 says, *There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.* Through the cross, all the hostilities and differences between us melt away and we find ourselves one with people of every nation. And when you read in the end of the book and you see around the throne of God people from every tribe, tongue and nation, all worshipping and singing as one in complete harmony, what caused that? The answer is the cross! All our hostility was nailed to it! Thirdly, through the cross:

3. God publicly defeated all the hosts of evil - Col. 2:15 From a time before creation, God has had a deadly enemy. His chief angel, Lucifer, mounted a rebellion against him that enveloped a third of the heavenly host. And from the moment God created this world and called it good, Satan and his demons have entered it to spoil it. He entered the garden to entice man to sin against God and brought death upon the human race. Through this initial fall, he worked hard to build a world system that insulates human beings from the knowledge of God and enslaves them to worship him through their fear of death. From the moment Jesus entered the world at Bethlehem, the Enemy tried to destroy him through the slaughter of the infants. He tempted him with all the powers at his disposal in the desert and tempted Him to choose His own will in the Garden, but He would not sin. So Satan moved the Jews and Romans alike to arrest Him and, at last, to condemn Him to die a horrible death, even death on a cross! But what Satan didn't realize was that, as they drove those nails into His hands and feet and hung Him up to die, through that very death, He would ...*destroy him who holds the power of death--that is, the devil-- and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. - Heb. 2:14-15*. The cross destroyed Satan's plan and sealed his doom. It stripped him of all his power to claim the victims of humanity. The agony of the cross was infinite and the three hours of darkness in the land bore testimony to it, but when Jesus lifted His head and cried out with a loud voice, "It is FINISHED!", it meant something Satan never figured on. "SATAN, YOU ARE FINISHED! YOU ARE VANQUISHED! I HAVE WON! The sins of men are paid for, they are redeemed, they are mine! And you can guard the tomb with a whole battalion of Roman soldiers if you want, but when you look in, I won't be there, because death can't hold Me. I WIN! I have the Keys of Hell and Death!" On the cross, Jesus stripped His ancient adversary of all his power and made it a public spectacle for all the world to see His triumph. And to this day, we look at the cross and know Who has won!

But not only is the cross central to the plan and purpose of God in history:

II. The Cross Is Central To Our Salvation - 1 Cor. 1:18 says, *For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.* The story of the cross is crazy to the world. It makes no sense. They laugh at how the death of a man on a cross 2,000 years ago could possibly mean anything for us today. But we realize that it is through the cross, and the cross alone, that our entire salvation was procured. ***Through the cross...***

1. we were redeemed from the penalty of the law - Col. 2:14 The law of God can be summed up in what God told Adam, "If you eat it you will die!" God repeated it twice through Ezekiel, "The soul that sinneth, it shall die!" Death passed upon all men because all sinned. The justice of God demands the punishment of sin. The law stood against us; it accused us. It said, "Death! Eternal death. Eternal separation from God." We were under the curse of death for having broken it. The decree of the law that said, "Guilty!" stood against us. But Jesus fixed that; He nailed it to the cross. Look **Gal. 3:13**. He redeemed us from the curse and penalty of the law by taking it in our place, so that none of it was left for us. *Jim Hislop tells about one day when he awoke earlier than usual and with a heavy heart. He decided to write in his journal so he turned on his laptop computer. It had been so long since he'd written in his journal that he had forgotten the password to get into that file. He tried everything he could think of, but nothing worked. He finally decided to just create a new file. That seemed appropriate--he felt like he needed a fresh start. As he started writing he was surprised by what came out. He just poured out his heart--all his frustrations about recent failures, inconsistency in personal disciplines, his problem with anger, pain in certain relationships, unkept promises, and unfulfilled obligations. In no time he had filled a couple of pages. All of a sudden, the computer locked up. He could see what was on the screen, but he could do nothing with it. The only solution was to turn off the computer and reboot. When he did it opened up the file he had been working in, but the screen was blank. Everything he had written was gone. But instead of being angry or heartbroken, like I am when that happens to me, in that moment he felt the burden of his heart lift. He saw the forgiving grace of God in a new light: "I realized that God's computer screen of my life showed only the blood-stained cross--the cross to which all of my failures, all of my inconsistencies, all of my inappropriate anger were nailed." [News of Interest, Oct 1996. Page 1.]* The penalty for everything we've ever done was nailed to that cross in Him. It's taken away and our slate is clean. Then, through the cross:

2. we were released from our sins and given His righteousness - 1 Pet. 2:24 Our sins were nailed to the cross in Him and removed forever. But the purpose of that transaction is to produce in us His righteousness! Now how is that going to happen. Even if all my sins to this minute are forgiven and cleared away and I start out with a fresh resolve not to sin, I still will. Something has to be done not just about the penalty of sin but about it's power, so that I will live for righteousness. And it was! Through the cross:

3. we were delivered from the power of sin inside us - Rom. 6:6 Oh, listen to it. On that cross another great transaction took place. When He was nailed to that cross, so was I. It was made true of me the moment I believed. I was placed into Him by the Spirit of God and His life became my life, so that what happened to Him happened to me. I was crucified with Him. What part of me? The old part, the old man, the sinful part, the sin nature. Call it what you want. but that old self that was saturated and enslaved to the power of the force of sin died with Him on the cross and a new self was created in me so that now I am free! I no longer have to be a slave to sin. I can choose to if I want, but there is no power on earth to make me, because the old me was crucified there! I'm a brand-new person because of the cross. And so, through the cross:

4. we were given a new way to live - Gal. 2:20 Because the old me was nailed to the cross and now Christ is in me, I have a new way to live. It is not me, but Him that lives His life out through me, as long as I live by faith, that is, as long as I trust Him to do it! The cross did that for me! The cross made a whole new way of living possible for me, a Christ-life instead of a self-life, a crucified life, a "yet not I, but Christ" life of victory and holiness and purity!

So, our salvation, from the removal of sin's penalty to the breaking of sin's power over me, was all accomplished through the cross. Therefore, it seems almost needless to say that:

III. The Cross Should Impact Our Daily Lives It should be in our minds and before our eyes constantly. The Scripture says that ***Because of the cross...***

1. we have only one purpose: to share its message - 1 Cor. 2:1-2 Paul told the Corinthians,"Wwhen I got to Corinth, I didn't come with some fancy philosophy and elegant pulpit rhetoric. I didn't come waving impressive credentials and using high-sounding words. My life is not about that. I made up my mind before I ever got there that I would just do one simple thing: I would tell you about the cross and the One who died on it! After all, the the good news of the cross is the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes! And sharing it with others is my sole purpose!" Well, it's ours too. If the cross is the center of God's plan and purpose for all history and if it's the fact on which our whole salvation centers, then it would seem to me that we have only one purpose in life, to point to the cross, to point people to the cross, to tell them how they can come to the cross and find Jesus and find forgiveness and find a new power to live! Because of the cross, we have a purpose in life, a purpose that makes a difference, that matters, that changes the eternal destiny of people! And because of the cross:

2. we have only one thing in which to glory - Gal. 6:14 God forbid that anything else should matter, once I know what's been done for me on the cross! God forbid that I should run after the world and all the things that are in the world and pursue selfish pleasure and pride and success and all the things everybody else runs after. The cross makes me dead to the lure of the world. It has no appeal to me; it has nothing in which I could boast or glory. I glory in the cross and the cross alone!

On a hill overlooking the harbor of Macao, the Portuguese once built a massive cathedral. Several centuries ago, a typhoon proved stronger than the work of man's hands, and the huge stone building fell in ruins. However, the front wall of the old cathedral still stands, with its wide steps leading to the ancient cobblestone street bordering the harbor. High on top of that jutting wall, challenging the elements down through the years, is a great bronze cross. In 1825, Sir John Bowering sailed his ship into Hong Kong harbor and caught a glimpse of that great cross, towering about the ruins of the old Cathedral of St. Paul in Macao. Sir John was deeply moved. Retiring to the cabin of his ship, picking up a quill, he dipped it in ink and wrote these words in his journal:

In the cross of Christ I glory
Towering o'er the wrecks of time.
All the light of sacred story
Gathers 'round its head sublime.

The central message of the Bible is the cross of Jesus Christ. [Power for Living by Jamie Buckingham. Arthur S. DeMoss Foundation, 1984. Pages 103-104.] The cross IS Christianity, that's why we wear it and why we talk about it and why we glory in it! Dottie Rambo expressed it in her song:

I boast not of works, Nor tell of good deeds,
For naught have I doneTo merit His grace,
All glory and praise Shall rest upon Him,
So willing to die in my place.

I will glory in the cross, In the cross,
Lest His suff'ring All be in vain,
I will weep no more, For the cross that He bore;
I will glory in the cross.

What are you glorying in? Is it the Cross and the Savior who died there? I hope so!

The Central Event

The Centrality Of The Resurrection

If, as we saw last time, the cross of Jesus Christ and His death is central to the Christian faith, then we must hasten today to point out that the empty tomb and His Resurrection, to which it points, is equally central. It is the factor that distinguishes Christianity from every other religious movement in the world. Every other one has a leader who died and some have leaders who were even martyred for their teachings, but not a single one can point to an empty tomb! The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the core of the Christian message. In the Book of Acts, every sermon any of the apostles preached had the same punchline, **Acts 2:22-24**. The resurrection is mentioned 20 times in 13 of the 26 chapters of Acts. It is not simply the central tenet of our faith; it is the reason why there is a Christian faith at all! The resurrection is central in three ways. First, like the Cross:

I. The Resurrection Is Central To The Plan and Purpose of God We just read that this whole thing, Jesus' death and His resurrection, were done by God's set purpose and foreknowledge. They are the central part of His plan and purpose to accomplish His own glory by redeeming us and reconciling all things to Himself. This was accomplished by His death on the Cross, but the Cross alone was not enough in itself. God's purpose had to be completed by His resurrection. First of all:

1. it powerfully declared the identity of Jesus - Rom. 1:4 It is easy for someone to claim to be God or to claim to be the Son of God. Rev. Moon did it and so have many others. Jesus claimed directly that He was God the Son over and over, by forgiving sins and by receiving worship. He claimed that God was His Father and, even before the Sanhedrin, publicly declared that He was the Christ. But that declaration required proof, irrefutable proof! And He told them what the acid test would be, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up!" "You want a sign? As Jonah was 3 days in the belly of the fish, so will the Son of Man be three days in the heart of the earth!" But on the third day, the great fish of death will spit Me out alive!" That's the sign! That's the proof! It's a once-for-all proof for all men for all time. It can't be disputed or duplicated or explained away. Jesus was declared, not just in words, but with supernatural power to be who He said He was, to be God the Son, by His resurrection! Second:

2. it plainly declared the forgiveness of our sins - Rom. 4:25 The Greek preposition here is NOT the same one used everywhere else when it says, "Christ died FOR our sins". This one would be better translated, as the NAS does, "because of" or "on account of". *[He] was delivered up because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our*

justification. Justification means pardon or forgiveness. He went to the cross because we had sins, which He took on Him there to get rid of them. And He came out of the tomb BECAUSE they are forgiven and we are pardoned! If the eternal punishment for our sins had not been completely satisfied, Jesus could not have risen. The wages of sin is death, eternal death. If His sacrifice had not been enough, had not accomplished its purpose, He would have been locked in eternal death experiencing the wrath of God. But when He got up out of that tomb and left it empty, it proved once and for all that our sins are gone and we are forgiven! Third:

3. it permanently declared the Lordship of Jesus - Acts 17:31 Did you hear that? God has appointed a day when He will judge the world, when every human being that has ever lived will have to stand before the Judge to get the just penalty for his sins (if he hasn't found forgiveness). And guess who the Judge is going to be! God left us no doubt; He declared it to all men openly by raising Him from the dead! The resurrection is God's sign to all men for all time that they will have to answer to Somebody and that Somebody will be Jesus Christ! Oh, the Resurrection proves it all: Jesus is God, He is Savior and He is Lord and Judge. Every knee will bow to Him! That's the message of the Resurrection and the purpose it accomplishes!

It is central to God's plan and purpose in all of history. But not only that:

II. The Resurrection Is Central To Our Salvation It is the cross which paid for our sins but it is the resurrection that actually accomplishes and brings about our individual salvation. The Resurrection is the heart of the Gospel. Paul said in **2 Tim. 2:8**, *Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel.* The Good News is that Jesus lives and:

1. heart belief in the living Christ saves us We've all memorized **Rom. 10:9-10**, but look at it with me anyway. You know what that says? If you don't believe in your heart that Jesus is alive, you can't be saved! Jesus can't be Lord if He's dead. If you don't believe He rose, then for you He's not alive and He can't save you and you might as well be talking to the air when you pray! Anyone who comes to God must believe that He exists; anyone who comes to Jesus Christ must believe He's alive, not merely give intellectual assent, but confess sincerely that He is real and living and present in this very room! That's the kind of faith that saves us! And when we do believe that in our hearts and we come to Him to ask for the gift of salvation:

2. the Spirit of the living Christ in us gives us life - Rom. 8:11 Let me interpret that; it is the Spirit of the Living Christ who was raised from the dead, who now comes to live inside you and this is not talking about getting life after you die, about your resurrection. It is saying that when you invite Him, the Living Christ comes to live in you and give His life to your dying body. John put it like this in 1 John 5:11-12, *God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.* His resurrection gives us life because He Himself comes to live in us. And when He does:

3. the living Christ regenerates us and guarantees our future - 1 Pet. 1:3-4 When He comes to live in us, He gives to us a new birth. The old sinful spirit inside us is dead and gone and He creates a brand new spirit, a new nature, inside us that is made just like Him. We who have Christ in us are new creations; the old things have passed away and we are made new. Only a resurrected, living Christ can do that. PLUS Peter goes on to say that, because of the living Christ, we have a living hope, a real genuine true certainty about our own future and inheritance! The living Jesus is waiting to receive us into heaven and has, in fact, prepared a grand and glorious future for us there. As long as He lives, we live every day in certain hope! *The story is told that Martin Luther at one point was going through some depressing days, and showing it. He was hanging around the house and constantly glum. At last, his beloved wife Katie had seen enough of his moping. So she dressed herself all in black and went about her day as if she was in mourning. When Martin saw what she was doing, he asked what was wrong. "Who died?" "God is dead," replied Katie. "`What do you mean, 'God is dead?' "The way you go around sad all the time, I'm sure God must have died." This had a profound effect on Luther. We're told that he wrote the single Latin word "Vivit" (He lives) on his study* wall as a reminder to himself so that ever after whenever he felt down, he would remember that his own future and the future of all things was guaranteed by that one simple fact!*" [Northwestern Lutheran, Apr 1995. Page 34.]* He lives! And finally, in Hebrews we read that:

4. the living Christ makes our salvation eternal - Heb. 7:25, *Therefore he is able to save completely [Or forever] those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.* Jesus can save us forever and ever and ever, because He's always alive. His eternal life makes our life eternal. It will never end! So, our salvation, from the moment of belief to beyond the end of time, rests squarely on His resurrection!

Yet it is not just something for the past or future:

III. The Resurrection Is Central To Our Daily Lives When we looked at the cross, we discovered that we have been crucified with Christ. Our old self was crucified with Him. But when we look at the empty tomb, we discover that the Bible says:

1. we have been raised with Him - Eph. 2:4-5 He made us alive together with Christ. We were raised with Him to a brand-new resurrection kind of life! The Spirit of Jesus entering us imparted to us His very own life. So in practical terms what that means is simply this:

- **we have a new power to live - Eph. 1:18-20** The same power that raised Jesus from the dead and exalted Him to heaven and seated Him there at the Father's right hand, that same power, the infinite, eternal, omnipotent, power of God, is not only for Him; it is for us, directed toward us. And Paul prayed that we would understand it! We don't have to live in our own strength anymore. We don't have to figure out "how we're ever going to get through this one". We don't have to "tough it out" anymore. Instead, that incomparably great power of His is resident inside us because HE, the living Christ, is living in us and He is not just there to help us WANT to do what's right but, according to Phil 2:13, *...it is God who works in you to will and to act [to work] according to his good purpose.* He does the work! He lives through me! And when I get myself out of the way and yield myself as a channel to Him and say "Lord, YOU do it through me!", He does it! Jesus said in John 14:10, *...it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work.* And that's how it should be for us now, every day, because Jesus lives! And lastly, the second fact that we are told that impacts our daily lives is that because of being resurrected with Him:

2. we have been seated with Him - Eph. 2:6 The resurrection of Christ seated Him at the Father's right hand in glory and declared Him Lord of all. And our resurrection with Him seated us there with Him in glory. And that's not a future thing. Oh yes, our bodies aren't there yet, but when we were placed into Christ, what's true of Him became true of us, so we are there on the throne IN HIM right now. You may not understand it, but God says it's true, so it's true. We are seated in the heavenlies by being raised with Him. And what that means in practical terms is this:

- **we have a new perspective on living - Col. 3:1-4** We don't see things the same way anymore. We don't look at things from the old earthly perspective. We look down at them from up there, where we really are, with Him. We see them like He sees them! That is, if we fix our minds right, if we focus on the things that are above, not on the things that are on the earth! When we focus here, we see troubles and hardships and insurmountable difficulties and pain we'll never get through. But when we look there, we see God working out His purpose by His unopposable power and we see nothing but victory!! And that makes all the difference.

Jeremy was born with a twisted body, a slow mind and a chronic, terminal illness that had been slowly killing him all his young life. Still, his parents had tried to give him as normal a life as possible and had sent him to St. Theresa's Elementary School. At the age of 12, Jeremy was only in second grade, seemingly unable to learn. His teacher, Doris Miller, often became exasperated with him. He would squirm in his seat, drool and making grunting noises. At other times, he spoke clearly and distinctly, as if a spot of light had penetrated the darkness of his brain. Most of the time, however, Jeremy irritated his teacher. One day, she called his parents and asked them to come to St. Theresa's for a consultation. As the Forresters sat quietly in the empty classroom, Doris said to them, "Jeremy really belongs in a special school. It isn't fair to him to be with younger children who don't have learning problems. Why, there is a five-year gap between his age and that of the other students!" Mrs. Forrester cried softly into a tissue while her husband spoke, "Miss Miller," he said, "there is no school of that kind nearby. It would be a terrible shock for Jeremy if we had to take him out of this school. We know he really likes it here." Doris sat for a long time after they left, staring at the snow outside the window. Its coldness seemed to seep into her soul. She wanted to sympathize with the Forresters. After all, their only child had a terminal illness. But, it wasn't fair to keep him in her class. She had 18 other youngsters to teach and Jeremy was a distraction. Furthermore, he would never learn to read or write. Why waste any more time trying? As she pondered the situation, guilt washed over her. "Oh God," she said aloud, "here I am complaining, when my problems are nothing compared with that poor family! Please help me to be more patient with Jeremy." From that day on, she tried to ignore Jeremy's noises and his blank stares. Then one day he limped to her desk, dragging his bad leg behind him. "I love you, Miss Miller," he exclaimed loudly enough for the whole class to hear. The other children snickered, and Doris's face turned red. She stammered, "Wh-Why, that's very nice, Jeremy. Now please take your seat." Spring came, and the children talked excitedly about the coming of Easter. Doris told them of the story of Jesus, and then to emphasize the idea of new life springing forth, she gave each of the children a large plastic egg. "Now," she said to them, "I want you to take this home and bring it back tomorrow with something inside that shows new life. Do you understand?" "Yes, Miss Miller!" the children responded enthusiastically -- all except for Jeremy. He just listened intently, his eyes never left her face. He did not even make his usual noises. Had he understood what she had said about Jesus' death and resurrection? Did he understand the assignment? Perhaps she should call his parents and explain the project to them. That evening, Doris' kitchen sink stopped up. She called the landlord and waited an hour for him to come by and unclog it. After that, she still had to shop for groceries, iron a blouse and prepare a vocabulary test for the next day. She completely forgot about phoning Jeremy's parents. The next morning, 19 children came to school, laughing and talking as they placed their eggs in the large wicker basket on Miss Miller's desk. After they completed their Math lesson, it was time to open the eggs. In the first egg, Doris found a flower. "Oh yes, a flower is certainly a sign of new life," she said. "When plants peek through the ground we know that spring is here." A small girl in the first row waved her arms. "That's my egg, Miss Miller," she called out. The next egg contained a plastic butterfly, which looked very real. Doris held it up. "We all know that a caterpillar changes and grows into a beautiful butterfly. Yes, that is new life, too." Little Judy smiled proudly and said, "Miss Miller, that one is mine." Next, Doris found a rock with moss on it. She explained that the moss, too, showed life. Billy spoke up from the back of the classroom. "My Daddy helped me!" he beamed. Then, Doris opened the fourth egg. She gasped. The egg was empty! Surely it must be Jeremy's she thought, and of course, he did not understand her instructions. If only she had not forgotten to phone his

parents. Because she did not want to embarrass him, she quietly set the egg aside and reached for another. Suddenly, Jeremy spoke up. "Miss Miller, aren't you going to talk about my egg?" Flustered, Doris replied, "but Jeremy, your egg is empty!" He looked into her eyes and said softly, "Yes, but Jesus' tomb was empty too!" Time stopped. When she could speak again, Doris asked him, "Do you know why the tomb was empty?" "Oh yes!" Jeremy exclaimed. "Jesus was killed and put in there. Then His Father raised Him up!" The recess bell rang. While the children excitedly ran out to the school yard, Doris cried. The cold inside her melted completely away. Three months later, Jeremy died. Those who paid their respects at the funeral were surprised to see 19 eggs on top of his casket, all of them empty.

My friends, Jeus was killed and put in there. But then His Father raised Him up and that tomb is empty because He's alive. My forgiveness is complete, my future is secure, and now I can love all the Jeremys of this world, no matter how hard it is, with His love. And I can face all the difficulties and problems the Enemy can throw at me; I can face illness and lose my job and anything else that you can name, because I can endure all things through the incredible power of the Living Christ who lives in me. I can face all of life for one reason, the same one Martin Luther found, *Vivit!* He lives!

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The Passover Plot: The Plan To Kill Jesus
The Plot Is Formed In Galilee - Luke 4, Mark 2-3

This Wednesday is Ash Wednesday, the beginning of the season of Lent, a time when Christians traditionally begin to think about the momentous events of Good Friday and Easter. So it is fitting that we turn our thoughts to the Gospels and the life of Jesus in these next weeks. Back in 1965, a liberal British theologian by the name of Hugh Schonfield wrote a popular book called "The Passover Plot", which basically ended up discrediting the reality of Jesus' resurrection as a hoax planned by His disciples. Please don't read the book! I just want to steal its catchy title for this series of messages! Seriously, if you read the Gospels carefully, you discover that there was a real Passover Plot. Even though Jesus was often surrounded by crowds who flocked to Him because of His compassionate miracles, from the very earliest days of His ministry, He made enemies among the Jewish people, and in particular among their religious leaders, and almost from the very start, they planned to kill Him. Not long after His baptism by John and His temptation in the wilderness, Jesus returned home to Galilee in the north of Israel. He made the town of Capernaum His headquarters and began to teach and to do miracles, but early on He made a point to visit Nazareth, the small town where He had been raised and spent the first 30 years of His life, and that's where our investigation begins in **Lk. 4:16-30**. No matter how many people He healed of diseases or freed from demons, there were three things that Jesus did that deeply angered those who were steeped in Jewish religious tradition. You see conflicts over these same three things repeatedly throughout the Gospel narratives. And the first conflict occurred at the beginning of it all right here in His home town and it involves this concept:

I. Jesus Is A Messiah For All Peoples It is hard for us to comprehend the level of animosity that the Jewish people had developed toward the Gentiles or non-Jewish nations at that time, especially after being overrun and oppressed by them for hundreds of years. They regarded them all as pagan idolaters, worshippers of false gods who were unclean and not even to be touched. These anti-Gentile sentiments ended up being recorded in the Talmud, which is a collection of the earlier oral teachings of the rabbis that was written down about 200 AD. And according to some of those teachings, non-Jews are not real human beings, but are really the same as animals. A Jew can kill a non-Jew without being guilty of murder or lie to one for his own advantage without guilt. He doesn't even have to return the lost property of a non-Jew if he finds it and he can steal it if he wants it. I'm sure that not all the Jewish people in Jesus day agreed with all these things, but these are the kinds of things that were being taught by the Rabbis and it created this kind of Jewish supremacist world view in them as a people in that day. Today, of course, Jewish folks don't hold to those teachings or have that attitude any longer, but in Jesus' day the culture was rife with it. So, it is no wonder that He created a stir when:

1. He read Is. 61:1-2a in the synagogue at Nazareth (16-20) Every good Jew knew those verses from Isaiah were talking about the Messiah and what He would do when He came. In fact, that word *anointed* is actually the root of the word *Messiah*, which means "anointed one". But what you don't notice here is that Jesus stopped His reading in mid-sentence. In Isaiah it continues …*and the day of vengeance of our God*, and it goes on from there. Of course, everyone listening knew the passage and could likely quote the whole thing from memory. They knew what came next; that's what they were hoping and waiting for, that Messiah would come and lead them in taking vengeance upon their enemies! But Jesus stopped with, *the year of the Lord's favor.* He was not going to be the kind of Messiah that they wanted. His first coming was to preach good news to the poor and heal blind eyes and set oppressed people free; the day of God's judgment would come later, at the end of the age. Today is a day of mercy for all! So, He halted there, rolled up the scroll and sat down and everybody was poised, waiting for what He would say next and, as they might have expected:

2. He claimed to be the fulfillment of that passage (21) All the other things He obviously said are not recorded, only the beginning punchline which means, "I am the Messiah! I am doing these very things, preaching to the poor, healing blind eyes, casting out demons. The long-awaited Messiah Israel has been hoping for is here now and I am He!" And at first:

3. they appeared to warmly receive His teaching (22) It made sense. They had heard of Him doing all these miracles. Surely He COULD be the One they were waiting for at last! Maybe! But Jesus knew there was no depth to their cautious acceptance and what their ultimate attitude toward Him would become. He knew they were eventually going to demand proof and ask to see miracles and so He said in **(23-24)** essentially, "No matter how many miracles I do, you'll never believe Me, because this is My hometown and you know Me too well. You won't get past that, but I'll tell you who will!" And then:

4. He declared that they would not receive Him but the nations would (23-27) What's He saying? "I'm not sent just to you. God loves the Gentiles; He loves all peoples. I am the Messiah who is sent to all peoples, not just to you to get you your day of vengeance over them! God loves all the nations and so do I!" Well, that did it! He had stomped hard on their sore spot and they reacted immediately. Their anti-Gentile beliefs were so strong that:

5. the crowd dragged Him out and tried to throw Him over a cliff (28-29) They mobbed Him and tried to do away with Him on the spot. But before we judge them too harshly, remember that they are neither the first nor the last to hold a prejudice this strong and resort to mob violence. Look at our own US history and the violent anger during the civil rights movement. Check out the 2004 movie *Hotel Rwanda* about the hatred between the Hutu and the Tutsi people that resulted in such horrible slaughter, even where Christianity was the norm! Jesus says, "I am a Messiah for ALL peoples! I don't just love you; I love all the peoples of the earth and I love them the same. I will not be yours alone; THEY belong to Me too. That's why I've sent you to reach them all with the Gospel! Get busy; I want them to hear!" But the hometown folks quickly object, "But aren't there enough lost people here among us? Isn't there enough work to do here?" And Jesus says, "Yes, but I love them as much as I love you and they've never in all history had the opportunity to hear about Me! I am a Messiah for all peoples!" Well, this is the first attempt on His life and he's only begun His ministry. But it was not His time, so:

6. He supernaturally passed through their midst (30) I can't imagine this is saying that He tore Himself loose and ran away. Adam Clarke, in his commentary on this verse, tells *the story of a missionary who was often in danger of losing his life through persecution. On one occasion he came to a place and about fifty people had assembled. After he had preached about thirty minutes, an unruly mob surrounded the house. Those inside shut the door and began to pray while the mob attacked the house, hurling stones against the walls, windows, and roof so that in a short time almost every tile was destroyed and there was no glass left. At one point, a person put his pistol through the window and tried to fire it, but it only flashed in the pan! The house was a wooden building, so they began with crowbars and shovels to undermine it, and take away its supports. The missionary then said to his people, "These angry people seek not you, but me; if I continue in the house, they will soon pull it down, and we shall be all buried in its ruins; I will therefore, in the name of God, go out to them, and you will be safe." He then went towards the door while the people begged him*

not to go out as he would be instantly massacred, but he went calmly forward and opened the door. As it opened a whole volley of stones and dirt was loosed at it but he was unhurt. The people were crowded in all the space before the door, and filled the road for a considerable way, so that there was no room for him to pass. But as soon as the missionary appeared, the mob became instantly as silent and as still as night; he walked forward and they divided to the right and to the left, leaving a passage of about four feet wide for himself and a young man who followed him, to walk in. He passed on through the whole crowd and not one either lifted a hand, or spoke one word, till he and his companion had reached the outskirts of the mob! The man who told Clarke this story was present on that occasion and he says, *"This was one of the most affecting spectacles I ever witnessed; an infuriated mob, without any visible cause became in a moment as calm as lambs! They seemed struck with amazement bordering on stupefaction; they stared and stood speechless and, after they had fallen back to the right and left to leave him a free passage, they were as motionless as statues! They assembled with the full purpose to destroy the man who came to show them the way of salvation, but he, passing through the midst of them, went his way."* That's how I imagine Jesus passed through this angry mob, His Divine power parting them like the waters of the Red Sea, and He went on about His ministry.

Now the second thing which deeply infuriated the religious leaders was that:

II. **Jesus Forgives Sins** In **Mk. 2:1-10** we have the familiar story of:

1. a paralyzed man who was brought to Him in Capernaum (1-4) Jesus was in Peter's house there and most likely in the roofed inner courtyard of it, while a crowd filled the outer room before Him and spilled out into the street. The four friends of this man, finding no way to get through, carried him up the steps onto the rooftop and began to remove the tiles over the spot in the courtyard where Jesus stood. Then they quietly let the man down in front of Him with ropes. Nobody had ever seen that done before, but everybody knew what this man wanted and needed. Or so they thought. But Jesus didn't do what they all expected:

2. He declared the man's sins were forgiven, instead of healing him (5) Now why did He do that? To intentionally anger people? I doubt it. The Jews had another common and deeply held belief, that disease or other physical maladies were a judgment from God upon sin. Jesus' disciples voiced this in John 9 when they met a man that had been blind from birth and they said, *"Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"* To them the cause of the blindness was not a question; it was assumed. Somebody had to have sinned for him to be born blind! The sins of the parents could be visited upon their children. We are not told how long this man in our text had been paralyzed or what the cause of it was, but it seems to me that, just as Jesus could read the thoughts of the religious leaders who were present, He could also read the thoughts of the paralyzed man. Probably for years, this man had been told that his paralysis was a curse because of sin and that whatever the sin was, it had such a permanent consequence that it could not be reversed. So, in his mind this Jewish man is thinking, "Can I ever be forgiven and healed? Would God ever take away this curse of sin from me and heal me?" And his actions and those of his friends in their desperation to get him to Jesus showed to Jesus that they had faith to believe it was possible. So Jesus first tenderly reassured him, "Son, [literally, My Child] your sins are already forgiven!", because that's what was on his mind and heart. Listen, have you heard that when you come to Him in faith, trusting in Him and laying yourself before Him sincerely asking, Jesus forgives sins! Hallelujah! He forgives ALL of them! He forgives them once, for all, forever! And not only that, He wants you to KNOW it on His authority! He wants you to have that assurance, just as He wanted this man to have it! But in that crowd were religious leaders who had already begun to follow Him around everywhere He went to keep an eye on Him and they reacted strongly in **(6-7)**:

3. the scribes and Pharisees who were in the crowd **accused him of blasphemy in their minds** They didn't even say it out loud, but in their heads they were shouting, "Blasphemy! This man is claiming a prerogative that belongs only to God! Who does he think he is! He should be put to death for this!" But they missed the point; He IS God! He has the right to forgive sins and He is declaring it by saying that. By the way, for you to assert that you know God has forgiven your sins is also considered blasphemy by many, even today! People will say that's audacious pride, a huge presumption, because you think too highly of yourself, or even that you're deceived into a false hope. It irritates people, especially really religious people, to say that you know with certainty that ALL your sins are forgiven, but listen, if JESUS says your sins are forgiven, they're forgiven, just like this man's were! Other people's opinions don't matter! At any rate, Jesus read their minds and:

4. He healed the paralyzed man to prove His authority (8-12a) That's actually a trick question. From the human perspective, it seems easier to say, "your sins are forgiven" because there's no way to verify it. But in actuality, both forgiving sins and healing a paralyzed man on the spot are things that only God Himself can do. So He went ahead and DID what only God could do in healing the man, so they would know He could also forgive sins! Well:

5. the crowd was awed (12b) but I don't think that included everyone there. I'm quite sure that **the leaders remained offended**. On a later occasion, Jesus was at a meal in a Pharisee's house when a sinful woman came and anointed his feet. But when Jesus told her that her sins were forgiven, the Pharisees around the table began to mutter, *"Who is this, who even forgives sins?"* **- Lk. 7:49**. This practice remained a continual offense to them, no matter how many miracles Jesus did. Now finally, the third thing that infuriated the religious leaders was that:

III. Jesus Refuses To Endorse Legalistic Traditions and that's what's going on in the two situations recorded in **Mk. 2:23-3:6**. In the first one:

1. His disciples picked grain to eat on the Sabbath (23) Matthew says they were hungry. It was just a casual thing, gleaning a few grains of wheat to chew on as they walked by, (I wouldn't recommend this, by the way. It tastes terrible.), but anyway:

a. the Pharisees accused them of breaking the Sabbath (24) They weren't really violating the Sabbath law at all, just the traditions with which Jewish leaders had encumbered it for centuries. I'll give you a modern day example from a conservative Jewish website, *Lights which will be needed on Shabbat are turned on before Shabbat. Automatic timers may be used for lights and some appliances as long as they have been set before Shabbat. The refrigerator may be used, but again, we have to ensure that it's use does not engender any of the forbidden Shabbat activities. Thus, the fridge light should be disconnected before Shabbat by unscrewing the bulb slightly and a freezer whose fan is activated when the door is opened may not be used. [www.chabad.org]* That's what the religious leaders in Jesus' day had done in their own setting; thumbing a few heads of grain in your hand is "reaping" and Jesus refused to endorse their nonsense. In fact:

b. He shared how David actually violated the Law in a time of need (25-26) David and his men actually ate the holy bread from the Tabernacle and God never reproved him for it! Why? Because it was an emergency situation and it was done with reverence. Then Jesus made His point:

c. He declared that the Sabbath was to benefit man, not bind him (27-28) God gave the day of rest to relieve man's toil, not to burden him with a zillion legal do's and don'ts and Jesus claimed the right to decide how it should be observed! Well, this Sabbath thing didn't go away. Soon after:

2. He healed a man in the synagogue on the Sabbath (3:1-2) This man with the withered hand was there and notice that already:

a. the scribes and Pharisees were watching to see if Jesus would heal him, because healing is working, you see. They WANTED to catch Jesus doing something against the Law; they wanted a charge to accuse Him of. With all the people streaming to Him, they needed to bring out some kind of scandal or dirt to accuse and discredit Him. But again, Jesus was reading their minds and:

b. He declared that it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath (3-4) Matthew tells us Jesus added these words, *Which one of you who has a sheep, if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not take hold of it and lift it out? Of how much more value is a man than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.* **- Mt. 12:11-12**. It's just plain obvious that God would want you to rescue your sheep, even on the Sabbath. These traditional rules, instead of helping people obey God, were enslaving them and actually keeping them from doing what God would want! But strongly religious people often have a hard time seeing that their rules and traditions are not sacrosanct like the Word of God itself. And they get angry at you if you won't endorse and practice them. Jesus wouldn't:

c. He healed the man in defiance of their stance (5) He was grieved; He just could not believe how hardened their hearts had become to the things that really matter to God! So. He healed the man and the very fact that the power of God just did something no human could do should have proved His point. It should have said, "See, God approves!" God is not about rule-keeping; He is not impressed by legalism. He is touched by love and compassion in the heart for others! But that was lost on these men. In fact, look at **(6)**:

d. they came to the conclusion that He must be killed The Herodians were normally the enemies of the Pharisees, because they supported Roman rule over Israel, while the Pharisees detested it. Yet the Pharisees immediately ran to their own enemies, who had political clout with Herod, the Roman governor of Galilee, and together they began plotting how to kill Him! Notice that Jesus had actually asked if it was lawful to kill on the Sabbath; He knew what they would do! But I guess it was OK to plot murder since it didn't violate the rules! And thus, the plot to eliminate Jesus was formed and began to impact His life and ministry. The first steps on the path that led to the Cross were taken.

But Jesus went on setting people free, forgiving their sins, giving them life, no matter who they are. And He's still doing it. I heard this amazing testimony from a pastor friend: *Before they moved to this area their daughter was abused physically and sexually by a fellow student at school when she was 13 and 14 years old, abuse that even left scars on her body. They knew something was wrong, but she wouldn't tell them. Finally, she told what happened and eventually said, "I know I need help to deal with this." So they got her to a Christian counselor who began to help her deal with it, but then she went to a Youth Retreat with their church and toward the end of the weekend, their phone rang. In tears of joy, the daughter said, "Mom, Dad, Jesus healed me! He spoke to me! He told me that it wasn't my fault. He told me I have nothing to be ashamed of. He told me that I am clean and pure. My pain is all gone!" They were so overjoyed! Well, that Monday the husband came home and his daughter and wife were sitting on the couch crying together and he asked, "Hey, what's*

happening?" And his daughter said, "Dad, I had just taken a shower and Jesus spoke to me again and He said, 'Look at your body'. And Dad, I did, and the scars I had, they're not there anymore, they're all gone. Jesus healed them!" Folks, that's what Jesus is all about, giving life and freedom and healing and forgiveness to those who are suffering. How could anybody hate One who does that? And yet they do; they still do.

The Passover Plot: The Plan To Kill Jesus

The Plot Grows Through Visits To Jerusalem - John 2, 5, 7, 8, 10

As we saw last time, Jesus began and continued most of His ministry in Galilee in the north of the land of Israel and it was not long before the Jewish leaders there were so offended that they were plotting to kill Him. The Law required that three times each year every Jewish male was to go up to Jerusalem to offer sacrifice at the Temple, for the Feast of Passover in our March/April time frame, for the Feast of Pentecost 50 days later in June and for the Feast of Tabernacles in October. So throughout the $3^{1/2}$ years of Jesus' ministry, He made the long trip to Jerusalem often and it seems that each of those visits led Him deeper and deeper into conflict with the Jewish leaders and increased their determination to be rid of Him. A good portion of John's Gospel is actually built around these visits and the conflicts they engendered and that's what we want to examine together today.

I. His First Visit actually occurred even before the incident in the synagogue in His home town of Nazareth. He went up to Jerusalem to celebrate **Passover**, which would probably have been in **April, AD 27 (2:13-14)**. The Temple was primarily a place where animal sacrifices were offered to God and, naturally, it was pretty difficult to drag your animals 90 or 100 miles to offer them if you lived far away, so a thriving business had grown up in Jerusalem where people could bring money, exchange it for the proper sanctuary coinage and purchase a kosher animal there. It sounds convenient, but along the way, the money changer makes a profit, the animal seller makes a profit and the animal inspector makes a profit. And this business had thrived so much that the leaders had moved it right into the outer court of the Temple itself. So imagine walking through the ornate gate to the huge court of the Gentiles to find that over here is a corral with several dozen oxen. Do you know how big an ox is? Do you know what a herd of oxen *do* in a corral all day? Ever been in a cow barn? And over there is another corral full of dozens of sheep, bleating and baahing. And over there are stacks and stacks of cages full of pigeons for the poor to offer, cooing and fluttering. And somewhere nearby are big stone tables, behind which are the moneychangers with crowds of people round each one haggling back and forth. It seemed just like entering the city's marketplace! So, on that day, Jesus:

a. He cleansed the Temple (15-16) He coiled up a cord in his hand and began to drive the animals out with their vendors running after them and to tell those who sold the doves to get them out and to overturn the tables of the moneychangers. Can't you see them crawling around frantically picking up coins? And He said, "Don't turn My Father's house into [literally] an *emporium*, a place of selling merchandise!" By the way, notice that He also referred to God as HIS Father, something no Jew would ever do. Now, what do we learn from this? **Jesus detests turning worship into business!** The worship of God is about adoring and serving Him, not about making money! Yet in that day and through the centuries, religious leaders have at times tended to fill their own coffers from the generosity of the faithful, to make a profit from well-meaning people trying to worship. One of the factors that drove Martin Luther and others to begin the Reformation was that they detested the widespread campaign by the Pope of their day to raise money by the blatant sale of indulgences to get people's deceased relatives into heaven. Jesus' act should be just as stern a warning to leaders or even businesses today who line their pockets at the expense of worshippers as it was in His day! But nobody likes that kind of warning. Thus:

b. the Jewish leaders questioned His authority and demanded a sign (18-19) Notice that they didn't even object that He was wrong; they just demanded a sign to prove that God had authorized Him to do it! So, speaking of His body, not the physical Temple, He said, "Destroy this and in three days I'll raise it up!" His resurrection was the only and the ultimate proof that God would give to that generation, and for all time, of who He was. And He walked away. While He was there in Jerusalem:

c. many believed (23) However, eventually **animosity arose and Jesus withdrew (4:1-3)**. He went home again to Galilee and continued His ministry to avoid precipitating more conflict too soon.

II. His Next Visit occurred at another **Feast (**probably the **Passover)** which would have made it a full year later, in **April AD 28 (5:1)**. And as He arrived this time:

1. He healed an invalid on the Sabbath (2-9) Imagine it! This man had been handicapped and unable to walk for 38 years, the majority of his life! And Jesus saw him lying hopelessly there by the pool and had compassion on him and healed him instantly. But it happens to be the Sabbath day - again! So, when they found that Jesus had healed the man:

2. the Jewish leaders openly opposed Him (16). Here the word *persecuting* is being used in the lesser sense of pursuing Him, arguing with Him and condemning what He had done. But look what He said to them **(17)**. He said, "God is always working, even on the Sabbath day! If He truly rested and stopped for one day, the universe would fall apart!

And I'm just doing what He's doing, doing good to needy people, even on the Sabbath!" Again, in the process **He called God His Father**, and in the whole rest of the chapter He went on to declare His authority as God's Son to them at great length. Listen, **Jesus is constantly at work doing good**, carrying out the Father's plan. Every day, all day, 24/7 as we like to put it, He is working, working, working all things together for good for us who love Him and to accomplish His good purpose in the world. No matter what your circumstances may scream at you, no matter how much they may tell you He's off on vacation somewhere and doesn't care, He's at work in your life, right now, today, this moment! As author Sarah Young put it, *"I am constantly working to transform your life. You need My help continually to keep your hope alive. I stand ready to help you at all times—during stormy episodes as well as times of smooth sailing. I am not only ever-living, but also more abundantly alive than you can possibly imagine. There are no limits to what My great Power and Glory can accomplish! I can change the most 'hopeless' situation into outright victory. Moreover, as you affirm your trust in Me—no matter how difficult your circumstances—I am able to transform you: gradually, lovingly. Those who hope in Me will not be disappointed." [Jesus Lives by Sarah Young, p. 226]* Amen! But the Temple officials could not get past their understanding of the Sabbath Day and especially the fact that **Jesus declared He is God's Son**, so now:

3. the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem plotted to kill Him (5:18) The concept that He must be killed is now fixed in their minds and they began to look very hard for a way to do it, for an opportunity to make it happen. And the effect of that is recorded later in **(7:1)**. Jesus purposely stayed away from Judea, because there was an openly known desire to take His life, an unofficial price on His head, if you will. He was on the official hit list. Did you ever wonder why Jesus spent so much of His ministry way up in Galilee, so far away from the center of Jewish life and culture? Largely it was because His life was in constant danger every time He was in Judea! The next event John records is:

III. A Conflict In Capernaum in Galilee, which occurred near **Passover** time, which would make it another year later in **Apr. AD 29** according to **(6:4)**. What sparked it was one of His most well-known miracles:

1. He fed the five thousand by multiplying bread (5-11) Think about it! Five tiny loaves fed five thousand men, plus women and children! And there were leftovers! Everyone present, of course, recognized the amazing nature of the miracle. It even convinced them (for the moment at least) that Jesus was the promised Messiah, according to verse 14. But Jesus knew that their hearts weren't really after Him; they were after the bread, so He left them quickly and even crossed the Sea of Galilee back home to Capernaum, where they found Him teaching in the synagogue according to verse **(59)**, where He challenged them. He told them they were only seeking Him in order to get physical bread and they even tried to convince Him that He should do this for them regularly, because Moses gave the Israelites manna from heaven to eat. In response to that:

2. He claimed to be the Bread of Life (6:32-35, 47-51) "Bread merely sustains your physical life, but eventually you die anyway. You don't need bread, you need ME! Believe in ME and I will give you ETERNAL life!" Listen, **Jesus is our True Need!** All too often, human beings, and even ourselves, are stubbornly convinced that our true needs are physical. We need God to provide for some need we have, for some bill we struggle to pay. We need God to heal our sickness or our affliction so we can feel better. We need God to fix our job situation or to change our spouse or solve some problem and if we can just get God to do what we need Him to do, our needs will be met and we'll be satisfied! Jesus says, "No, you won't, because that's not what you really need! You need ME!" If you haven't believed in Him as your Savior, you need Him, because He Himself IS eternal life. And if you have believed, you need to focus on your relationship with Him, instead of all your problems and needs, because Col. 3:4 says He IS your life! Jesus will carry you through, Jesus will strengthen you, Jesus will show you the way. We don't live by bread alone; we live by the Presence and the power of Jesus in us and flowing through us. So, we must seek Him for HIM, not for all we want Him to do for us! Naturally, in the process of all the dialogue, He has called God His Father numerous times, as well. And what was the reaction to it all?

3. the Jews grumbled (41) They **argued and criticized** Him because they couldn't comprehend the analogy of bread that He was using **(52)**. And by the end of that time, **many of His disciples deserted Him (66)**. By this point in His ministry, Jesus had hundreds of followers who sought Him out and listened to Him teach in various places and believed He was the Messiah at some level. But this was too much for most of them. From this point on, the crowds left; only the Twelve and a few others remained with Him. The rest were only in it for what they could get out of it. Yet six more months pass there in Galilee and then Jesus makes:

IV. His Third Last Visit to Jerusalem, for the Feast of **Tabernacles** which would have been in **Oct. AD 29**, about 6 months before the Crucifixion **(7:2, 14)**. Going to Jerusalem is now so dangerous that Jesus waited to go up and show Himself until the middle of the eight day long celebration. As He taught, this time, He took the offensive:

1. He deliberately exposed the plot to kill Him in verse **(19)**. Of course, many people were unaware of the leaders' plotting and denied it, but others evidently knew about it **(25)**. And on that day, verse **(30)** says the Jews sought to seize Him; they even sent Temple guards to arrest Him **(32)**, yet somehow they didn't. He did not appear publicly again until the last day, the most important day of the Feast. On that day, in a great procession, a priest would go down the pool of Siloam, draw a golden pitcher of water from the spring of Gihon and bear it back to the Temple. As all the

people gathered in the court with palm branches in their hands, waving them toward the altar, the water would be poured out, along with wine, at the altar of sacrifice. It was a remembrance of God pouring forth water out of the rock for His people in the wilderness and it also symbolized God pouring out His Spirit upon His people as the prophets predicted. Then the Levites would chant the Great Hallel, Psalms 113-118, and in response to each line, the people would shout *Hallelu-jah!* It ends with the words of Palm Sunday, *Hosanna...blessed is He who comes in the Name of the Lord!* It was a tremendous moment of loud rejoicing and just as the last echoes of it died away, Jesus stood up and shouted **(37-39)**. What a powerful moment! What a powerful proclamation! "I am the true water of life! If you believe in Me, whole rivers of living water will well up inside you and gush forth to a thirsting world!" And John explains that He meant, "I'll put my Spirit within you, who will not only give you life, but will pour forth His life through you to others!" They didn't understand it, but do you? **Jesus placed His very Spirit within us** and through that, not only do we *with joy draw water from the wells of salvation (Is. 12:3)*, but we have a never-ending source of life and strength within us that constantly pours forth that life to others! And our Spring will never run dry, not even in the severest drought conditions of life! Hallelu-Jah! Praise the Lord! Well, that moment was so powerful that even:

2. the guards did not seize Him because their hearts were touched (44-46) How true! No man ever spoke like Jesus did! Then:

3. He later declared that He is the Light of the world (8:12) Do you see how many times Jesus made such direct proclamations about who He was and invited people to believe in Him? Such compassionate invitations, "I'm your true bread, I'm your life-giving water, I'm your light - you'll never walk in darkness if you follow Me!" His appeal, over and over, was "believe in Me!" But this new proclamation led to yet another long diatribe between the Pharisees and Himself, arguing about their truly being children of Abraham, until finally Jesus said this in **(58)**. In saying those words, "I am":

4. He openly declared that He is God When Moses asked God, "What is Your Name?" God answered, "I AM". It is the sacred Divine Name and in taking it to Himself, everyone immediately recognized that He was saying, "I am Jehovah, the eternal I AM". Listen, there is no way around it. You can't believe in a Jesus who is simply a prophet or a great religious teacher or a compassionate leader. That holds no water with His own loud repeated public declarations. Jesus said He is God! He either is or He isn't. If He isn't, then He is either a deliberate liar or a raving delusional lunatic. But if He IS, then we must fall down and worship Him! That's actually the choice He was putting before them and, of course, that was the last straw for the Jews:

5. the Jews tried to stone Him, but He hid and slipped away (59) Two more months went by and then Jesus risked returning once again for:

V. His Second Last Visit It was now **Dec. AD 29** at the Feast of the **Dedication** of the Temple **(or Hanukkah) (10:22)** and look what happened **(10:23-30)**. Did you hear Him?

1. He declared He is both the Christ and One with the Father However, this time He declares it in the context of being the Good Shepherd who laid down His life for His sheep. He says, "My sheep are the ones who listen to My voice, who believe in Me, and I keep them safe and secure. They are safely nestled in the most powerful Hand in the universe, My Father's hand, and that hand is also My hand! We are one being!" Oh, listen, in those words lies our eternal security! **Jesus keeps us safe forever!** No being, no circumstance, no persecution, is big enough or strong enough to take us away from Him. We are held safe forever! Hallelujah! But once again:

2. the Jews attempted to stone Him (31) however, He stalled them momentarily with a question and then again declared that the Father was in Him and He was in the Father. So **they tried to seize Him, but He escaped (39)**. He went down across the Jordan and stayed there until it was time to make His last visit.

All of His ministry Jesus lived in opposition and danger. Hostility against Him grew and grew until it reached a fever pitch and the plan to execute Him came to fruition at last on Good Friday. Jesus had a heart filled with compassion that touched thousands. He healed the sick and fed the hungry and even raised the dead. And in the process, He constantly declared who He was and passionately implored people to simply believe! But in case your impression is that He simply went about doing good followed by huge crowds, teaching wonderful truths, I think the record we've seen paints a different picture: He was constantly spied on, argued with, and in danger of arrest and of losing His life. And He endured that for you and I. This is what Heb. 12:3 really means, *Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. In 1873, William Holman Hunt completed his now famous painting, <u>The Shadow of Death,</u> during his second trip to the Holy Land. It depicts Jesus as a young man prior to his ministry, working as a carpenter in his shop. He is standing and stretching his arms after sawing wood. But the shadow of his outstretched arms falls upon a wooden spar on which His carpentry tools hang, creating the shadow image that He is being crucified, while His mother Mary kneels below in a corner looking up.* Jesus whole life was lived under the shadow of His impending death, yet He endured everything that He had to face. Why? He did it for you! When things are difficult and you are suffering and opposition or danger or even persecution become part of your life, consider Him. Look at Him! And endure for Him!

The Passover Plot: The Plan To Kill Jesus
The Plot Intensifies Through Lazarus - John 11:1-12:11

Last time, we ended our study in December of AD 29 when Jesus had visited Jerusalem during the Feast of the Dedication of the Temple and the Jewish leaders had tried to stone Him. At this point there are only 3 to 4 months left in His earthly life. Immediately after that conflict, He left Jerusalem and crossed the Jordan River eastward into Perea where John the Baptist had his great ministry in the earlier years and he stayed over there, sort of out of reach, for a couple of months, teaching and touching many lives. John reports in 10:42 that *many believed in Him there.* But then an event happened that drew Him back into Judea, an event that turned out to be:

I. The Culminating Miracle Of Jesus' Ministry, the crowning moment of displaying His glorious power: the raising of Lazarus from the dead, which is recorded for us in **John 11:1-45**. Here is why:

1. Jesus returned to Judea (1-3) Jesus had met Mary and Martha, and of course Lazarus, when He visited and probably stayed in their home in Bethany several months earlier, just before the Feast of Tabernacles in October. You may remember Luke's record of that visit in chapter 10, sharing how Martha was busy serving, while Mary sat at His feet. We'll find Jesus back in their home once again at the start of Passover Week in John 12, where Mary anoints Jesus with precious ointment and wipes His feet with her hair. Evidently, a real bond of love had formed between this little family and Jesus over the months. But now, sometime perhaps in February, Lazarus suddenly fell seriously ill. The sisters' first thought was to immediately send word to Jesus, thus, a day or so later:

a. a messenger arrived to inform Him of Lazarus' illness The man had to walk some 15 to 20 miles to get to where Jesus was in Perea and then had to find Him, so probably a whole day went by before Jesus got the news. In verse **(4)** we have:

b. His promise: this sickness will not end in death That tells me a couple of things. First, Jesus already knew about this sickness before the messenger ever came. It was already part of His plan, something that He knew would come and had allowed to happen to Lazarus. And second, it had a great purpose! He already knew how He planned to use it to glorify God! Isn't His reaction comforting? Whenever something comes into your life, whether it's sickness or accident or job loss or the loss of a loved one, it doesn't take Jesus by surprise! He not only already knew it was coming, He chose to allow it and He has a plan to use it to glorify Himself! Death never wins! Sickness never wins! Suffering never wins! They are never the end of the story; Jesus plans to use whatever has come to glorify God! The wife of a dear missionary couple we know was diagnosed with cancer some years ago. Her husband wrote to their friends, *Recently we posted a journal of our journey with cancer... We've entitled the journal, "The Pathway To Life." ...We do not see cancer as a road to death but rather the pathway to life, as rocky and painful as it may be, walking hand-in-hand with Jesus on into our eternal destiny*. They saw even terminal cancer as something that God has planned and allowed and something out of which He will get glory. It is not the end but the pathway to something wonderful! However, as urgent as this appeal to Jesus was:

c. He remained where He was for two more days (5-7) Now let's do some math. If it took at least a day for the messenger to get to Jesus and He waited two days before leaving and it took Him at least an additional day to get there, how many is that? Four, right? Then we read in verse **17** that when Jesus arrived Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. What does that tell you? Lazarus must have died immediately after the messenger left! He was already buried before Jesus got the message. Jesus knew that and said so in verse **14**. So, His waiting was not a lack of concern for Lazarus or the family; He loved them! Listen, when Jesus doesn't answer your request right away or answer it in the way you desire, don't ever take that as a sign that He doesn't love you! He loves you so much that He died for you! The Jews commonly believed that decay of the body set in on the fourth day after death; notice what Martha said in verse **39**. The Jews even had the superstition that the soul of the departed sort of hung around the body until the fourth day before departing. Jesus was merely making sure that enough time went by so that everyone would recognize that Lazarus was really and completely dead and no one could protest that Lazarus had merely been "nearly dead" and had revived in the tomb. He was ensuring that God would fully get all the glory He deserved from what was about to happen. So, after waiting two days, He said, "Let's go back to Judea", but:

d. His disciples knew the danger and were reluctant to go back (8) They knew that Jesus' life was in serious danger if He went near to Jerusalem again. But He reassured them in verses **(9-10)**. As Adam Clarke paraphrases the meaning, *I have not travelled these twelve hours yet-my last hour is not yet come; and the Jews, with all their malice and hatred, shall not be able to bring it a moment sooner than God has purposed. I am immortal till my work is done and this, that I am now going to Bethany to perform, is a part of it. When all is completed, then their hour, and that of the power of darkness, shall commence.* The disciples didn't understand that, but we should! I am immortal; no matter what Satan tries to do to me, I cannot die until God has completed all the work He plans to accomplish through me. Then death will come. Neither disease nor accident nor enemies will determine the time of my death; God will! Hallelujah! Then look at verses **(14-15)**. You see:

e. He planned to raise Lazarus solidify their faith, to raise it to a whole new level, to demonstrate to them, to the world and to us that He is absolutely in charge of life and death itself. But the best they could manage was the pessimistic comment in verse **(16)**. Then, upon their arrival the next day:

2. Jesus first interacted with Martha in verses **(17-24)**. Word was brought that He was coming and she got up and quickly ran out to meet Him. Her first words are really a response of faith **(21)**.

a. she believed He could have *prevented* Lazarus' death, that He could heal any disease, no matter how deadly. That's why she sent the messenger. She even had hope for the future **(22-24)**.

b. she believed Lazarus would eventually rise at the Resurrection of all the righteous dead, sometime far in the future. She couldn't quite bring herself to fully believe that Jesus meant, "right now", even though she hinted at it. And, in response:

3. Jesus declared this truth which has been the bedrock of assurance to all believers down through the ages **(25-27)**. Did you hear that? **I AM the resurrection and the life**; "I don't just control it, I AM it! I am the very source of it, the power behind it and the One who gives it!" And look at the promise of what that means:

a. those who believe live, even though they die, that is their body dies. Believers who die are ALIVE! They are not annihilated; they haven't ceased to exist just because their body is lying in a grave. They live! *It was D.L. Moody, the great evangelist, who said, "When they tell you I'm dead, don't believe it! I'll be more alive than I have ever been!"* As Jesus put it on another occasion, *God said to Moses, I AM the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He is not the God of the dead but of the living for all live to Him! - Lk. 20:37-38* Friends, your loved ones who knew Jesus and passed away are alive right now in His presence. And when you die, YOU will still be alive, because Jesus Himself IS life and He is IN you and joined to you, so that His life is yours! But you won't simply be a disembodied spirit forever; one day, at His coming, He'll resurrect your body and transform it into a brand new resurrection body, because He IS your resurrection! Then look at the second half of His promise:

b. those who believe while living never "die" in eternity. Literally, they *will never die forever*; it's a strong double negative. They will never, no way, die. Oh yes, they will die physically, but not in eternity. He's speaking about spiritual death, eternal death. As John put it, there is a *second death*, a death that happens after you die physically, a lake of fire and burning sulfur that is the eternal fate of the wicked. And over those who believe *the second death has no power - Rev. 20:6*. If you place your trust in Jesus Christ as your only means of salvation, you will never, no way, die eternally after you die physically! You'll be in heaven with Christ who is your life! You have nothing to fear! But notice the question Jesus asked Martha, *Do you believe this?*

c. we must believe that Jesus is truly God and the source of life He is the Son of God, God the Son, who came into the world to save us by dying for our sins and by rising from the dead. We must believe that He is the One and only, the sole source of eternal life, that apart from Him no one has life. Do you believe this? Do you *really* believe this?

The death of 11-year-old Willie Lincoln on February 20, 1862 came as a devastating blow to President Abraham Lincoln. At times he covered his face with his hands and wept convulsively. In the days that followed, his spirits were so low that he could hardly resume his work. The first Thursday after his son died, Mr. Lincoln shut himself in his room, and no one knew to what extent he gave way to his sorrow. The next week it was the same. Then he received a visit from Dr. Francis Vinton of Trinity Church in New York, who told him he was behaving like a heathen and that it was a sin to give way so completely to his grief. "Your son is alive in Heaven," he said. At first Lincoln seemed deaf to his words--then somehow they reached him. "Alive? Alive? Surely you mock me!" "No, sir," said Dr. Vinton. "It is a most comforting doctrine of the church, founded upon the words of Christ Himself." For some minutes the President sobbed and repeated, "Alive! Alive!" After that he no longer shut himself up, and with a mighty effort he turned his attention to the affairs of state once again. Jesus is saying, "Do you REALLY believe this, both for yourself and for your loved ones who have believed?" Well, Martha did, and then as the story continues:

4. Jesus interacted with Mary in verses **(28-37)**. Martha sent word back to Mary in the house and she came out to meet Jesus. Let me just point out two things. First:

a. her incomplete faith She said the exact same words as her sister **(32)**. She also believed Jesus could have *prevented* Lazarus from dying, but could not conceive of more. And Jesus didn't repeat what He told Martha. Rather, I want you to notice a second thing:

b. His deep emotion (33-36) Jesus was deeply moved at the sight of everyone weeping and when He got to the tomb, He wept! That's the shortest verse in the Bible, but it contains a mighty truth. Jesus did not stand stoically by, saying to Himself, "That's so unnecessary; I'm going to raise him in a minute." He is not only God; He is fully and truly human! He cried with the sisters weeping over their brother. He wept at the grave of a dear friend. The reaction of the crowd should be ours, *Behold how He loved Him!* Jesus wept because He loved these sisters and He loved Lazarus; the suffering they had and were enduring touched His heart deeply.

Listen, *we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses - Heb. 4:15!* We don't have a Savior who stands by unfeelingly, watching us cry in our suffering and sorrow. He feels it with us; He weeps with us when we weep, because He loves us! *A little girl was so late coming home from school one day that her mother began to worry. Finally, when she got home, her mother asked her what happened. "I stopped to help a little girl. She was crying because her doll had broken," said the child. "That was kind of you," the mother said. "Did you help her fix the doll?" "No," replied the girl. "I stopped to help her cry." [Love in a Lunchbox by Elaine M. Ward. Abingdon, 1996. Page 96.]* Jesus stopped to help them cry, to cry with them, to feel with them what they felt, and He does the same with us! Hallelujah! But now the time had come. He had said, "I AM life" and now:

5. Jesus proved His claim by calling Lazarus back to life in verses **(38-45)**. Notice:

a. Jesus' complete confidence (38-42) He knows that Lazarus' body has not decayed. He knows that when He gives the command, Lazarus will rise and somebody needs to move the stone so he can get out. He knows that the Father has heard His prayer on the subject and that it is His will to raise Lazarus. He even says, "Father, I'm only praying this so that everybody watching will know that You and I are one! I already know it!" And then verses **(43-44)**. What a dramatic moment it must have been! Jesus fairly shouted, "Lazarus, come out!" Someone commented, "It's important that Jesus specified Lazarus by name; if He hadn't ALL the dead would have been raised right then and there!" Because, as John recorded, ...*an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment. - Jn. 5:28-29.* And imagine the hush of awe that came over the crowd as:

b. Lazarus came forth alive, still wrapped in all the linen burial strips, so that they had to unwrap and free him! There in the tomb, his spirit came back into his body, and his body began to live again. It was, of course, not like the final resurrection that he and all of us will experience. He came back into his mortal body and was restored to mortal life in this world. He would have to die again at some point in the future when his time was up. But nevertheless, it proved something to everyone watching. Jesus said that He Himself was life and now He proved the truth of His claim by giving life back to a man who was indisputably dead! No one had ever seen such a thing and according to verse 45, *many of the Jews believed in Him!* Of course they did! Who wouldn't? But what's harder to understand is:

III. The Reaction Of The Jewish Leaders (46-48) They didn't even deny the miracle; they couldn't! But they were mightily afraid that Jesus would end up creating a popular uprising and cause their Roman rulers to destroy their Temple and their people. But one of them, the most cold and calculating of all, had an answer **(49-52)**. Here we have the last prophecy ever given to Israel:

1. the prophesy of Caiaphas that Jesus should die for the nation and, John adds, not only for them but to gather into one body the children of God scattered over all the earth. Caiaphas was high priest and in that capacity, he made a proclamation, a decree, *Jesus shall die to save the nation!* He meant it only physically, but he had no idea how truly right he actually was! Jesus died to make all of us, Jew and Gentile alike, children of God by faith in Him. His death saved us all! But Caiaphas meant only that he should be put to death to rescue Israel from destruction, and so, from that moment:

2. the Jews openly planned to put Him to death (53-57) It was now no longer hidden. It was openly declared to the whole nation; “Our leaders have said Jesus MUST be arrested and put to death!” Bethany was about two miles from Jerusalem and Jesus never actually went into the city after raising Lazarus. Because of the determined decree caused by this miracle, He went instead about 15 miles north and east of Jerusalem to a little village called Ephraim in the wilderness of Judea to wait for Passover and for His time to come. Meanwhile, word about this amazing miracle spread and many were believing in Jesus because of it. Now I want to skip ahead and show you just how low these leaders stooped **(12:9-11)**. They not only planned to kill Jesus when He came to town for Passover:

3. they also planned to kill Lazarus - again! To destroy the one who was the very evidence of the miracle! How blind were they to not see that Jesus IS who He claimed to be and if He is, then no power on earth can stand against Him! No cross can stop Him! No tomb can hold Him! He IS the resurrection and the life!

And, by the way, He's still proving it today! *Fatuma Shubisa is a humble believer who lives in the little village of Alelu in rural Ethiopia with her husband and nine children. For two months in 2008, she was very, very sick and one day her mother came to care for her, but found she had died. "She came and touched my face. I was cold. My eyes were open. She closed my eyes and straightened my legs," Fatuma says. "My mother cried when she found out that I was dead. Because of that, everybody came and started crying." She testifies that after she died, she felt herself being drawn to heaven and says "I was very happy, and I was going with a very merry heart." But as more and more village people, Muslims, gathered in her home and were crying, a local missionary named Warsa Buta was walking nearby. When he was passing by, he heard that somebody had died. So he came and started praying. By now, Fatuma had been dead a full 12 hours, but Warsa prayed anyway. He says, "I had faith the Lord would work through me. I prayed as Peter prayed. 'Fatuma, be raised. I ask you in the name of the Lord. Come to life.' When I prayed that prayer -- 'Fatuma, rise in the name of Jesus' --*

she sat up in the bed." Fatuma says, "Then immediately I found myself in my body. I sat up in my bed and started asking, 'What is this? What's happening? What's going on?' Then everybody was surprised. Some were commenting, 'A man can call back a dead soul to a body? If this is real, then we all will become Christians.' And they were shouting. Well, a film crew actually went there and recorded their story and you can watch her and Warsa tell their story on Youtube at *https://youtu.be/Y6r4XR_qqB4.* Listen, Jesus still IS the resurrection and the life! He controls when you die, He gives you life that extends after you die and He will raise your body from the dead one day! The question still is, "Do you believe, I mean <u>really</u> believe, this?"

The Passover Plot: The Plan To Kill Jesus
The Plot Climaxes At The Triumphal Entry - Luke 19:28-48

As we are following the calendar of Jesus' earthly life, it is now April of the year 29 AD and the Passover is at hand once more. Jesus had been hidden away in the wilderness of Judea in the little village of Ephraim for several weeks, but now it was time for Him to go up to Jerusalem, so He made a last brief ministry tour, then joined the crowds of pilgrims passing through Jericho and arrived in the village of Bethany on the Mount of Olives on Saturday. The next day, which we call Palm Sunday, He did the most outrageous thing of His entire ministry. Time after time, Jesus told people not to tell who He was; He attempted to not gather crowds and slipped away from them to keep them from exalting Him in a rash manner. But on this day, He deliberately did something entirely the opposite, in the grandest manner possible. It was an event that God orchestrated to impact the history of Israel as a nation forever. On this day:

I. Jesus Openly Presented Himself To Israel As Her King He rode into Jerusalem in the midst of hundreds of followers loudly proclaiming Him as the Messiah and King of Israel. It was her opportunity as a nation to officially receive or reject Him. The first thing He did that morning was this:

1. He procured a donkey colt to ride into the city (28-35) He sent two of His disciples into the tiny village of Bethphage to borrow a young donkey for Him to ride on. Yet even in this simple act you'll notice that:

a. He displayed His Divine foreknowledge He told them THAT they would find a colt tied, WHERE they would find it tied, WHAT to say when they were confronted about untying it, and, Matthew adds, that the owners would send it immediately when they said it! In His Divine mind, Jesus already sees the colt standing and the owners nearby and knows exactly what will happen. In fact, He has orchestrated it to be so! And, verse 32, says, they went and it turned out exactly as Jesus told them it would! Nobody but God can do that! Nobody but God can know and control the future in such a specific way. Aren't you glad that Jesus knows and has even orchestrated the things that lie ahead for you in your life? They are not random events that happen. Jesus already knows they're coming and has a plan to use them and has a way that He desires you to respond in them! But in this same simple act of procuring the colt:

b. He also displayed His Divine power Notice that verse **(30)** says that this colt was unbroken; it had never been ridden before. Yet Jesus sat on it and rode it into Jerusalem in the midst of a crowd of hundreds of shouting people who were throwing things in front of its feet and it gave Him NO trouble! I have no experience with donkeys beyond watching them climb the 800 stone steps of Petra in Jordan with tourists clinging to their backs at a fast clip and descending at a run, but when I was a child, we had ponies. And I can assure you that a pony colt does not just passively let someone sit on its back the very first time. I've seen a colt sit down on its haunches and successfully resist the efforts of three strong men to load it onto a truck. Nobody but God could make a young animal behave as this one did for Jesus. It's another evidence that He was in complete control. But why a donkey, and a colt at that? Wouldn't a grand white horse, or a carriage drawn by a team of them, have been more fitting for a king? The reason for the donkey colt is that:

2. He presented Himself as fulfilling prophecy Matthew comments, *This took place to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet, saying, "Say to the daughter of Zion, 'Behold, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.'"* **- Mt. 21:4-5**. Every Jew knew this passage and the verse that comes after it. Look with me at **Zech. 9:9-10**. And Matthew combined verse 9 with the first part of **Is. 62:11** which says, *Behold, the LORD has proclaimed to the end of the earth: Say to the daughter of Zion, "Behold, your salvation comes; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him."* And again, every good Jew would remember that. By specifically choosing to ride into the city on a donkey colt, Jesus was sending a clear message to Israel; He was declaring, "I am the King of Israel, I am the Promised Messiah who will rule the world, I am your salvation!" Nobody would miss it and the crowd didn't. They clearly recognized what He was doing! But don't miss the message in these verses:

a. He is the salvation of Israel (and the world) We look for salvation in all kinds of things, eliminating poverty, conquering dread diseases, negotiating peace between nations. But none of those things, beneficial as they may be, will save the world or bring about world peace. Two thousand years have proved that! Both personal salvation and the salvation of the world itself are found only in Jesus. But notice also that the end of verse 9 says that at His first coming, the donkey was meant to symbolize the fact that:

b. He would be a meek and humble King The Jews had come to expect a mighty warrior Messiah, one who would drive off the Romans and restore their independence and cause them to dominate the world. Jesus didn't fit their mold! He came meek and lowly, as a Teacher, not a general of armies. And yet, through Him peace would come, not only to Israel, but also to the whole earth, if they would but receive Him! When He comes again, He WILL come at the head of heaven's armies and will enforce peace throughout the whole earth for a whole millennium. But at this moment, He comes humbly, without force, giving opportunity for human beings to choose Him. And that's my first point of application:

***3. We must acknowledge Jesus as our King*!** He is not just some great teacher who said wonderful things. He is not just a wonderfully compassionate prophet who healed and helped countless people. He is KING! King of Israel, King of the world, King of the universe! He is King of Kings and Lord of Lords! And even though He comes to us graciously and humbly today and gives us the choice of whether to believe Him and submit to His rule, make no mistake, He IS Lord of all and one day everyone and everything will bow to Him, angels and demons and all of the creatures of earth and even those in heaven and hell itself will one day bow at the Name of Jesus and every tongue will confess that He is Lord! You don't want to wait for that day; you want to willingly receive Him as your King NOW! Well, in the next section of our text, we see how:

II. Jesus' Followers Rejoiced Radically As He Rode Into The City (36-38) A stream of people followed Jesus out from Bethany and crowd of Passover pilgrims had come out from the city to meet Him when they heard He was coming. Their ranks soon swelled to hundreds of people following behind and going in front, shouting and rejoicing loudly. Some took off their cloaks and threw them down on the road for Him to ride over. Others gathered palm branches, strewing them before Him on the path. And look closely at the whole mixture of what the crowds were shouting:

1. they acknowledged Jesus as King The other Gospels mention that their chief exclamation was, *Hosanna!*, which is Hebrew for *Save us!*, but they were actually using it as an exclamation of praise, like *Hail to our Savior! Hosanna in the highest! Hail our Great Savior, our Highest Savior!* Both Hosanna and the rest of what they were shouting comes from **Ps. 118:25-26**, *Save us, we pray, O LORD! O LORD, we pray, give us success! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD! We bless you from the house of the LORD*. These words were often used at Passover and other feasts to greet crowds of pilgrims as they arrived in the city of Jerusalem. But this crowd added to those words. They said, *Blessed is the KING who comes...* They got the message! They were declaring Jesus King! And, Matthew and Mark add that they were shouting, *Hosanna to the Son of David!* That is, they were declaring Jesus as the Messiah of Israel who was to come, the One for whom the nation had been waiting. Further, their words, *peace in heaven and glory in the highest* seem to echo the words of the angels to the shepherds at Jesus' birth! They are saying that this is GOD's King, GOD's Messiah and shouting before Him with all their hearts. He is their long-awaited hope and now He's here. They are celebrating with everything they've got. Think of the crowd cheering at a football game when the home team scores! They're dancing and shouting with abandon. But, not everyone was caught up in the emotion:

2. the Pharisees tried to get Jesus to stop this public demonstration (39) They were there in the crowds and they got it too! They understood what this was all about and they were appalled. They thought it was blasphemous and they appealed to Jesus to rebuke and censure His followers for what they were saying. But Jesus refused **(40)**. In other words:

3. He declared that it must happen and could not be stopped If the crowds were not to cooperate, the very universe itself would take over the cheering, because God had decreed that He must be recognized as King and that He must on this day be presented to Israel as their King! Nothing on earth could stop it, let alone a few grumbling Pharisees! And so, the crowds kept on cheering Him as He rode and maybe we should make application of that to ourselves:

4. We should rejoice radically that our King is coming! But somehow I think we've forgotten how! Keith Green was a well-known Christian recording artist who died in a plane crash in 1982. We still sing his songs like, "O Lord, You're Beautiful" and "There Is A Redeemer". He didn't pull any punches; he wrote, *If your heart takes more pleasure in reading novels, or watching TV, or going to movies, or talking to friends, rather than just sitting alone with God and embracing Him, sharing His cares and His burdens, weeping and rejoicing with Him, then how are you going to handle forever and ever in His presence with no TV, movies, or singles' retreats? You'd be bored out of your mind in heaven if you're not ecstatic about God now! It would be crazy for you to think God would invite you to heaven, where the most exciting thing to do all day is gaze upon His glorious face, if you're not in heaven right here on earth when you're alone with Him! Do you think that after you die, suddenly you'll be in heaven and "poof!" all at once you're not going to like worldly things anymore? All of a sudden, you'll love more than anything else just to hang out with God, when you couldn't stand being alone with him even 20 minutes a day?" [From "Will You Be Bored in Heaven?", Last Days newsletter, June 1980 by Keith Green]*. Listen, we have a Great Savior and a Great King and our KING is coming! I don't know when He'll ride into earth's atmosphere and set up His Kingdom, but I know that today it's closer than it's ever been before! Should we not be ecstatic? Should we not rejoice, especially when we gather to worship Him? Now here's a third thing. While all the people were rejoicing with all their hearts, at the point where the city came into full view:

III. Jesus Paused To Weep Over Jerusalem (41-44) Upon reaching that spot Edersheim says, *...in an instant the whole City bursts into view. As now the dome of the Mosque El-Aksa rises like a ghost from the earth before the traveler who stands on the ledge, so then must have risen the Temple-tower; as now the vast enclosure of the Mussulman sanctuary, so then must have spread the Temple courts; as now the grey town on its broken hills, so then the magnificent City, with its background - long since vanished away - of gardens and suburbs on the western plateau behind.... thus giving full effect to the great peculiarity of Jerusalem, seen only on its eastern side - its situation as of a City rising out of a deep abyss*. And as He saw it, Jesus broke into weeping, not quiet tears as at the grave of Lazarus, but, in the Greek, loud wailing and sobbing. But why?

1. He deeply longed for His own people to recognize who He was, and even though huge crowds were hailing Him as King, He knew their enthusiasm was not based on true belief, but merely upon the miracles they had seen Him do and that, on Friday, another crowd would just as loudly shout, "Crucify Him!" Yet He so much wanted them to see Him for who He was. He was coming to His own people and He so desperately wanted them to receive Him, but *His own received Him not*. He wept because:

2. He realized they were too blind to see it, too blinded by the idolatry of their own traditions, too blinded by the pride, the self-righteousness and the greed of their own leaders, too blinded by the fear of Rome, too blinded by all of Satan's schemes, to recognize that God Himself showed up to fulfill His promises and offer them His Kingdom, if they would have it! He also wept because:

3. He knew the destruction that would come because of that blindness When she finally revolted against Rome 40 years later to achieve her dream, a Roman general named Titus would bring the vast might of his Roman legions against Jerusalem. As Edersheim puts it, in His mind Jesus saw Jerusalem *...in vision dimly rising on the sky, with the camp of the enemy around about it on every side, hugging it closer and closer in deadly embrace, and the very 'stockade' which the Roman Legions raised around it; then, another scene in the shifting panorama, and the city laid with the ground, and the gory bodies of her children among her ruins; and yet another scene: the silence and desolateness of death by the Hand of God - not one stone left upon another!* Literally, hundreds of thousands were killed and tens of thousands of survivors were sold into slavery. The Temple of God was completely destroyed. Jesus wept because He knew the awful suffering His people would bring upon themselves in their stubborn blindness. And, following His example:

4. We should weep over those who are too blind to acknowledge Him! Right before our eyes is a huge crowd of people blindly going about their daily activities, eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, earning money and buying houses and raising children, too blinded by their own circumstances and the darkness of their own hearts to care that Jesus loves them, that Jesus died for them, that Jesus wants to come into their very lives. And from God's word, in our minds we can see that a far worse eternal destruction awaits them, a burning lake of fire and sulfur where they will exist in torment forever. Do we react like Jesus? Do we weep over their blindness and their fate and pray fervently for their salvation or are we content to watch them go their merry way while we pursue ours? Ponder that.

Well, Mark tells us that when Jesus arrived and entered the Temple that day, He looked around upon all things and went back out to Bethany. It was actually on the next day, Monday, that:

IV. Jesus Cleansed The Temple A Second Time (45-46) He had done this once before, at the very beginning of His ministry and now He did it once again, at the very end. The first time, He chided the sellers for making His Father's house into a marketplace. This time He says that:

1. God's Temple where worshipers were to pray had been made a place where dishonest, greedy people extorted money from them with impunity; a place of prayer truly had become a den of thieves and it was sanctioned by the religious authorities! But there's more to it. The place in which all this was occurring was the huge Court of the Gentiles which surrounded the inner Temple area proper that only Jews could enter. Therefore:

2. by doing this in the Court of the Gentiles, Israel was preventing the nations from coming to the true God The fullness of what Jesus said is recorded in **Mk. 11:17**, *And he was teaching them and saying to them, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer <u>for all the nations</u>'? But you have made it a den of robbers."* Look with me at the passage He is quoting from, **Is. 56:6-7**. The Temple was not just to be for Israel. Israel was to be a testimony to the whole world that their God was the True and Living God and the peoples of the world were supposed to stream to it and offer sacrifice and worship the God of Israel! That was God's dream, His vision, His intent for His house! It was even built with a huge area for Gentiles to come and worship, but none did! None had for centuries, not since the time of Solomon, probably. But even if they had come, there was no place of prayer for them, only a dirty, noisy, marketplace, full of greedy people taking advantage of poor worshippers. No wonder Jesus drove them out and no wonder the Jews were angry. They didn't want the nations to come; they wanted to keep them out. But:

3. the Jewish leaders could not destroy Him for fear of the people (47-48) They were boiling mad, both because of Palm Sunday and now the Temple! This whole passion week long they tried desperately to arrest and kill Him, but

He was always surrounded by a huge crowd of followers and they couldn't pull it off without creating a major riot, not until Judas came to them. But let's not miss my last point:

4. We must be careful to advance God's mission to the nations, not hinder it! God is on a mission to reach, not only the people around us, but every people group on the earth. And it is easy for us, like the Jews, to develop tunnel vision and think only about OUR relationship to God and what God will do for US. It's easy for us to get caught up in, not only a self-oriented religious lifestyle, but the materialistic lifestyle impressed on us by our culture, to get caught up in our "business" and let that keep us from pursuing God's mission. That's why, 2,000 years after Jesus told us to make disciples of all the peoples, there are still 3 billion individuals living in unreached people groups who have no opportunity to hear of Jesus! Largely because we loudly applaud God's program for US and what we expect He will do for US, as those Passover pilgrims did on Palm Sunday, instead of being filled with the passion to see Him worshipped by the multitude around us and the peoples at the ends of the earth and devoting our lives to HIS cause.

Let me close with this quote from Corrie Ten Boom, which is so appropriate to our text, *When Jesus rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday on the back of a donkey, and everyone was waving palm branches and throwing garments onto the road, and singing praises, do you think that for one moment it ever entered the head of that donkey that any of that was for him? If I can be the donkey on which Jesus Christ rides in his glory, I give him all the praise and all the honor."* And similarly, Kim Hall comments, *Don't forget to be the donkey! Be the donkey who carries Jesus – hope of the world – to angry and fearful people. Be the donkey who carries Jesus – healer of the world – to hurting and broken people. Be the donkey who carries Jesus – bread and wine of heaven – to desolate and empty people. Be the donkey who carries Jesus – the host of heaven – to welcome into his kingdom all the people. [originally at https://givenbreath.com/2016/03/07/be-the-donkey/]*

The Passover Plot: The Plan To Kill Jesus

The Plot Materializes During Passion Week - Matthew 21-26

Jesus entered the city of Jerusalem amid cheering crowds on Palm Sunday and went back out to Bethany for the night. On Monday He returned to the city and cleansed the Temple. And right there in the Temple. a crowd gathered and He healed many blind people and lame people. So, the children were shouting Hosanna to Him and the Jewish leaders again tried to get Him to stop them, but He refused and went back to Bethany for the night. However, as soon as He arrived back in the city on Tuesday morning, they were right after Him again and this whole day long we can see clearly that:

I. Jesus Deliberately Engaged In Conflict With The Jewish Leaders As kind and compassionate as He was to the poor and needy, and even mingled openly and ate with tax collectors and those considered "sinners" by society, His interactions with the Jewish leaders were direct, harsh and even scathing. Now, if I would encounter people who I know don't like me or people who hate anything having to do with the Gospel, my first impulse would be to avoid them or get away from them as quickly as possible. If that wasn't possible, I would at least try to answer softly to calm them and try to avoid conflict. Jesus did the exact opposite. This whole day, it seems like He deliberately engaged those who hated Him and stirred them up to what must have been a fever pitch. When we study Matthew 21-23, we tend to take these chapters apart and study them section by section, parable by parable, and focus on the details of what each story or each interchange teaches us. As helpful as that may be, in doing that, we tend to miss the overall point of what Jesus was really doing, which was, it seems to me, stirring the Jewish leaders up by telling them the truth, to the point where they almost had no choice BUT to act against Him, and soon. He knows that Friday is the day of His crucifixion and it is almost as if He is doing His utmost to ensure that they would fulfill their part in it. I'd like to do a quick fly-over of this section with you so that it becomes clear what Jesus is really doing. In the morning, when He first entered the Temple, the chief priests and elders confronted Him in **21:23-27**, demanding that He prove His authority to do all that He had done over the last two days and:

1. He refused to tell them His source of authority He replied, "You tell Me; where did John the Baptist get his authority?" But they refused, verse **(27)**. He called their bluff. They knew John's authority was from God and they could see by the miracles Jesus did that His own was from God. Instead of defending Himself, He deliberately defied them and then, to put the icing on the cake, He told them a story in **21:28-32** about two boys. When their father told them to go work in his vineyard, the one said, "No", but changed his mind and went. The other said, "Yes", but never went. He was saying, "That's what you are like; you say you will obey God, but you never actually do His work!" And look at His punchline in verse **(31b-32)**.

2. He told them God accepted publicans and harlots over them Can you imagine saying that to these pious, religious men, the very priests of Israel, who read the Torah and offered sacrifices daily? "You are worse than those you consider the very worst! They listened to God; you don't!" Can you see how they would take that as the ultimate insult? By the way, religious people tend to react like that. When you tell them, *All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags - Is. 64:6*, they get upset. *Filthy rags* is literally, *menstrual cloths* in Hebrew. All our self-driven religious acts by which we try to earn merit and approval from God, all our repetitious praying and giving money and going to church, even our being baptized or taking communion, if we regard it as earning favor

with Him, it's all worse than giving God a soiled diaper, because His Son is the only One who is righteous! We're not! Not one of us! And only He can make us righteous, by giving us HIS righteousness. So, for us to believe that our own actions can make us righteous before Him is the most serious affront there is! Yet no human being likes to hear that, especially a religious one! And when we tell them that all their religious deeds can't save them, that in reality they're worse than the people who openly admit they're sinful, they get angry, just as these leaders did. Then Jesus told them another story in **21:33-46**, the parable of the Tenants in the Vineyard, who wouldn't give the owner his share of their crop when it ripened. They killed the servants he sent, one after the other, and finally, they killed his son. Look at his punchline in that one in verses **(40-41, 43)**:

3. He told them God would take His Kingdom away from them Israel was the chosen people of God and every Jew, especially these leaders, took great pride in that. They were the only people in the world whom the True God had claimed as His own. But Jesus said, "God is going to take that privilege away from you; you don't deserve it! And He's going to give it to someone else, that is, to the Gentiles!" Well, look at their reaction **(45-46)**. They got it! They realized He wasn't just telling nice meaningful stories, but, as the NLT puts it, *...they realized he was telling the story against them—they were the wicked farmers*. The wicked wretches He had portrayed as deserving to be destroyed because they had tried to take His Kingdom for their own were THEM! And He was telling them all this in front of all the people, humiliating them publicly! Oh, by this point they must have been seething, but Jesus kept on. He told them the parable of the Wedding Feast in **22:1-14**, about how a King gave a wedding feast for His Son, yet the invited guests wouldn't come, but instead mistreated and killed his messengers. The punchline to that story is in verse **(7)**:

4. He told them God would destroy them and burn their city, which is exactly what happened in 70 AD, as I shared last week. Then the King would invite the whole world to come to the banquet instead. The Holy City, Jerusalem, burned! Themselves, murderers! Oh, how this must have galled the Pharisees! And they finally decided they had better get away from Him. So we have **22:15**. Their real desire is perhaps best expressed in the NLT, they plotted ...*how to trap Jesus into saying something for which he could be arrested*. So they sent others to ask individual questions to try to snare Him, but:

5. He silenced all their attempts to trap or humiliate Him First:

a. He silenced the Herodians' challenge about taxes in **22:16-22**. "Shall we pay taxes to Caesar or not?" You remember it, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's!" Then:

b. He silenced the Sadducees' challenge about resurrection in **22:23-33**. "What if a widow marries 7 times? If there is a resurrection of the dead, who would she be married to?" So, Jesus proved to them from the Scriptures that the dead are alive right now! And they didn't like that one bit, verse **(34)**. Then a lawyer asked, "What is the greatest commandment?" You know His answer, "Love God with all your heart and love your neighbor as yourself!". Then He turned the tables and asked them a question in **22:41-46**. "If David calls the Christ, 'My Lord', how is he his son?" To that they had no answer, and so:

c. He silenced the Pharisees in their beliefs **concerning the Messiah**. And that put an end to it all, verse **(46)**. The Jewish leaders were utterly defeated and humiliated before Him, but He still didn't stop. In **chapter 23**:

6. He vehemently castigated them as hypocrites before the people He tells the people what fakes they are and then pronounces eight "Woes" upon them. *Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! Blind guides! Blind fools! Murderers of the prophets! Brood of vipers!* And He challenges them **(31-32)**. He all but said, "Go ahead, show who you really are and kill ME!" and when He finished, He turned abruptly and left the Temple, with everyone standing in stunned silence. No one had ever said such things! That evening He explained to His disciples His second coming in chapters 24-25 and then told them plainly in 26:1-2 that in two days it would be Passover and He would be crucified. But while He was doing all this:

7. the Jewish leaders met to plot how to stealthily arrest and kill Him - 26:3-5 They had decreed it before, but now they were determined, "We MUST kill Him as soon as possible. We must find a way to arrest Jesus secretly, privately, and get him put to death, but we can't do it until after Passover, until all of these confounded pilgrims who love Him so much go home!" Little did they know that that very night they would catch the break they had been waiting and hoping for, because that same evening or the next morning:

II. Judas Decided To Betray Him To The Jewish Leaders Matthew tells us the story of Judas' betrayal in **chapter 26**. He begins by sharing a flashback to explain how:

1. Judas had been alienated in Bethany (6-13) Look with me at **John 12:1-3**. This actually happened the previous Saturday when Jesus arrived there, before Palm Sunday. A man named Simon, a leper whom Jesus had obviously healed, held a dinner for Him and His disciples and Mary and Martha were in on it, helping serve. And Mary, realizing what lay ahead for Jesus, took an alabaster flask full of precious ointment of pure nard that she had been saving, broke it open and anointed His head and then, kneeling down, poured it out on His feet and wiped them, not with a

cloth, but with her own long hair, a tremendous act of love and devotion. The whole house was filled with the fragrant aroma of the perfume, but all the disciples could see was dollar signs. This precious ointment was worth a whole year's wages, tens of thousands of dollars in today's money. What a waste! To them it seemed like thousands of dollars had just been thrown away, money that could have been put to so much better a use! And they said so out loud! But:

a. Jesus chided his disciples for objecting to Mary's behavior "Leave her alone; she's anointing Me for My burial! She's the only one who really gets it. I'm going to die and she's been saving this to embalm my body; now she's done it beforehand and I want the whole world to remember it." But John tells us what Matthew doesn't:

b. Judas was the spokesman and the one rebuked - John 12:4-6 Here John reveals to us the truth about Judas. He was the group's treasurer. He held whatever money they had and he was a thief! He used to embezzle it for his own use secretly, so when he saw a year's wages dripping onto the floor, his greed came out of his own mouth! But how this could be? How could one chosen by Jesus, who heard all that Jesus taught, who saw the miracles that He did, who had himself cast out demons and healed people in Jesus' name, in the end be in it for the money? I don't know, but he saw where all this was going; Jesus was going to die and his source would dry up. Plus, now Jesus had rebuked him in front of the whole house and that, I think, became the straw that broke the camel's back, the incident that pushed him over the edge. I think in that moment he decided in his heart to quit following Jesus altogether.

I wonder what it would take to alienate you from Jesus. What if He told you that you were doing something wrong and you need to stop it? What if He told you to quit sleeping with your girlfriend or boyfriend or to stop cheating on your taxes or to stop being a gossip and criticizing other people? Would that be enough to turn you away? What if He allowed a sickness to come into your life or that of a loved one and didn't answer your prayers to heal it? What if He allowed a tragedy to happen or great suffering to come to you somehow? How about serious persecution? Would that be enough to make you say, "I quit following Him!" It is for many. Judas was done with Jesus, so, turning back to Matthew 26:

2. Judas now (3 or 4 days later) **went to the leaders and agreed to betray Jesus (14-16)** Notice how obvious his greed was:

a. he bargained with them to see how much he could get "I know you want Jesus. I'll help you find a time when you can arrest Him alone and in private, but how much will you give me? Name your price so I can see if it's worth it!" He bargained for the life of the Son of God! When we read that they gave him 30 pieces of silver, we tend to think of it as a pittance, as though it was maybe 30 silver dollars. In reality, determining the value of ancient money is always difficult, but the best guess I have is that this was probably the equivalent of a month's wages, so it was not inconsequential, perhaps the equivalent of $3,000 or $4,000 today. It was enough to later buy a field, and certainly enough to entice Judas, but that misses the point:,

b. thirty pieces of silver was the price of a slave According to **Ex. 21:32** 30 shekels of silver was the fine if your ox killed someone else's slave. In Lev. 27, if you were dedicating someone to the Lord, a male in the prime of life was worth 50 shekels, so this offer by them was actually an insult! Jesus was only worth the price of a slave, not of a real man! Speaking sarcastically to the prophet Zechariah, *...the LORD said to me, "Throw it to the potter"—this magnificent sum at which they valued me! So I took the thirty coins and threw them to the potter in the Temple of the LORD. - Zech. 11:13* - exactly what Judas later did.

Listen, what would it take to get you to betray Jesus and turn against Him? Would the opportunity to get a large sum of money do it? Would the opportunity for a huge promotion at work that requires you to go against your convictions do it? Would the opportunity of betraying your spouse to be with a beautiful woman or a handsome man be enough? Sadly, for many it would! But whatever the price or opportunity offered you, it would be a supreme insult to the infinite sacrifice that God made in sending Jesus to the cross for your sins. Hebrews calls it, *crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting Him to public disgrace (11:6*) and *trampling underfoot the Son of God (10:29)*. Judas is not the only follower of Jesus who has sold Him for some "magnificent sum", thinking that they were choosing life for themselves, when indeed it meant death. Well, Judas may have been done with Jesus, but Jesus was not done with him! On Thursday night:

3. Jesus identified Judas as His betrayer at the Last Supper in verses **(17-25)** After He had washed the disciples' feet, almost the next thing He did was this:

a. He gave a strong generic warning as a last chance (20-25). He began by saying, *one of you*, and He added a warning of eternal consequences. Of course, they all began to wonder which of them it was, but in the end, He said to Judas, "You're it!":

b. He specifically told Judas that He knew what he would do Why? I think He was genuinely warning Judas and appealing to him to reconsider and repent before it was too late. He genuinely loved Judas, just like all the others. Listen, Jesus' appeal to sinners is always, "Don't do it! Please don't do it! Don't turn from Me! Repent! Turn back to Me! I'll receive you!" But the appeal of love was not enough and immediately:

4. Judas left to carry out his betrayal We read the rest of the story in **John 13:26-30**. When Jesus handed Judas that piece of bread:

a. Satan directly entered him to empower him for this heinous act He wanted a personal hand in betraying the Son of God and Judas, by his own will, delivered himself into Satan's control. Of course:

b. the other disciples did not understand what was going on, but Jesus did. It's like Jesus was telling him to hurry and do what he knew needed to be done, so that he would be on schedule for the arrest in Gethsemane. Judas knew where Jesus planned to go next and he now knew that Jesus knew his secret. Tonight was the time to act. So:

c. he left immediately and went to the chief priests, was given a group of soldiers **and brought the soldiers to Gethsemane (Mt. 26:47)**. And so, Satan's hour of seeming triumph, the hour of the power of darkness, began.

Now as we close, let me ask you a question. Do you see Who's driving the bus, Who's in charge the whole time? In Acts 4:27-28, Peter and John prayed, *Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen*. The whole time the leaders were plotting and Judas was betraying, Jesus was driving the bus! He was making it all happen according to plan! He was coordinating all of these events to culminate in His own death. They didn't take His life; He deliberately laid it down, step by step! *Canadian author William D. Matheson, in My Grandfather's War, tells of a veteran who walked through the streets of his hometown with an empty sleeve. When a passerby commented on the loss of his arm, the veteran replied, "I didn't lose it. I gave it."* It is so apparent that Jesus didn't lose His life; He gave it. But why? He HAD to go to that cross. He HAD to, because of His immense love for the whole world, out of love for YOU!

The Passover Plot: The Plan To Kill Jesus

The Plot Apparently Succeeds In Crucifixion - John 18-19

These last weeks, we've been looking at Jesus' life and ministry from a different perspective. We have been examining the conflict He endured as His enemies sought to kill Him from the very beginning. The Jewish leaders dogged His every move and plotted against Him repeatedly, even in Galilee and especially during His regular visits to Jerusalem. They became absolutely infuriated at Him when He raised Lazarus from the dead and were beside themselves when He entered Jerusalem in a triumphant procession with crowds declaring Him King. Throughout Passion week, they sought to seize Him as He castigated them openly in public, but Judas, at last, gave them the break they needed when he offered to deliver Jesus over to them secretly for 30 pieces of silver and then came to them in the dark of Thursday night to carry out his bargain. So now, in John 18-19 we have recorded for us the end of Jesus' earthly life, the apparent triumph of His enemies as they arrest Him, try Him, crucify Him and bury Him. On the surface, it would seem as though they won, as though they succeeded in their evil designs. That night, after the Last Supper with His disciples in the Upper Room:

I. Jesus Was Arrested In The Garden By His Enemies in **(18:1-11)** A mob of soldiers came with swords and clubs and torches to arrest Him late at night as He was praying there in Gethsemane. And you know how they found Him:

1. He was delivered to His enemies by Judas (1-3) His own disciple guided them to the garden where he knew Jesus would go and identified Him with a kiss of betrayal. But woven through this whole story is the real truth, that He Himself knew and planned everything that was happening. You can see right here that it was not the soldiers who took Him, but rather:

2. He delivered Himself to the soldiers John is the only one who records the fact that at their arrival:

a. He demonstrated His Deity (4-6) I want you to notice something very important here in verse 6. The word *he* is not found in the Greek. English translations insert the word *he*, as it could be "understood" in the original, but He only actually said, *I am*! *I am* is the literal Greek equivalent of God's proper name in Hebrew, Jehovah, the Eternal I Am! When Jesus had told the Jews in 8:58, *Before Abraham was, I AM!,* they picked up stones to stone Him, because they knew that Jesus was asserting His Deity, that He was claiming to be God. And now here, when He did the same thing in the garden, the entire crowd stepped back and fell to the ground on their faces at the force of His Divine Name. Do you think that was voluntary? Is it likely that a cohort of soldiers with swords and clubs would fall back and drop to their knees when one man who is their enemy, Jesus, identified Himself? Not likely! Then why did they do it? I'll tell you why! Because one day at the Name of Jesus every knee shall bow whether they want to or not! Jesus used the very power of His Name to make sure that both they and we who read it would understand Who was in charge! As He told Peter just a moment later, *Don't you realize that I could ask my Father for thousands of angels to protect us, and he would send them instantly? But if I did, how would the Scriptures be fulfilled that describe what must happen now?" - Mt. 26:53-54.* No army could have arrested Jesus if He didn't want to be taken! He deliberately gave Himself to the soldiers to fulfill the plan that He and the Father had laid out! Then look how:

b. He protected His disciples (7-9) Wouldn't you think the soldiers would probably have arrested His key followers along with Him right there on the spot? They could have nabbed the whole bunch and squashed the growth of Jesus' movement on the spot. But Jesus virtually commanded them to let His disciples go, and they actually did! Even after one of them pulled a sword, as we'll see in a moment! They made no attempt to arrest the Eleven. Why? Because, John says, Jesus was fulfilling the words He had just prayed in 17:12. He told the Father, "I have kept them and not one is lost!" Even in the garden, He was exercising His protective power over them. Again, He was in charge. Hey, did you know that Jesus is well able protect YOU? Even in the most extreme circumstances, if He sends you there! But no matter what He may allow to happen to you, even if He DOES let you be arrested, He will never LOSE you! He will never lose ONE of those who belong to Him! He keeps us! And notice that:

c. He refused resistance (10-11) Peter suddenly turns brave and swings his sword to protect his Master, only to miss and chop off the nearest guy's ear. Wouldn't you think that in an instant, 20 soldiers would have been on him and cut him to ribbons? But before the soldiers could react, Jesus intervened and stopped him, and Luke adds that Jesus touched the man's ear and healed him. He did a miracle before the eyes of the soldiers who arrested Him! But again, notice the words of verse 11. This whole experience is the cup that the Father has given Him; this is the very plan of God and it is happening according to His will. It is not simply the plan of His enemies being carried out. Well, as the night progresses toward Friday morning:

II. Jesus Was Tried And Condemned Unjustly By His Enemies in **(18:12-19:15)** He was actually tried multiple times. First:

1. He was delivered by the soldiers to Annas (18:12-13) Annas was probably the most powerful man in Judea, which is why the soldiers took Jesus to him first. He had been High Priest from 7 to 15 AD and thereafter ruled through his family as his sons and son-in-law succeeded Him in that office, one after the other. His family were the wealthy operators of the booths where items for sacrifice were sold, both on the Mt. of Olives and in the Temple itself. In cleansing the Temple, Jesus had struck at the very heart of his fortune! He sought to question Jesus privately, hoping to gather evidence against Him **(19-23)**. Jesus refused to answer Annas' questions and was even struck in the face for it, but when Annas saw that he was getting nowhere, in the pre-dawn darkness, Jesus:

2. He was delivered to Caiaphas by Annas (18:24) But not to Caiaphas alone. Please turn with me to Mark, who tells us that:

a. He was tried before the whole Sanhedrin - Mark 14:53 Caiaphas himself had been busy since Judas left with the soldiers. He had awakened and gathered most of the council of 70, the ruling council of the Jews, to condemn Him. He had quickly gathered false witnesses whom he, no doubt, paid to accuse Jesus, but Jesus:

b. He refused to answer the false testimony against Him - Mark 14:55-61a Jesus would not dignify the ridiculous charges they were making by trying to defend Himself. Anyone could see that there was no validity to them. So finally, in frustration, Caiaphas demanded that He declare once and for all who He was. And in response to that:

c. He declared Himself to be both the Christ and the Son of God - Mark 14:61b-64 That was enough. It was what they were waiting for. In their eyes, He had committed the ultimate blasphemy, a man claiming to be God! Such a man must die! So said they all, but while the Sanhedrin could try and punish small matters, they had no authority to execute anyone. Therefore, Jesus:

3. He was delivered to Pilate by Caiaphas (18:28-32) By the way, here in verse 28 the term *Passover* means the *chagigah*, the festive sacrifice made on the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, not the Passover lamb which they ate the night before. At any rate, well before 6 AM, the Jews had Pilate up and were demanding Jesus' death. Now note **verse 32**. The Jews put people to death by stoning; the Romans executed people by crucifixion. But Matthew tells us that *...as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside and said to them, "We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will turn him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life!" - 20:17-19.* Jesus said He would be crucified, not stoned, and John says that in demanding that Pilate execute Him, these men were simply doing what Jesus had planned all along for them to do! Betrayed, condemned, turned over to the Romans, it was all His plan! At every step, He was in control! But Pilate already knew that it was out of envy that the Jewish leaders wanted Jesus dead and he didn't want to placate them, so he thought of a way to circumvent them. That's why Jesus:

4. He was delivered to the crowd by Pilate After speaking to Him privately:

a. Pilate tried to release Him, but was shouted down (18:38-40) His strategy was ingenious. It was evidently a custom for the Roman governor to grant clemency to and release one Jewish prisoner on this special festive day each year. And at that time, he happened to have an infamous, notorious prisoner named Barabbas, a man who had murdered people during a time of insurrection, a first century terrorist. Knowing how popular Jesus was with the people, he thought that surely, given such an awful alternative, they would choose Jesus. But they didn't! They

screamed for Barabbas! Can you believe it? Of course, the Jewish leaders urged them to do it. Then Luke tells us that Herod, the ruler of Galilee, was in town, so Pilate sent Jesus to him. However, when Jesus wouldn't answer Herod either, he sent Him back to Pilate. Yet Pilate still did not give in:

b. he tried to release Him a second time after flogging Him (19:1-5) Don't skip over that little word. Pilate *flogged Him.* Flogging was a serious punishment. Jesus was chained to a post in the courtyard and flailed with a whip, a cat-o-nine-tails, until He was half dead, barely able to walk, blood covering His body. And then Pilate brought Him out and shouted, "Behold the man!" I guess Pilate thought the crowd would have to feel this was punishment enough, as Jesus stood before them in the mockery of a purple king's robe with a crown of thorns, dripping blood, a humiliated fool to be disregarded. But they would have none of it **(6-7)**. Well, when Pilate heard that, he became more desperate than ever:

c. he tried a third time to release Him and finally gave in (19:8-16a) No amount of reasoning or pleading could prevail against the roar of the multitude. So finally, Pilate washed his hands before the crowd and said, "Alright, have your way. I'm innocent. His blood is on YOUR heads!"

And so:

III. Jesus Was Crucified As His Enemies Desired in **(19:16b-37)** Stoning was too good for Him, too quick and easy. The Jewish leaders wanted Him executed the Roman way, the long, slow, excruciating way. So, the soldiers led Him out to Golgotha and nailed Him to a cross and there, for six hours, He experienced everything they had wanted to inflict on Him:

1. He suffered humiliation (18-24) He was hung between two thieves, as though He was one of them. There was a public notice of a criminal charge against Him placed over His head. The soldiers gambled at His feet to see who would get His only earthly possession, His blood-stained clothing, indifferent to His suffering. He hung there naked with only a loincloth. His enemies stood around the cross and mocked him and made fun of Him for claiming to be the Christ and taunted Him to come down. How they had repeatedly tried to humiliate and discredit Him publicly and at last, it was done, as fully and completely as possible. Their purpose was achieved. He also:

2. He suffered both human and Divine separation (25-27) His mother was nearby watching. He had to see her endure His agony and to part from her earthly love. John, the disciple whom He loved, was there too. He was leaving His closest ties behind. But that was not all! **Mark 15:34** says, *...at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"* For the first time in eternity, He was separated from God the Father as He was made to be sin for us and bore our sins in His own body on the tree. There is the real agony of the cross, the eternal wrath of God against sin poured out upon His soul. And of course:

3. He suffered physical agony (28-29) Thirst was only a part of it. There is no more agonizing way to die than by hanging on a cross. Psalm 22 describes what He felt: *My life is poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint. My heart is like wax, melting within me. My strength has dried up like sunbaked clay. My tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth. You have laid me in the dust and left me for dead... They have pierced my hands and feet. I can count all my bones. My enemies stare at me and gloat.* The pain was awful; the suffering was intense. Oh, how His enemies had wanted Him to suffer and now they were gloating as they watched it. And finally, they got their ultimate wish:

4. He suffered death itself (30) The experience that every human being dreads most of all came to Him, but it did not take His life:

a. He deliberately gave up His spirit He released it, dismissed it. He decided it was time for His Spirit to leave His body and go to the Father. Notice that the other two men beside Him were still very much alive. Crucifixion doesn't kill you fast; a victim would often hang there for days in agony before death claimed him. Jesus decided it was finished, that our redemption had been accomplished, and He dismissed His spirit from His body. And how that crowd of enemies must have cheered, at least in their hearts, that He was gone, that He would be no more. But, not taking anything for granted:

b. the soldiers made sure that He was dead (31-37) The soldiers broke the legs of the other two guys who were still alive, so they would not be able to push themselves up to breathe and would die momentarily. Jesus was already dead, but to be sure, they gave Him the coup de grace; they drove a spear into His side, piercing His lung and heart. Yet even in this, they were merely doing what God had already planned and predicted they would do through David and through Zechariah, that they would not break one of His bones and that they would pierce Him!

But why did He do it? Why did He endure the suffering of death? **Heb. 2:9** says that Jesus is now ...*crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.* He suffered death for US! This whole event, this horrible cross, He endured for us, for ME! He died in MY place. He suffered the agony of humiliation and separation and pain and death itself, all for me and for you, so that for us death would now be transformed and become a doorway to heaven to be with Him! *Only by dying could he break the power of the devil, who*

had the power of death. Only in this way could he set free all who have lived their lives as slaves to the fear of dying. - Heb. 2:14-15. Hallelujah! Of course, His enemies had no idea what He was really doing and their work was not done yet:

IV. Jesus Was Buried In A Sealed Tomb To His Enemies' Delight (19:38-42) Yes, He was buried by two friends, but the other Gospels tell us that His enemies went to Pilate and got permission to seal the tomb and post a Roman guard so no one would dare to open it. Just to be certain, mind you. And then they all went home to joyfully celebrate their feast that evening, saying, "There, that takes care of that, at last!" They thought they had won, that it was all over. But there was something they didn't know. It was only Friday; Sunday's coming! And I'm going to let the well-known preacher, Dr. S. M. Lockridge, tell you about it. Watch this... https://youtu.be/8gx6_rGLz20.

The Passover Plot: The Plan To Kill Jesus

The Plot Foiled Forever In Resurrection - John 20

On Friday, it seemed like Jesus' enemies had won. The Jewish leaders had successfully convinced Pilate, the Roman governor, to order Him crucified. He had hung on a cross outside the city in humiliation and agony for six hours before dying. His body lay in a stone tomb, sealed with a Roman seal and guarded by soldiers as they celebrated and rested on the Sabbath. But, as Aslan told Lucy and Susan in *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*, *...though the Witch [who symbolizes Satan] knew the Deep Magic, there is a magic deeper still which she did not know....if she could have looked a little further back, into the stillness and the darkness before Time dawned, she would have read there a different incantation. She would have known that when a willing victim who had committed no treachery was killed in a traitor's stead, the Table would crack and Death itself would start working backwards."* Jesus' enemies, and even Satan Himself, never understood God's ancient plan, that when His own Son willingly offered Himself on the cross as a sacrifice for the sins of the world and died, that death itself would be defeated and all those he had held captive would be set free. Jesus' own disciples didn't understand it either; they were still caught up in the finality of His death and in John 20, John records for us how Jesus went about convincing them of the truth of what had happened. First, he tells us that:

I. Jesus Left The Tomb On Sunday Morning in verses **(1-10)**. Several women went to visit the tomb, even before daylight, but Mary Magdalene evidently went on ahead and got there first **(1)**. When she got there, she saw that:

1. the tomb was open The heavy stone which had sealed its entrance had been rolled away and the soldiers were already gone. How that could possibly be, she didn't know. She couldn't have known that a mighty angel had come and rolled the stone away and frightened the guards nearly to death, sending them fleeing into the city. But there it stood, open for anyone to look inside and see the obvious, *He is not here!* It was still too dark to see anything clearly, but even in the deep shadows, Mary could see that:

2. the body was missing (2) All she could think was that the body had been stolen by someone, maybe even by His enemies as a last act of cruelty. By the way, no one was ever able to produce that body! Surely, once rumors of His rising reached the ears of His enemies, they would have found or brought forth the body if they could to disprove it. But they couldn't, because He was alive and back in it! But Mary didn't know that yet, so she ran as fast as she could to find Peter and John and tell them. But they couldn't believe what they were hearing **(3-10)**. They ran as fast as they could to the tomb and went inside and what they noticed was that:

3. the linen cloths lay there in the spot where the body had once lain. When Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus put Jesus in the tomb, 19:39-40 tell us that Nicodemus had brought a huge amount, about 75 lbs., of thick, gummy spices for embalming. These were spread thickly over Jesus' body and then it was wrapped in strips of linen cloth. Don't imagine that it was wound around and around the body, like you see mummies in the cartoons. To do that, they would have had to lift the body time after time or roll it. I rather think they used shorter strips of linen, almost the way that we use paper mache, pressing them over and into the spices to form a covering for the body. The linen then soaked up and embedded itself in the spices and as the air dried, it probably began to form a rather stiff, rounded coccoon-like covering. So when they got there and looked in, they could see the linen lying there, exactly where it was. Most likely it still bore something of the shape of the body. It was not like someone had unwrapped the body piece by piece and threw the strips all over or left them in a gooey pile. It appeared as though the body had simply evaporated, as though it had passed straight through the cloth, leaving it to collapse in place. But Jesus' face had not been wrapped. Instead, it had been reverently covered with a small cloth, a handkerchief, and they noticed that the cloth was folded up by itself separately. It was not thrown aside, lying on the floor nor was it lying in place with the linen. It was intentionally folded up neatly and put away, as if to send the message, "There, I won't be needing that anymore!" Listen, can't you see Jesus calmly stand up right through the graveclothes and gracefully take the kerchief from His face and fold it up carefully to leave as a gentle reminder to us that He left the tomb alive and under His own power!

Well, next John tells us how:

II. Jesus Appeared To Mary Magdalene in verses **(11-18)** She had evidently followed Peter and John back to the tomb and stayed there after they left **(11-13)**. In her weeping, she bent over and looked inside the tomb for herself one last time, and as she did:

1. a pair of angels appeared to her, sitting right where His body had lain. They even spoke to her, asking, "Why are you crying?", meaning, "Woman, you have no reason to cry any longer!" The very words of angels were not enough to break through her sorrow; her mind was still stuck on the idea that His body was stolen. In fact, her mind was so filled with grief and her eyes with tears, that in that very moment:

2. Jesus appeared to her, but was unrecognized (14-15) Jesus was standing there the whole time watching Mary cry. In the depth of her sorrow, she wouldn't even look up at him. She didn't recognize either Him or His voice as He tried to focus her attention on Him. It took Him saying her name, "Mary!" **(16)** Oh:

3. when Jesus spoke her name, she knew Him instantly! She knew it was Him and that He was alive, so she fell at His feet and wrapped her arms around Him, crying out, "My Teacher!" in relief and joy! The Good Shepherd calls His own sheep *by name* and when He does, we know His voice and follow Him! He knows each one of us personally, just as closely as He knew Mary, but He did not leave her clinging in sweet relief to His feet very long:

4. Jesus sent her to declare a message to His disciples (17-18) He directed her to go and find all of His disciples and deliver to them a message from Him. He wanted them to know that:

a. He would soon ascend to heaven and return to the Father Look how He calmly told Mary what He was doing. It is as though He is saying, "I chose to give myself to my enemies, I chose to be crucified, I chose to die, and I chose to rise again! And now I'm choosing to return to the glory of Heaven to the Father! I am in control and I have known exactly what I'm doing all along!" But hidden in that message is something more. Notice how Jesus emphasized, *I'm ascending to My Father <u>and YOUR Father</u>, to My God <u>and YOUR God</u>*. "Because of what I just did, My Father is now YOUR Father!" In other words:

b. we now have the same relationship to the Father that He does! In His prayer on Thursday night in John 17:21, Jesus prayed for those who believe in Him, ...*that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us*... "The same way that You and I are connected to each other, united in our very being, I want them to be connected to us in the exact same way, to be joined to us at the very core of our beings, so that we enjoy that same union with them!" That's what the cross and the resurrection accomplished for us! *For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit - 1 Pet. 3:18*. What we used to be is dead and gone and now we have been made children of the Heavenly Father, indwelt by His very Spirit and joined eternally to Him at the core of our being! Jesus' Father is My Father! We've been brought into that same relationship of oneness with Him. Hallelujah!

Well, even though Mary went and declared that she had seen Jesus and gave them His message, Mark reports that they didn't believe her, so that evening:

III. Jesus Appeared To His Disciples as they had gathered in the upper room in verses **(19-23)**. Look at **(19-20)**. He appeared to them suddenly, behind their locked doors, as though His body had passed right through, and immediately:

1. He assured them He was alive He verified that it was indeed Him. He showed them the wounds in His hands and His side. I'd like you to turn with me to Luke's account of this night read the two in parallel. **Lk. 24:38-44** They touched Him; they handled Him with their own hands. He even ate a piece of fish in front of them to prove that He was really there in His real body! And He said to them, "I told you that all these things were going to happen to Me, remember?" And they were so filled with joy they could hardly believe their eyes, but they did; at last they were convinced that He was alive, so now:

2. He gave them a mission (21) "The Father sent Me on this mission. My enemies killed Me according to plan and I rose according to plan. It is in His perfect control and now, *as the Father sent Me, so I am sending you.* I have a mission for you!" In Luke, we read what that mission is - **Lk. 24:45-48**. "Your mission is to take the Good News of My death and resurrection to the whole world, to all the peoples of the earth, and you'll start from Jerusalem. You'll be My witnesses and you'll call people everywhere you go to repent of their sins and believe in Me to receive forgiveness." Friends, those first disciples turned the world upside down in their passion, but they're long dead and gone. However, their mission continues and it has been passed down to US! As the Father sent Jesus into the world to save the world through the cross, so Jesus has sent us into the whole world to save some from all the peoples through preaching the message that they can have forgiveness of sins through changing their minds and believing in the living Jesus Christ as their Lord! It's a gargantuan task, an unimaginable goal, but in His very next breath:

3. He promised to give them His Spirit (22) Now what's that about? I thought the Holy Spirit only came 50 days later at Pentecost! Well, look at the parallel in **Lk. 24:49**. Evidently, as Jesus breathed on them, this is the full text of what He said, "Don't rush out and get started; wait until I send you the Holy Spirit as the Father promised and I'll give you the power to do it." Breathing on them was a symbolic act; He was showing them how, just a few days later, the Breath of God would come; there would be the sound of a rushing mighty wind and the Spirit, the very Breath of God, would descend on them and dwell in them. Friends, we are not sent to tell the whole world in our own strength. This promise

is for everyone who believes; we ALL receive His Spirit so that we might have power to complete His mission. But then, going back to John, notice that:

4. He declared their solemn responsibility (23) That is not some statement of priestly authority that says we get to arbitrarily judge or decide who gets forgiven and who doesn't. It's a continuation of Him investing us with a mission. We're to take the message of forgiveness of sins through Jesus to all the peoples of the earth. Those we take it to, have the opportunity to believe and be forgiven; those we neglect, don't. So, in a very real sense, by choosing who we take the message to and who we don't, we decide who lives and who dies eternally! What a weight to carry! *Over a century ago Hudson Taylor, who led many to serve in the untouched interior of China in that day, finally won this one man, a community leader to Jesus. He says, "However, a few nights after the man had accepted Jesus as his Savior, he asked me a very hard question. 'How long have the people in your land known about Jesus?' 'Oh, hundreds of years,' I told him. 'What?' said the man in amazement. 'You knew the truth for hundreds of years and didn't come to tell us? My father searched for the truth all his life and died without finding it. Why didn't you come sooner?'"* That same heart-wrenching question has been asked by people in villages from Africa to the Arctic circle. It embodies what Jesus was saying, "You know the truth; it is your responsibility to go. Their fate rests on you!"

Well, that evening, one of the disciples happened not to be there with the rest and so next John tells us how:

IV. Jesus Appeared To Thomas in verses **(24-29)**. Look at **(24-25)**:

1. Thomas refused to believe Jesus was alive without personally seeing Not one of the several reports of those who'd seen Him that day could convince him. Even the testimony of the whole group that He was alive was not enough. He adamantly declared he would never believe until he could see for himself. Seeing is believing and that's that! So, Jesus appeared again, eight days later **(26-27)**. The setting was exactly the same, but this time:

2. Jesus revealed Himself to Thomas and challenged his unbelief "You want to see? Put your finger here! Touch My wounds! Here, put your hand in My side! Believe!" You know, I don't think Thomas actually did it. One look was enough for Thomas to cry out in faith in verse **(28)**. Notice that:

3. Thomas confessed Him as his own Lord and God He said, "MY Lord and MY God!" In that moment, he was radically transformed from a doubter to a man of obedient faith, one who went and carried out the mission Jesus gave him. He preached the Gospel all along the way from Jerusalem to the southeast coast of India, where he died at the point of a spear preaching the Gospel, still convinced! We've gone and stood at his tomb in Chennai. How many Thomases have their been? How many Sauls of Tarsus have been transformed into Apostle Pauls by an encounter with the living Jesus and become so convinced they were willing to pay the ultimate price? The answer is millions who have suffered at the hands of their enemies and freely given their lives, because they were convinced that Jesus is alive and He is Lord and the world MUST be told! But not everybody gets to see. Jesus' next words are very important for us **(29**). Did you hear that?

4. Jesus blessed all who believe without personally seeing - that's us! We don't need to see Jesus in order to believe, like Thomas. For us, believing is seeing! Peter wrote, *Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory!* **- 1 Pet. 1:8**. When we believe, we experience the presence of His own Spirit in our lives and are filled with joy and with a glory that is far better than the simple joy of physically seeing Him. It brings us a genuine joy and happiness in our souls that the world cannot take away from us! We are truly blessed!

Now let's back out from the story a moment and try to see the whole point of this first Easter Sunday in perspective. The experiences we've looked at say this: Even though Jesus' enemies appeared to have succeeded in their awful plotting against Him, even though they got Him crucified and laid in a tomb:

V. Jesus Triumphed Over His Enemies Forever Through His Resurrection Turn forward a couple of pages to Peter's sermon and listen to what he preached on the Day of Pentecost in **Acts 2:23-24, 36**. It was God's plan all along. He knew what He was doing. His enemies thought it was their doing, but it wasn't! The resurrection of Jesus Christ is final proof that God's authority is greater than the power of any enemies. It is even greater than the power of death itself. No matter how much power or might evil may appear to have, it ultimately bends to the authority of Jesus Christ and accomplishes His purpose. That's what the Resurrection says to us! And John finishes his chapter like this in **(30-31)**. John says:

1. this record is to convince you that Jesus is the Christ and Son of God Just as Mary and Peter and John and the disciples and Thomas became convinced that Jesus IS who He claimed to be, that He is the Messiah of Israel and the Son of God incarnate in a human body, so you and I must be convinced that He lives and He is Lord of all. Let the word of these eyewitnesses convince your heart. But John further says He wrote:

2. it is so that you may have His eternal life by believing! *And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life. I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life.* **– 1 Jn. 5:11-13**. Believe in the Name of the Son of God. Believe that He died for your sins in your place and rose again,

that you might be joined to Him and have His life! If you have Him, you have His life. Rejoice in the wonderful assurance of knowing you have Him. But if you don't have Him, you don't have life, so why not receive Him, even today. Why not fall at His feet, confess your sins and give yourself to Him as your Lord and Master?

Several decades ago, my good friend was traveling to the country of Kyrgyzstan and on the way, during a layover in Istanbul, Turkey, he had gone to a museum where he had seen two ancient relics of note. One was the [supposed] hand or arm bone of John the Baptist. The other was supposedly a vial of "dust from Mohammed's tomb". During the week that he was in Kyrgyzstan, one evening a Kyrgyz man, who was hired as a driver for his group, asked him what the difference was between his religion of Islam and Christianity. My friend thought about it for a moment and said, "When I was in Istanbul I saw a vial of dust from Mohammed's tomb." The man replied, "Yes, this is true". And then Mike said, "The difference is that there is no dust in our tomb." They talked some more and later on in the week that man approached Mike again and said, "You are right. That is the difference. There is no dust in your tomb!" You can go today to the city of Medina in Saudi Arabia, to the Green Dome and the mosque which covers Mohammed's tomb and the dust of his body is still in there, undisturbed. Millions go every year. But you can also go today to Israel to a stone tomb at the foot of a hill called Golgotha and see that the stone is still rolled away and the tomb is still empty, because our Jesus is alive! He is risen! He has ascended to OUR Father and one day, at His Name every knee shall bow! Hallelujah!

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The Road That Led To Calvary: Mark 14-16

The Upper Room: The Place Of Separation 14:1-31

As I asked the Lord to give me a series of messages to take us through the Easter season, He brought to my mind two pieces of music. One was the song from one of our Easter musicals that goes, *The Road That Led To Calvary was paved with drops of blood and every step He took was an offering of love...* The steps He took were not just those physical steps from the gate of Jerusalem up the hill to Calvary. They began long before. First, the plan to come to earth and die was set in eternity past, then the Incarnation (coming to earth to die), then His entire ministry (preparing His disciples for Him to die). He took step after step after step, every one an offering of love and all leading to Calvary, the ultimate sacrifice of Himself for us. But nowhere do those steps become clearer than in the last days of His life. We're going to use the book of Mark to trace them since it is the most concise account and traces His last steps most clearly. The other song is an old hymn which says, *Go to dark Gethsemane...learn of Jesus Christ to pray. Follow to the judgment hall...learn of Him to bear the cross. Calvary's mournful mountain climb...learn of Jesus Christ to die.* Every step He took on that Road That Led To Calvary has a lesson for us; we can go there with Him and learn it, if we will. So, we're going to walk that Calvary Road together with Him the next few weeks, step by step, and learn of Him. We begin in Mark 14 by considering three events, which Mark closely connects in his account, that center around the experience of the Last Supper in the Upper Room. This experience for Jesus is a time of separation, a time when all the crowds who cheered Him at His entry to the city, when all His earthly followers are peeled away from Him and in just an hour or two He will be left totally alone. These are His precious last moments to share with His disciples as He prepares them and Himself to separate, to be alone. And in them are some precious lessons for us. Mark begins with an event that occurred several days earlier:

I. The Anointing At Bethany (1-11) What a strange and unusual event! We're not left to wonder who this was. John 12 also records the same story and tells us it was Jesus' quiet friend and disciple, Mary of Bethany. Her sister Martha was there that day, busy serving and helping make the supper, as usual, and her brother Lazarus was also there, reclining at the table with Jesus and His disciples. It was a time with dear friends, a quiet last time to eat with them. And in the midst of it, quiet Mary brought out something she'd been saving. It was an alabaster box, a stone flask, and in it was sealed a pound of very precious ointment made from pure nard. This fragrant perfume was imported all the way from India and was extremely costly. It was evidently something she was treasuring up and saving for an extreme or special circumstance. And for her, this was it. She broke the flask open and poured its precious content on Jesus' head. And John adds that she also poured it on his feet and then wiped them with her own hair and the whole house was filled with the sweet fragrance. It was a tremendously touching act born out of love and compassion, but what I want you to notice is:

1. Mary was alone in her act of devotion (3) Nobody applauded it. Nobody said, "Oh how sweet, how lovely!" Nobody said, "Oh, how generous; see how she loved Him!" Not one person gave her a hug. Instead:

a. it drew criticism from believers (4-5) The room was full of Jesus' disciples and they all talked about it. They said it was a waste, it was inappropriate, it could have been used so much better some other way. The actual value of the perfume was a year's wages! Think about it, a $50,000 jar of perfume oozing all over the floor! She poured away $50,000 on Jesus' feet and not one person, not even sensitive John, could understand it and stand with her in it. In fact:

b. it actually alienated unbelievers (10-11) John tells us that Judas was the ringleader of the complainers, because he was the disciples' treasurer and a thief, and would rather have sold it and stolen the money. He got so discouraged and angry about Jesus accepting this, that he went out and made arrangements to betray Jesus. This was the event that pushed him over the edge. Money alienated him from the Savior! But the truth is that:

2. she was alone in believing Jesus (6-8) Jesus had been talking to His disciples for a long time very clearly about going up to Jerusalem to die. He could not have been more clear. He said that he would be crucified, that He would die, that He would be buried and on the third day, rise again. But none of them heard it, or at least believed it. None of His friends, His disciples, believed Him. None but her. She took out the perfume she had been saving and anointed Him beforehand with a view to His burial. It was an act of faith. She believed what He said was true, whether anybody was with her or not, and served Him by anointing Him with the most precious thing she had, just as she would if His body were already lying there dead. And it didn't matter to her what anyone thought, whether her fellow believers complained, whether nobody could understand. She was willing to stand alone in serving Him. And I think there's a lesson in that: *We must willingly stand alone in serving Him.* Jesus was standing alone in serving God by going to the cross. Nobody wanted Him to go. Mary was standing alone in serving Christ by anointing Him. And we must be willing to stand alone in serving Him. There will be moments and times like this one, when nobody agrees with us, when nobody understands us, when nobody sees that this is what God wants. There will even be times when people say, "If this is Christianity, I don't want it!" and are alienated from the faith because you obeyed God. But that's the place Jesus was in and Mary was in and that's the place you must be willing to be in. It may have to do with giving, with honesty, with refusing to partake of sin or to hide the truth. But that's the place you must be willing to be in, alone. David was just a lad when he sensed the call of God on his life to walk out on the battlefield against a 9 foot tall Goliath. Thousands of Israelite soldiers were around him, but not one would go with him. They all thought he was stupid or crazy. They either mocked him or begged him not to go, but not one said, "This is of God; I will go too." But David said out loud before them all, "This battle is the Lord's, not mine. He doesn't need a sword and a spear and a shield. It's His battle. I trust Him." And down came the giant! He was willing to be found alone in serving God. Are you? Are you, when all your friends are pulling you the other direction? Are you, when it makes you look stupid and nobody's going to understand? You see who Jesus commends here, don't you? And as He predicted, we're still telling her story to this very day.

Now from the Anointing at Bethany, Mark takes us on to:

II. The Supper At Jerusalem (12-25), the celebration of the Passover Meal which Jesus held with His disciples before He died. This was to be for them primarily a time of assurance and the beautiful words recorded for us in Jn. 13 and following show that time and again. He reassured them over and over of their relationship to Him, of His love for them, and that that would continue despite all that was about to happen to Him. And in this account, we too can find a lesson: *We have complete assurance in our relationship with Him*, even if we're standing alone against the world! There are actually three lessons in assurance here for us. First:

1. we have the assurance that He knows all things (12-16) What a marvelous thing.! Jesus knew they would meet a man carrying a water jar. That, in itself, was unusual enough. But then He knew that they would follow him to a particular house, which would have a large upper room already furnished and prepared for the Passover, with all they would need, and to top it off, the owner would be willing to let them come and use it! How did Jesus know that? Did He have a secret arrangement set up with the man ahead of time? Was the guy in the Rent-A-Room business and Jesus had sent in a reservation by mail? No. He knew it because He knows all things and in His Sovereignty, had planned it! What an assurance that should have been to the disciples when they heard Him say in a few hours, *In a little while you will see me no more but you will see Me, and because I live, you too will live!* Jesus knows what will be! He does not send us into any situation to do His will blindly. He knows all things and has already arranged what will be for us, to His glory! We can trust Him. Further:

2. we have the assurance that He knows our hearts (17-20) Early on in the Supper, as they were eating, Jesus told them the truth about themselves, “One of you is a traitor and I know which one.” He even identified him, both by handing him a sop of bread and verbally, when Judas asked, "Is it I?" John tells us that Judas got up and left immediately after that. That left eleven, and it was with them that Jesus shared the Lord's supper. But note my point; what an assurance this should have been to them. He not only knew Judas' heart, He knew all their hearts and He Himself said He knew that there was only one false heart; the rest of them were true! None of the disciples could see the hearts of the others. They sat and whispered about it and tried to get John to ask Him quietly. They may all have had their favorite candidate and pointed their fingers at each other. But Jesus knew their hearts. And He knows ours. It doesn't matter what people say about us, how people feel about us. He knows our hearts, just as we do. He knows the sincerity of our trust and faith in Him, that it is real, just as Judas' was false and fake! And finally:

3. we have the assurance that He made atonement for us (22-24) Note that He gave it to them all and made them all eat of the bread and drink of the cup. He said, "This is my blood which is poured out before God in a new covenant, a new atonement, which is for you! It is not just for a few, but for many, for all of you and all those who will believe!" And He gave it to us, His church, as a standing memorial, a constant reminder that we can rest in the assurance that He has made atonement for all of our sins! No matter what anybody says, no matter what anyone accuses us of or holds against us, no matter how alone we stand in the world, we know that He died for us and we have His life! We have complete assurance in our relationship with Him, just as He had complete assurance in His relationship with the Father, though nobody stands with us.

Now finally, Mark takes us on to:

III. The Walk To Gethsemane (26) It was a long, slow walk out of the city and down through the Kidron Valley to the Garden. On that walk, He talked. And Mark records something very specific which He chose to teach them in these remaining moments:

1. the truth: all disciples will fail (27-28) What prophetic words! Every last one of them would fail. They would fall away. The Greek word is *skandalon*; they would stumble against a stone and trip and fall. They would be scattered from Him, but they were not to worry; He would meet them again in Galilee. Oh my friends, that statement is prophetic. It includes more than Peter and the Eleven:

a. we will all fail Him It is not that every one is a Judas who is unsaved and doesn't love him. But every one of us who truly loves Him will stumble and fall and fail Him at one time or another. We are human. Sin dwells in us. John tells us that if we say that we do not sin, we lie! We will all fail Him. There will be moments when we desert Him like they did, moments when we flee in terror instead of following where He goes, moments when we pretend we don't even know Him, like Peter did. There is none exempt. We will all fail Him many times in our lives. And if that's the case:

b. we will all fail one another We will fail to love each other, to help each other, to care for each other. We will fail to listen, to tell the truth. And conversely sooner or later:

c. everyone will fail us There is not a person on the face of this earth who will not disappoint you, who you can trust with the assurance that they will never say an unkind word, never think a bad thought, never wound your heart. There is no one you can put up on a pedestal, not even a Peter or a Paul and say, "That one will never stumble!" I don't say all this to make you feel bad, but to warn you that it is true. That's why Jesus said it. You can see in the very next verse what He was warning against:

2. the false confidence (29-31) Peter says, "Not I!" Jesus says, "Yes, you!" But Peter vehemently insists, "Not I, even if I have to die for you!" You know, there's a Peter in every crowd of believers, somebody who thinks about themselves:

a. I will never fail "I have arrived. I am past that. My dedication and my devotion to the Lord is so deep that I will never stumble and fall, not like those other guys!" Jesus is kindly warning us that pride goes before a fall! And there are others who adopt the thought:

b. some will never fail me "Someone or something will never fail me, never let me down" and they put their trust in that person or thing, instead of in the Lord who is the only one who cannot fail.

Notice that they all said the same thing. And in an hour, verse 50 says, they all forsook Him and fled. There is in each of us a blindness about ourselves and about our own vulnerability and about the vulnerability of others, until Jesus takes the veil away and we see clearly:

3. the lessons: He wants us to see. First:

a. our faith must stand in Him alone, not be based on people Jesus went to the cross forsaken by every earthly friend He ever had. If He was counting on people in the least, it would have thrown Him. But He knew that in the end all would fail. His faith did not rest on people; it rested on God alone. And our faith must stand likewise in Him alone, not counting on people to meet our needs, not counting on our friends to give us our worth, not counting on our fellows to stick by us as a condition of our standing. Jesus went to the cross alone because He was sure of His relationship with the Father. Mary anointed Him alone because her faith in Him and in His word was sure. If we are to stand through the storms of life, our faith must rest in Jesus only and our relationship with Him. And that means that:

b. our faith must not be shaken even by our own failure Jesus said, "I know you'll fail, but it's OK. I still know your hearts. That doesn't mean you're not Mine. I will keep you even through your failure. I'll see you shortly in Galilee!" You don't have to be failure-free to belong to Him, for Him to love you. You don't have to be perfect or even good. When you trust in His shed blood to save you, you're His. Your belonging does not depend on you; it depends on Him and what He did for you at the cross. And that's what Jesus was trying to tell them, "You're all going to fail; don't let it shake your faith. Trust me!"

Go to that Upper Room. What can we learn of Jesus there. We can learn of Him the lesson of separation, that we can let go of everything on earth and everyone on earth, if that is the place He leads us to, and stand safe in Him. Our faith is not based on the approval or the performance of others. It rests in Him alone. I don't know what this means in your life; I don't know what trial or difficulty you may be facing or have yet to face. But I know that He is enough. He is sufficient. You need nothing more than Him. Though the whole world turn against you, you are secure in Him. Let me close with what David the shepherd boy had to say at another time in his life when he was hiding like a rabbit in the mountains from Saul, *For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation. He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be greatly shaken. How long will all of you attack a man to batter him, like a leaning wall, a tottering fence? They only plan to thrust him down from his high position. They take pleasure in falsehood. They bless with their mouths, but*

inwardly they curse. — Selah For God alone, O my soul, wait in silence, for my hope is from him. He only is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken. On God rests my salvation and my glory; my mighty rock, my refuge is God. Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us. — Selah Those of low estate are but a breath; those of high estate are a delusion; in the balances they go up; they are together lighter than a breath. Put no trust in extortion; set no vain hopes on robbery; if riches increase, set not your heart on them. Once God has spoken; twice have I heard this: that power belongs to God, and that to you, O Lord, belongs steadfast love. For you will render to a man according to his work. - Psalm 62:1-12. Jesus knew the lesson of Psalm 62 well. He lived it. He tried to teach it to His disciples. He's trying to teach it to us. Will we listen?

The Road That Led To Calvary: Mark 14-16

Gethsemane: The Place Of Surrender 14:32-52

The Road That Led To Calvary wound from the Upper Room, through the streets of Jerusalem, to the gate North of the Temple. From there, it descended the hill to the Valley where the brook Kidron lay. Just across it and slightly to the left off the road leading to the Mt. of Olives, is a Garden, a small property enclosed by a stone wall with a gate, filled mostly with olive trees. It was called Gethsemane, the "oil press". It was here that Jesus came to be alone and to pray before going to the cross. The hymnwriter, James Montgomery, wrote, "*Go to dark Gethsemane, you that feel the tempter's power. Your Redeemer's conflict see, watch with Him one bitter hour. Turn not from His griefs away -- Learn of Jesus Christ to pray*." There is a lesson for us to learn from Jesus. Gethsemane was more than a place of prayer. It was a place of surrender. It was here, in the final analysis, that Jesus willingly surrendered to the Father to endure the cross. It is here that we can learn what surrender means. The first thing we can observe here is that:

I. Surrender Is Born Out Of Struggle (32-34) The very word *surrender* implies that a struggle or conflict precedes it. It has been, from way back, a military term, meaning to give up the fight and give control to the opposing army. Surrender, in the Christian sense, means ***to voluntarily relinquish control of your life, person, and circumstances to the Lord***. Surrender is more than simple obedience. It implies that there is a struggle going on, and we are all well aware of:

1. the nature of the struggle It is the very same struggle Jesus was experiencing. Before Him on the road, lay the Cross. Tomorrow, if He walked that road, He would die. He would experience tremendous physical pain and agony. Nails would be driven through His body. He would experience shame and jeering and taunting. And worst of all, the sins of the world would be laid upon Him who knew no sin and He would endure the very wrath of God against the sins of the world! Now let me pause before my next statement to say that I realize that we are on holy ground here. We are seeing the very heart of the Savior displayed before our eyes. Christian interpreters have had a hard time with Jesus' prayer in the garden and some very fine and well-intentioned attempts have been made by very godly men to try and protect the integrity of the Savior. Some have said, "He wasn't really praying to avoid the cross; He was praying not to die prematurely under Satan's attack in the garden." Others have looked at the comments on it in Hebrews 5 and said, "He wasn't praying to be kept *from* death but to be delivered *out of* death, that is, by resurrection." Theologians have carefully tried to say that Jesus did not have two wills, Divine and human, in conflict within Himself." With all due respect to men and reverence to Jesus, let me say that the obvious and clear intent of this text is to declare plainly the Divine mystery that **there was that in Jesus which did not want to go to the cross!** And it was deep. It was a struggle that brought Him to tears and loud cryings, to sweat great drops of blood. It was a struggle which took Him, by His own admission, nearly to the point of death with the pressure it created in Him, and necessitated the ministry of an angel to strengthen Him. And that same struggle exists in each one of us many times in varying degrees:

a. it is between our feelings and our faith (trust in God) Jesus had true human feelings. His body knew what pain felt like and his mind recoiled from the thought of physical pain, just like yours does. Nobody likes to feel alone and to feel the feelings that come with being mocked and jeered at. And certainly, nobody wants to feel the wrath of God! Our feelings often tell us, “If I do what Jesus wants, it's going to hurt, maybe not physically, but in some way.” But pulling the other direction is faith, trust in the nature and character of God who loves us. Faith says, "I can let go and give God control of this because I know He will take care of me; He loves me." Listen, nobody had more confident faith than Jesus, and nobody had more true human feelings that Jesus, and the two were in a struggle right here and they are in you too. Or to put it another way:

b. it is between our flesh (which desires to protect self) and our spirit (which desires to please God) - Gal. 5:17 says, *For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh*. *They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want.* Jesus had true human flesh. It was just like yours and mine, in every respect except one; it was not tainted by the presence of sin like ours is. Nevertheless, He had a true human self which pulled back his hand from fire to keep it from being burned, which made Him eat when He was hungry and step out of the way of a running horse. The nature of human flesh is to protect ourselves and ours is sinful to boot, which means that our flesh wants to protect itself at all costs, without regard to right and wrong or the effect on others. But pulling the other way inside us is our spirit, who we really are, which is joined to the Holy Spirit of God who lives in it. The Spirit's chief goal and highest end is to please God always. And when protecting ourself looks to us like it is going to come into conflict with pleasing God, our human flesh comes into conflict with our Divinely re-created and inhabited spirit, and the struggle for control is on! Our text affords us a glimpse of:

2. the emotions which often create the conflict There are deep forces at work inside of us which make surrender a struggle. Three of them are mentioned here:

a. fear: a sense that our well-being is in serious danger (33b) The Greek word for "deeply distressed" means literally, "struck with terror". As He looked to the cross, fear came upon Jesus. His humanity felt a deep sense of terror. Wouldn't yours? If Jesus had nonchalantly walked up and jumped upon the cross as though it were nothing, would He have been a true human being like you? Many times, as we look at what we sense God wants, the thing that creates a struggle is fear, that sense we have that we're in serious danger. "If I do what God wants, I'm afraid of what is going to happen to me. If I give Him control of my life, will He protect me and meet my needs? What will happen to me?" And what we're afraid of may be something we know, like Jesus knew the cross was coming, or it may be simply fear of the unknown, not knowing how we're going to be kept safe in the circumstance. We're often even more deathly afraid of the unknown. *Several generations ago, during one of the most turbulent of the desert wars in the Middle East, a spy was captured and sentenced to death by a general of the Persian army. The general, a man of intelligence and compassion, had adopted a strange and unusual custom in such cases. He permitted the condemned person to make a choice. The prisoner could either face a firing squad or pass through the Black Door. As the moment drew near, he was asked his decision. This was not an easy decision and the prisoner hesitated. Not long after, a volley of shots in the courtyard rang out. The general, staring at his boots, turned to his aide and said, "You see how it is with men; they will always prefer the known to the unknown. "What lies beyond the Black door?" asked the aide. "Freedom," replied the general, "and I've known only a few brave enough to take it."* Oh, it's like that with us. We're afraid to give God control because we don't know what's going to happen to us, whether we can protect ourselves, so we opt to take our chances with the known and do things our own way, the best we can, instead of surrendering. Another thing that contributes to the struggle is:

b. depression: a sense of hopelessness and helplessness (33c) Thayer says "troubled" in the Greek is the strongest of the three words used to indicate depression. Most of us don't have a true idea of just what real depression is. It's more than just a little sadness. It's a sense of hopelessness and helplessness, a sense that, "There's nothing I can do and no chance that anything will change." It's a black cloud of the spirit, a sense of despair. It's hard to let go of control in our lives when we feel that if we do, we will be utterly helpless and completely at the mercy of God, and everyone and everything else in our lives, that all hope for the things that we consider important in life will be gone. And another big contributor is:

c. sorrow: a sense of deep sadness and loss (34) Jesus said, "My soul, my heart, the human feeler part of Me, is not just sad, but extremely sad, overwhelmed with sorrow" and sorrow usually relates to loss. If Jesus chose surrender, He would lose everything, His life, His close relationship with the Father, everything. And there is that within us which doesn't want to let go of what we value, whether it's our arm, our spouse, our child, our money, or our house. We want what we have, and if surrender means losing it, there is a real struggle.

Oh, the forces inside us that would keep us from surrendering control of our lives are strong. They are powerful. But they are not all-powerful! Surrender may be born out of struggle and conflict, but for the believer:

II. Surrender Is Wrought In Prayer (35-42) I chose the word *wrought* on purpose. It means *hammered out*, *forged*. Surrender is not something that happens easily. That struggle must be fought and won, and the place that happens is in prayer. So the Savior went alone into the garden and prayed, not once but three times, and we have little snatches of that wrestling in prayer recorded for us. What a high and holy privilege that is, to see the Savior in intimate prayer, coming to a place of surrender! Note five things in this brief synopsis about coming to surrender:

1. it occurs within the intimacy of relationship: *...Abba Father* *Abba* is the Aramaic familiar term for *father*, equivalent to saying "Daddy" for us. Our surrender is not to some unknown, distant, demanding king, to some sovereign we don't know who's forcing us to do what we don't want to do. We go to Daddy, our Father, who loves us and provides for us and wipes our tears and hugs us close and holds us on His lap and carries us, and we say, "Dad, I think I know what you want me to do and I know you know what's best, but I don't want to do it. It's gonna hurt. Isn't there some other way we could do this?" And together, in love, with your arms about each other, you and Father talk about your feelings and your fears and your depression and your sadness, until you are ready to let go and say, "OK Dad, I trust you". Believers come to surrender time and again in their lives in the intimacy of a close relationship. If you don't have that, if you haven't built any kind of a close walk with God, it's no wonder that surrender is such a hard thing! Learn what it means to have a Father in heaven; get close to Him. It'll make these issues so much easier. Secondly, coming to surrender:

2. it involves genuine exploration in faith: *...everything is possible for You* Or to capture the thought directly, "You have power for all things. You are Almighty God. You can do anything. You can make a way out of no way; you can divide the sea and make Israel walk through on dry land. Is there not another way than the one before me?" There is nothing wrong with exploring in prayer, with asking your powerful Father to make another way. This is not Moses reneging and saying, "Lord, I'm a little tongue-tied and backward; please send somebody else." This is Jesus saying,

"Father, You can do mighty things. Could You do one to take this away?" I repeat; surrender comes through exploring in prayer all the options, including outright miracles, trusting that God can do all things. And at the same time:

3. it involves truthful expression of feeling: ...*take this cup from Me* Note the positiveness of the request. In what Mark recorded, He didn't sa,y "If it's your will, could you please..." He said, "Father, here's what I want, what my self wants. You can do all things. I want you to take this away. Don't send me through this! Let it pass me by. BUT I say that, recognizing that what you want is more important than what I want!" Jesus was truthful. He didn't hide it and try to be pious. We have only a brief sentence recorded, out of an hour's praying or more. I'm sure He told the Father, "I'm afraid, Father, I'm depressed, I'm overwhelmed with sorrow. It's so heavy on Me that I could die right here." Tell God how you feel! Be honest. Tell Him what's on your heart, what's in your very soul. Get it out. Don't piously submit, but resent it inside. Spill your guts. Tell Him why you're afraid and why you're sad and how much you are in pain over the choice before you. God has big shoulders. He can take it. Even if you feel angry at Him and blame Him and feel like He's hurting you somehow, tell Him! He's your Dad and He loves you; He'll never stop, but if you don't get it out with Him and you hold it inside, you may obey, but your heart won't be in it. Then notice this, coming to surrender:

4. it is done within an attitude of submission: ...*yet not what I will but what You will* He explored the Father's will and He expressed what He was feeling, but He did it all while holding to one bottom line: the Father's will comes first. He had a constant attitude of submission all through His life and even here in prayer. There was never any question. "Father, I always, always, choose your will. But this is how I feel about this situation and isn't there another way? I must be dead sure what your will is!" Explore all you want and express yourself to your Father all you need to. Cry till the well is drained. But make up your mind before you ever start (in fact, make up your mind even right here and now and stick to it) that you will do whatever God makes clear to you is best, His perfect will for you! Don't ever go to Him saying, "I won't; I refuse." Go saying, "Lord, I can't ! I don't see how; help me to be willing if this is what you want!" And if you come to God and struggle in prayer like this:

5. it leads to a confirmed resignation Mark does not record what Jesus said when He went back and prayed the second time, but Matthew does in **Mt. 26:42, *if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, Your will be done***. And the third time He prayed the same thing. The longer Jesus prayed, the more resigned He became, the stronger the emphasis on doing the Father's will and the less on His reluctance. And Jesus left that garden with a firm resolve, a confirmed resignation to the will of God, with His eyes fixed on the cross, surrendered to what He knew was the Father's will. And so will you.

To set the whole scene in perspective lets compare **Heb. 5:7-10**. Most interpreters agree this is describing His Gethsemane experience and if it is, there are some clear facts. His wrestling to surrender was not serene and calm the way we read it. It was with loud crying and tears. The disciples heard Him crying out in prayer. Secondly, He was praying to the One who literally had the *power* to save Him from death. He was praying about *not* going to the cross. But He had an attitude of reverent submission while He did it! And it says God heard Him! What does that mean? Simply that the Father listened and sympathized? No, God answered Him. How? Not by changing the plan and making another way to keep Him from the cross, but by making clear to Him and reaffirming to Him the necessity of the cross and giving Him a firm resolve to go there! The Father didn't change the circumstances, He changed the feelings! And let me reverently say that I think this is what verse 8 means when it says, "He learned obedience". He experienced our human experience of surrender to the Father and handing control of His life over, when everything in Him wanted to go the other way or to have the Father change it. So, my friend, He knows what it means for you to surrender, to trust God and let Him control your life when everything inside you shouts, "No, please no!" He's been there. And He knows how to bring you to that place in your life too.

Now quickly let me point out that after surrender is wrought in prayer:

III. Surrender Is Fulfilled In Practice (43-52) The mob showed up with swords and clubs led by Judas to arrest Him. And it's clear to see that Jesus' surrender was not just words; you can see Him put it into practice immediately. And we can learn from Him three things about being surrendered:

1. it means accepting the choices others make (43-45) Judas came and identified him with a kiss. You should know that the Greek word means to kiss repeatedly or long and tenderly. It was not the peck on the cheek of a hardened enemy, as you might picture, but the lingering greeting of a long-time friend. And Jesus didn't push him away, as you might expect. Instead, **Mat. 26:50** records that Jesus said, *"Friend, do what you came for."* He knew it was God's will for Judas to betray Him and He did not resist that. He didn't call Judas a traitor and a dog. He called him "friend" still. And He didn't plead with him not to do this thing and betray Him. He accepted Judas' choice to oppose and betray Him as part of God's will. And you may have to do that too. Surrender means being able to say about others whom God does not change or make do what you want, "That's OK if that's what He wants. I will continue to care and pray for them". Then:

2. it means accepting the circumstances you know God has willed (46-47) The disciples hadn't gone through that process of surrender with Him. They were sleeping! So Peter whipped out his sword and tried to stop the will of God. If

we were with him, we might have shouted, "Hallelujah, what an answer to prayer; thank you Father for changing your mind!" and screamed, "Let's get 'em boys!" But **Lk. 22:51** says, *Jesus answered, "No more of this!" And he touched the man's ear and healed him.* And listen to what **Mat. 26:52-54** records, *"Put your sword back in its place," Jesus said to him, "for all who draw the sword will die by the sword. Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?"* Do you see what's become most important? Not what I want, but what God has said must be. Jesus knew He could have stopped the circumstances, but He refused. He let the soldiers take Him. He accepted what God had willed and didn't push it away and struggle and fight against it. And so must we. And finally:

3. it means declaring the truth about your motives (48-50) Jesus told the soldiers why He was letting them arrest Him. He was fulfilling the Scriptures. He was doing the will of God. And when we're surrendered, it means telling the truth to those who are with us, friend or foe, about why we're accepting the circumstances, because the will of God is more important to us than what we want.

Bill Gaither had a song some years ago that said, "Have you had a Gethsemane? Have you prayed, 'If it be Thy will'?" My guess is you've probably already had some in your life or if not, that you will. All God's children come sooner or later, and often many times, to that place where what we want and what we know God wants differ. Maybe you're there today on some issue in your life. It may be in choosing the career He wants over what you want, or in the music you listen to, or the people you date. It may be in the using your money like He wants, instead of like you want, or in accepting a serious illness or an operation, instead of becoming bitter. It may be in sticking with a difficult marriage, instead of fleeing, or in accepting your body the way God made it, instead of trying to make it what you want it to be. Your Gethsemane is some area in your life where you know God wants control and everything in you doesn't want to give it to Him, a place where you need to come to surrender. How can you do it? "*Go to dark Gethsemane, you that feel the tempter's power. Your Redeemer's conflict see, watch with Him one bitter hour. Turn not from His griefs away -- Learn of Jesus Christ to pray*."

The Road That Led To Calvary: Mark 14-16

The Judgment Hall: The Place Of Condemnation - 14:53-15:15

We pick up the Road that Led To Calvary in the Garden of Gethsemane that dark Friday night. The soldiers who came to arrest Him took Jesus and bound Him like a common criminal. As His disciples fled in terror, they marched Him back into the city and through the darkened streets to the house of Annas, the former High Priest and then on to the house of the current High Priest, Caiaphas, his son-in-law. It was the beginning of a night of condemnation where the Prince of Life was condemned over and over again by the mouths of wicked men to death. The hymnwriter, James Montgomery, wrote, "*Follow to the judgment hall, view the Lord of life arraigned; O the wormwood and the gall! O the pangs His soul sustained. Shun not suff'ring, shame or loss. Learn of Him to bear the cross!*" There is a lesson for us here on this black night as we reverently go with the Savior to the Judgment Hall. It is a lesson about how we can face the condemnation of those who would oppose and accuse and persecute us. But before we look at it, let's examine the great variety of:

I. The Condemnation Jesus Experienced That Night The truth is that when you look at the record all together, Jesus faced His accusers for interrogation and trial something like seven different times between midnight and 7 or 8 in the morning. He was taken from Annas to Caiaphas, to the full Sanhedrin, to Pilate, to Herod, to Pilate again, and finally, to the crowd. He faced His enemies alone and in every case, in the end received condemnation. Mark doesn't record it all, but has a clear enough summary for us to see that Jesus was condemned by four different groups of people. First of all:

1. He was condemned by the religious leadership (14:53-65) They were all there, the chief priests, the Elders of Israel, the teachers of the law. The Sanhedrin, Israel's finest, most religious, most devout men. Men who would die rather than defile themselves ceremonially, men whose devotion to the Old Testament law was minute. And Jesus stood before them. Now:

a. one would expect from them a concern for righteousness From religious leaders such as these, one would expect a concern for finding the truth of God, a concern for doing what is right, a desire to see repentance and a hatred of sin. These folks we should expect to find in agreement with Jesus, shouldn't we? We would expect to find them affirming His message of the need to love and to prepare our hearts more than our outward behavior. And yet these devoutly religious men condemned Jesus. Why?

b. their motive was self-protective Compare 15:10. Even Pilate knew they hated Jesus because they envied Him. They were jealous of His great popularity with the common people, of the things He could get away with doing, like gleaning grain and healing on the Sabbath and overturning the tables of the money-changers, and they couldn't stop Him for fear of the people. His success undermined their own secure position of leadership. Plus, they felt it endangered their situation with Rome, that if conflict arose in Israel, Rome would crush them with its mighty power. Their own lives and leadership were at risk. And when push came to shove, protecting themselves was more important than righteousness and truth and obedience! And consequently:

c. their actions were inconceivable (14:55-59) Look at this:

(1) they intentionally sought evidence to condemn Him In a trial you're supposed to seek the truth to determine whether a person is worthy of death. They had already determined to kill Him and they were just hoping to find some excuse to do it legally! Truth didn't matter; killing Him without getting in trouble themselves mattered! And so:

(2) they received and formulated false accusations They twisted His words and took them out of context. They tried to accuse Him of planning to destroy the Temple, when in reality He had said, "If you destroy *this* Temple (meaning His body), I will raise it in three days." They listened to everyone who had ever heard Him say anything and tried to get some worthwhile charge out of it, whether it was true or twisted or not. Incredible as it may sound, self-protection had brought religious men so low as to seek an excuse for the murder of an innocent man! Is this experience unique to Jesus? No, I would say it teaches us that:

d. we may experience condemnation in the religious realm Condemnation begins (as it did in Jesus' ministry) in small ways, with disagreement. Right away it moves to criticism, perhaps behind the back or even to the face. Many times, it stays at that level, but it can easily go on to become outspoken opposition and even personal attack on the character. It may even move to official shunning and public condemnation. All that from religious, pious people? From Christians? Oh yes! And you've been there maybe once or twice, haven't you? You have been criticized and condemned by religious people from whom you would expect to find sympathy. You may find yourself criticized or looked down on for doctrinal things, for being dispensational instead of reformed or vice versa, for being baptistic instead of presbyterian. It may be for performance things, like which version of the Bible you read or how you dress or wear your hair or whether you will mow your lawn on Sunday. Some will call you charismatic and turn away from you if you close your eyes and raise your hands while you worship; others will call you unspiritual if you don't. If you walk close to the Lord and stay obedient to Him, many times you will find yourself being criticized, opposed, and accused by very religious people. Why do they do it? The motive is always self-protection. Criticizing and condemning *you* makes *them* appear and feel secure. You being ungodly makes them godly. You being unrighteous affirms their righteousness in their own mind and perhaps in the mind of others. It has nothing to do with truth or true righteousness before God! And people, even Christians, driven by self-protection are capable of doing unbelievable things in the name of religion. But they weren't the only ones who condemned Him:

2. He was condemned by the political leadership (15:1-15) The Jews marched Him straight to Pilate, the governor provided by Rome to keep order and peace and administer Roman justice in Judea, the civil authority to whom they answered. Now:

a. one would expect from him a concern for justice When a man is brought as a prisoner worthy of death, you would expect that there would be a concern to investigate the truth of the matter and see that justice is done. You would expect civil authority to defend the innocent and condemn the guilty. It should be a refuge to protect those falsely accused, where they can find protection. And yet, as with the Jews, we find with Pilate that:

b. his motive was self-protective We read in **(15:15)** that he wanted to satisfy the crowd, to keep them happy and controlled so that his own neck would be safe! Luke tells us that when Pilate heard that Jesus was from Galilee, he sent him over to Herod, who happened to be in town. He thought, "Let's transfer the problem and make him responsible". But Herod sent Him back to Pilate. All Pilate cared about was literally keeping his hands clean, absolving himself of responsibility, and keeping everybody happy. And so:

c. his actions were inconceivable I don't know how many times he said to the Jewish leaders and then to the crowd, "I find no fault in Him!" When the crowd shouted for His blood, Pilate asked, "Why? What evil has he done?" and then he turned around and handed a man whom he knew was innocent over to be tortured and killed. Talk about the height of injustice! But is it unique to Jesus? No, it says to us that:

d. we may experience condemnation in the civil realm There will be times in our lives when we will get unfair treatment from the secular authorities in our lives. It may be in things as simple as unfair discipline at school when we were innocent or a ticket we didn't deserve. It may be discriminatory, such as not being allowed to pray in public schools. It may be as costly, such as fees, fines, and taxes that are not fair. Or it may rise to the level of the life-threatening, perhaps wrongful conviction for a crime or in some societies, conviction for the "crime" of being a Christian itself. How many of our brethren down through the ages and throughout the world even now have experienced that! Jesus repeatedly warned His disciples to expect persecution from the world rather than justice!

But perhaps the most incredible fact in this whole scene is that:

3. He was condemned by the public He had taught (15:8-14) Pilate stood Him before the crowd of Jews gathered there. Now surely:

a. one would expect from them a response of gratitude and protest These are the people who had flocked to Him to have their sicknesses healed and their loved ones helped. These are the ones who had shouted the Sunday before when He rode into the city, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" and had laid palm branches at His feet. They had

listened raptly to His teaching in the Temple all week long. Surely, they should have had hearts full of gratitude and love toward Him and have protested His arrest. Surely, they would have cried, "Jesus, we want Jesus. Set Him free!" But:

b. their motive was self-protective (15:11) tells us that the chief priests had stirred up the crowd. How did they do that? No doubt, by threats and intimidation. "If you ask for Jesus, we'll cast you out of the synagogue! We'll accuse you to Pilate as being one of His followers. Besides, if we don't get rid of Him, things will get so stirred up here that the Romans will come and destroy both our Temple and our nation (John 11:48). Ask for Barabbas!" And people, being people, have flesh that protects itself, that looks out for #1 first when push comes to shove. And so:

c. their actions were inconceivable They bit the hand that had fed them. They cried out for the blood of innocent Jesus, their own Savior and Messiah. They consigned the One who had healed their sick and freed their demon-possessed and even raised their dead, to a cross! But is that unique to Jesus? No, it simply teaches us that:

d. we may experience condemnation from those we've helped The very children we've loved and cared for may turn their back on everything we've done for them and accuse us! The very friends for whom we've sacrificed and to whom we've given so much of ourselves may turn against us when their own protection is at stake.

But the saddest thing of all in this whole section is that:

4. He was condemned in the actions of His own disciple (14:66-72) Peter was the disciple with the mouth. "Even though all forsake you, I never will. Even if I die with you!" He had been with Jesus all along and surely:

a. one would expect from Peter an attitude of loyalty As one who had swung a sword for Jesus back in the garden, surely he would at least acknowledge himself as a disciple now as he hangs out in the high-priest's house, waiting to see what's going to happen. But he didn't. Why?

b. his motive was self-protective He was afraid that he too would be arrested by the soldiers and tried along with Jesus and he knew what that would mean. The love of self took over and so:

c. his actions were inconceivable (14:71) He ended up cursing and swearing that he had never met, seen or known Jesus, the one he had followed for three long years. That Peter, Jesus' loyal colleague, should turn and deny Him in the moment when He needed Him most, just to save His own neck, is inconceivable. But is it unique to Jesus? No, it teaches us that:

d. we may experience condemnation from our own colleagues Our own coworkers in the Lord, our close brothers and sisters with whom we've shared our lives, the ones who we thought would be loyal to the death, even they may deny us when the price of loyalty becomes too great.

Listen, in this world we will face condemnation, criticism, false accusations, opposition and attack, religious and civil, even sometimes from those closest to us. That's a fact Jesus wanted us to be prepared for. But what's really important as we follow Him to the judgment hall are:

II. The Lessons Jesus Taught Us About Facing Condemnation - Heb. 12:3 has a wise piece of advice, ***Consider*** *him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.* Consider Him. Think it over. Ponder that One who found condemnation on every hand. See how He endured it, so that you may know how to endure it when you have to and so you won't grow weary and give up and quit serving Him. We can learn of Jesus Christ to bear condemnation, whether its religious or civil or from those we've helped or even from our best friends. There are six important principles that Jesus taught in words during His ministry and by His own example here that together constitute God's method for facing condemnation in whatever form it comes to us. First:

1. we must not be consumed with our own defense Our first human response is always to prove to the other guy that we're right or that it wasn't our fault, to defend ourselves. If you or I were standing there with our words being twisted, we'd have shouted, "That's not what I said; that's not what I meant!" We'd have talked to Pilate and said, "I'm innocent; let me go". We'd have yelled back to the crowd, "Friends, how can you do this to me? Don't you remember when I..." But look what Jesus did in **(14:60-61, 15:3-4)**. **Is. 53:7** puts it like this, *He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.* Why? To give us an example, because we too have self-protective flesh. Being right and making others know it is paramount to us. I will never forget an experience I had at our little church in Ohio. We had been there about three months and I thought everything was going great. People loved us, more were coming out, people were coming forward, some had been saved. And we had this committee meeting one night where one of the leaders said, "I have a list of things some people aren't too happy about..." And he proceeded to criticize me and the way I did this or that and some things I'd taught and some of the good things the Lord had been doing. Oh, did my blood start to boil. Everything in my flesh wanted to scream, "That's not true, that's not true...." But I also sensed another voice in my mind, "Don't defend yourself, don't answer back, be quiet and wait..." And I did. And I'm going to save the ending of the story to keep you in suspense for a moment. You see, the point of our enduring condemnation is not to justify

ourselves, but to glorify Him. A few simple statements of what the truth really is like Jesus made, are much better than a lengthy defense and denial. If we get consumed with the process of defending ourselves and our behavior, we'll miss what the situation is really all about: pointing to Him! But what's even harder is:

2. we must learn to not retaliate in kind Our first instinct is to accuse in return, to return anger for anger, accusation for accusation, to try to take down those who try to take us down. But look what **1 Pet. 2:21-23a** says about Jesus! He's our example and He didn't retaliate. He didn't hurl accusation and condemnation back at the crowd or Pilate or the Sanhedrin. I wanted to do that sitting in that meeting room. I wanted to say, "You don't really love God; you don't care about His Word..." But that's not what Jesus did. It lowers you to their level. It makes us engage in the same game. So, what should we do:

3. we must learn to entrust ourselves to God's faithfulness Look what Jesus did in **1 Pet. 2:23b**. Instead of retaliating, He chose to trust Himself to God who always judges rightly. And look at what He tells us to do in **4:19**. We should commit ourselves, our reputation, our protection and well-being to Him and continue to do good! Paul knew a great deal of condemnation in his ministry. Toward the end of his life, he was imprisoned on unjust charges at Rome and listen to what he said in **2 Tim. 1:11-12**, *Of this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher. That is why I am suffering as I am. Yet I am not ashamed, because I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day.* "It doesn't matter what they do to me. My protection and well-being don't depend on them. I've committed it to God and I am absolutely persuaded that He is able to keep me all the way to glory, and if He lets me die, I'm still His!" In the meeting room that night I made a quiet decision, "I'm not going to defend myself; I'm going to trust God to take care of me". And so must you. It's hard. We're so used to taking care of things in our own strength. But we must learn to trust God to do that. And we must do even more:

4. we must learn to praise God in suffering Jesus taught us in **Mat. 5:11-12** some words we forget, *"Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.* Check out **1 Pet. 4:14-16**. Whoa, now that's heavy! We obey Him and end up being condemned and suffering for it and we're supposed to learn to praise Him that we suffer for His sake? That's right! It means your faith is showing, that you're true and genuine. If you were of the world, the world would love you. But you aren't, and they don't! If you suffer for obeying Christ and doing right, you're simply following in the footsteps of Jesus; you're a "little Christ", a "Christian," and thank God you are! Oh, but it doesn't stop there:

5. we must learn to bless our enemies What did Jesus do? He let them condemn Him. He carried his own cross voluntarily up the hill. And as they were nailing Him on it, He prayed for their forgiveness! **Rom. 12:14** says, *Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.* Jesus taught it even more strongly. Please turn to **Lk. 6:27-28, 35-36**. You want to be like Jesus? Love that enemy of yours, even though he hates you. Do good things to him, even though he's doing bad ones to you. Say good things to him, even though he's saying bad things about you. Pray for him, even though he's cursing you. Give to him, though he's taking from you. Why? Because God is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. He shows them mercy. After all, isn't that what He did to you? Even when we were His enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son.

It's not natural; it's spiritual. It's Jesus' way. And I know someone is wondering, "But does it mean you always end up crucified?" No, when you leave your defense to God, very often He carries you right through the condemnation unscathed. Very often, when you trust in Him, He doesn't let Pharaoh kill you with His chariots; He makes opens the water and lets you walk through the Red Sea on dry ground. Oh, I guess you'd like to know what happened that night in Ohio. I obeyed the impulse the Spirit of God gave me and stayed silent for a long time and listened and prayed. And do you know what happened? When my critic was done, one by one, the other leaders who were in the room began to speak the truth in my defense and told how they saw God at work in the ministry. One of them pressed him for clarity and it turned out that the complaints came from this one man and one elderly couple who were his friends, not from "lots of people" as he made it seem. I went home feeling safe, protected, and kept, instead of angry and self-righteous. And I didn't do a thing, except be quiet and trust in God. That's what Jesus did. *Follow to that judgment hall, view the Lord of life arraigned; O the worm-wood and the gall*, the bitterness of it! *O the pangs,* the anguish, the hurt, *His soul sustained. Shun not suff'ring, shame or loss. Learn of Him to bear the cross*, to bear condemnation and accusation and opposition by trusting in God! Is it happening somewhere in your life that you're facing condemnation, where you're being falsely accused, hated, opposed for no reason? It will sooner or later. Let me leave you with this advice from a man who knew condemnation and opposition and even persecution for many years of his life, from David. *Psalm 37:1-9, 23-24, 28, Do not fret because of evil men or be envious of those who do wrong; for like the grass they will soon wither, like green plants they will soon die away. Trust in the LORD and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture. Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him and he will do this: He will make your righteousness shine like the dawn, the justice of your cause like the noonday sun. Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him; do not fret when men succeed in their ways, when they carry out their wicked schemes. Refrain from anger and turn from wrath; do not fret-- it leads only to evil. For evil men will be cut off, but those who hope in the LORD will inherit the land…*

If the LORD delights in a man's way, he makes his steps firm; though he stumble, he will not fall, for the LORD upholds him with his hand… For the LORD loves the just and will not forsake his faithful ones. They will be protected forever.

The Road That Led To Calvary: Mark 14-16

Calvary: The Place Of Death 15:16-47

We have followed the road that led the Savior to the cross as it began that night in the Upper Room and learned of Him to stand alone. We have gone with Him out to dark Gethsemane and learned of Him to pray and surrender everything to the Father's will. We have followed to the Judgment Hall and learned of Him to bear condemnation. From Pilate's hall, the road wound through the city and out through the North Gate. After a distance, it ascended a low hill shaped like a skull called Golgotha or in the Latin, Calvary, a place for the execution of criminals, where three crosses had been prepared. The hymnwriter pictures our journey with Jesus thus: *Calvary's mournful mountain climb; There, adoring at His feet, Mark the miracle of time, God's own sacrifice complete. "It is finished!" hear Him cry. Learn of Jesus Christ to die.* Oh, Calvary is the place of death, the place where Jesus Christ died for us. And it is also the place where we can learn of Him to die! Not so much how to die, how to face our own physical death, but *to die.* Jesus went to Calvary in order to die and we must go there with Him in order to do the same. Let's begin by considering:

I. The Manner Of Christ's Death On The Cross (16-36) The terms *Calvary*, or the *cross* are in all the great hymns and many of the great verses of Scripture we know. But it is too easy to let our minds begin to think of the hill or the wooden object itself or to consign it only to the final act of Christ giving up His Spirit and expiring. The cross or Calvary is not a thing or a place or even a single momentary event. It is a whole series of connected events that together form a unified whole. When Peter referred to this whole event, he referred to it as the "sufferings of Christ". I like that and Mark shows us first of all:

1. the sufferings before the cross (16-23) Once Jesus had been sentenced by Pilate to death, the first thing He suffered was:

a. scourging (15) He had Jesus flogged. Oh, that's so easy to say and so simple to gloss over. *Scourged* is the term we're used to. Jesus was stripped and His arms tied around a pillar or a post. A soldier brought out a whip called a cat o' nine tails, made of 9 leather thongs with bits of bone and metal tied on the ends. And with it, he beat the bare, bent back of the Savior until the flesh was torn and the bones showed and He was a mass of blood. The Jews would carefully limit this punishment to 39 lashes, so as not to kill the person or to treat them as a mere object, but the Roman soldiers had no such scruples, especially with a person sentenced to die. In fact, scourging was known as "the intermediate death". And when it was done and He had collapsed, they added another suffering:

b. humiliation (16-19) They robed His bleeding back in a purple robe and pressed a crown of sharp thorns down onto His head. Then they backed off and beat Him on the head on top of the thorns, again and again, with wooden staffs. They fell down and pretended to do homage to Him as a king, and laughed and mocked and spit on Him. They humiliated Him. John tells us that it was dressed like this, bleeding and hardly able to stand, that Pilate brought Him out again to the crowd again for a final chance and joined in the mockery, saying, "Behold your King!" "Shall I crucify your King?" Oh, the humiliation, the depths of the mockery, scorn, and contempt Jesus bore for us. And when it was done, there was another suffering:

c. bearing the cross (20-23) John tells us that at first, they laid the heavy crossbeam upon His own bleeding back and made Him carry it. He could only make it as far as the city gate before collapsing, and a passerby, Simon of Cyrene, was grabbed from the crowd and made to carry it for Him as He trudged slowly up the hill to Calvary, where we see:

2. the sufferings upon the cross (24-36) First there was:

a. the agony of crucifixion (24) itself. They laid Him on that cross and bound His arms fast and drove, not shiny little 10-penny nails like we use, but huge rough iron spikes through His wrists and ankles. It was then hoisted upright and set with a jar into place. The Savior hung there between earth and heaven gasping for breath, while they gambled for His clothes. It was a way of dying invented by the Romans specifically to be slow and painful and highly visible, so that all their subjects would think twice before rebelling against their wishes! It sometimes took a man two days to die this way, yet every move hurt and it was necessary to pull up and move simply to breathe. And if that were not enough, there was added once more:

b. the sting of humiliation (25-32) There was:

(1) the shame of the cross (26-27) itself. The cross was the electric chair or the gas chamber or the firing squad of its day. It was for the execution of criminals worthy of death. Every cross bore a sign with the written charges against the person: Thief, Murderer, Traitor. Jesus' little sign was a mockery. It said simply, "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews". It was a shameful death. He was counted as a common criminal. On either side of Him were two robbers with their little signs that read, "Thief". He was in the middle, not because He was the most prominent, but to show that He was just like them. Isaiah said, "He was numbered with the

transgressors..." Think of it, the sinless Son of God, holy and pure, counted as a criminal. And just open your ears and listen to:

(2) the abuse of the crowd (28-32) They were all there. The common people who had heard Him teach, now shouted with scorn, "Come down and we'll believe!" The chief priests and religious leaders came to torture Him further, "Come down and we'll believe. If you're the Messiah, prove it. Come down. Look, He can't do any more miracles! He's fresh out! He can't save Himself!" Oh, how it must have hurt His heart! It was all so untrue. He *was* proving He was the Messiah by staying there on the cross! Even the thieves on either side acted the same way at the beginning! Not even dying men could have sympathy for the dying Son of God. And if all that were not enough, there was:

c. the anguish of separation (33-34) The crowd eventually tired of their jeering and either went home or quieted down. At noon, the whole sky went dark and for three hours, darkness covered the land. About 3 o'clock Jesus shouted out loud what He was experiencing, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?" Yes, He intended it as a sign, and by quoting Ps. 22:1, He was identifying Himself as the Messiah! But oh, He felt it. The sins of the world were laid on Him there. The wrath of God upon the sins of the world waspoured out upon Him as our substitute. Separation from His own beloved Father for you and for me.

Oh, how great were the sufferings of Christ and He chose to walk that road for us. *Calvary's mournful mountain climb, there adoring at His feet, mark the miracle of time!* God the Son suffers and dies. But why? We need next to examine:

II. The Effects Of Christ's Death On The Cross (37-47) The first effect is that:

1. the atonement for our sins was completed (37-38) This death of the Son of God on Calvary is absolutely essential for the salvation of the human race. The sins of man require a sinless Savior to die, to suffer all the penalty due them. That's what the sufferings of Calvary were about. And in the moment of His death, it was completed! *Mark the miracle of time: God's own sacrifice complete. 'It is finished', hear Him cry!"* Mark notes:

a. the statement of it (37) John tells us what He said. It is one word in the original, *Finished*! Completed! Paid! However you translate it, it means that there is no more left to do; the redemption of mankind is complete. The holy wrath of God against sin is satisfied. There is nothing we can do to add to it. It is all done, and God gave:

b. the sign of it (38) The heavy veil in the Temple that had always stood between man and the presence of God was torn in half, from top to bottom (note it was not bottom to top!). How? By the very hand of God Himself. He tore it from the top down, probably in the very presence of the priests who were at that moment offering the evening sacrifice, to indicate that the way into His presence was now open and clear. The one true sacrifice had been made and no more need be offered there! It is finished! The second effect of His death was that:

2. the salvation of people through His death began The purpose of His death was to save men from their sins and right away, you can see men begin to recognize it. First:

a. the centurion (39) was so moved by how Jesus died and what He said and the signs around him, the trembling ground and the darkened sky, that he confessed more than he really understood, "Surely this man was the son of God." ***Mt. 27:54*** adds that it wasn't him alone; the other soldiers who were with him joined him in this confession! Look at the change His death wrought in them. From mocking and mistreatment and gambling for His clothes, total disregard, to confessing His deity. No one can say with certainty, but I have great hope that these men were deeply touched and that one day we may meet them in heaven as trophies of His grace. But there was also:

b. Joseph of Arimathea (42-43) Joseph was part of the Sanhedrin and no doubt, was there as they condemned Him and plotted against Him. Luke tells us he had not consented to their deeds, but he didn't cry out against them either! He didn't mount opposition to save innocent Jesus. We're told he was a secret disciple because he was too afraid. But having seen His death, he is no longer afraid and he comes boldly right to Pilate and asks to bury Jesus' body. He identifies himself openly before all the Jews with Jesus. And ***Jn. 19:38-39*** tells us that Nicodemus joined him. He who had come to Jesus by night so he wouldn't be seen, now comes boldly to help Joseph, bringing spices for burial. His death moved them to openly affirm Him and no doubt, we will meet them in heaven.

And these were just the first in a long line of people who have been touched by the death of Christ and brought to salvation. That line stretches down through the centuries, all the way to me and to you. And just in case you haven't been touched by His death to confess Him as your Savior, let me urge you to join these! It's high time to quit hiding and half-believing. Jesus endured the suffering of the cross so that you might have eternal life. Don't let that be a waste; take a bold step and put behind you what everybody else may think and give your life to Him right now! The third thing you'll notice here is that:

3. the very life of the Son of God was given The fact:

a. it was certified by the soldiers (44-45) They were professionals. They had crucified many a prisoner. They knew when a man was dead. They themselves had to put the spear into His side to make sure and saw the blood

and water come out. The centurion was willing to affirm to his commander, to whom to be wrong would have meant death, that Jesus was indeed dead. That fact was also:

b. it was sealed by His burial (46) His body was carried by Joseph and Nicodemus and wrapped in linen and laid in a stone tomb and sealed with a rock too heavy for one person to move. If he had not been dead on the cross, surely, he would have died in the tomb and never could have rolled away the stone. His burial sends a message; He is actually dead. And further:

c. it was seen by His followers (40-41, 47) A number of women who had followed Him throughout His ministry, who knew Him well, watched Him die and followed to the burial place. They knew He died and just where He was buried. Even Peter and John seem to have known later, so maybe they were there too. His own followers were convinced of the completion of it, that the very life of their precious Jesus was given and gone!

What a heavy scene! How sad we are as we behold the sufferings of our Savior for us! But we can't walk away from this scene without understanding:

III. The Lessons From Christ's Death On The Cross As we consider the full depth of the sufferings of Christ, three things become evident:

1. the price of His death - 1 Cor. 6:19-20 Paul saw the lesson, ***I am bought at a tremendous price; I must glorify Christ***. After what Jesus suffered to redeem me, I do not any longer belong to myself. I have no right, even to my own body! How can I even think of serving myself instead of Him? How can I do anything less than to present my body to Him as a living sacrifice, now made holy and acceptable to God, for His purpose? How can I do anything less than to make glorifying Him the goal of every moment of my life? How can I do anything less than to reverently shout hallelujah and praise Him every day for the salvation He provided for me! So often, Calvary fades in its meaning for us and we need times like this one to refresh our memory of the tremendous price Jesus paid for us. Fall at His feet and thank Him today! The second thing that is evident as we consider the cross is:

2. the power of His death It moved the soldiers and transformed the secret disciples. And in just a few short days, it began to touch thousands and then millions. The message of the death of Jesus Christ for our sins touches and transforms people all over the world. Paul experienced it personally and many, many times in others, and see what he said in **1 Cor. 1:18, 21-24**. He saw the lesson: ***I am entrusted with a powerful message; I must share Christ***. The sharing of the message of what Jesus did there on Calvary seems like foolishness to many. It looks like weakness to others. But to person after person, it becomes the power of God to transform their life, to take away their sins and make them a brand-new person! And like Paul, I'm entrusted with that message and I must share it and as I do, I can share it in the confidence that it will absolutely save and transform anyone who is willing to believe it! Then finally, we have here before us:

3. the example of His death Turn with me to **Heb. 12:1-4**. The hymnwriter said "Learn of Jesus Christ to die", to give up your very life for the cause to which you are committed. God has a race course marked out for each and every one of our lives and at the end, a finish line where we cross into His presence. And that course is fraught with obstacles. There are vines (call them sins) in life that stick to our clothing and try to entangle us and keep us from moving forward in the will of God, until we pull loose. There are weights we carry on our own person that weigh us down and slow us up, until we're ready to let go of them and throw them away. And there are times when the race grows long and we're tired and ready to sit down and rest or to give it up altogether. There are times when the road is full of obstacles, when people oppose us and try to harm us and humiliate us, just like they did Him, and we begin to get weary of struggling and lose the heart to go on. But the writer said, "You've not yet gone all the way like Jesus did. You have not yet resisted unto blood. You've not yet given your very life. Lift your eyes off of the circumstances, off of the difficulties and the sufferings. Look away there to Calvary, at Jesus, who because of His sure confidence of the joy that lay out there beyond the finish line, endured all the sufferings before and on that cross, despising, not even caring about, the shame. Great as it was, it was so small in comparison with the joy to come, when He would sit down at the right hand of God! Paul said in Phil 3:8, *What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ*. The lesson is this: *I am engaged in a grueling race; I must die like Christ*. You see, the truth is, I died already. I died there on Calvary with Him. I was in Him spiritually when He died. I have been crucified with Christ. I'm dead. My old self, my old man, the person I used to be, died there with Him. I'm dead to sin. I'm dead to the world.

But my mind, will and emotions have to catch up to that fact. I must learn to die to selfish longings and purposes. I must learn to die to all the things that hold me back. I must learn to die to the hold that the circumstances of life have over me. I must learn to live to one thing alone, to knowing Him, and that daily, in comparison to which, other things are just so much rubbish. And when the course of that race dictates that I must die physically and give my life for Him, I, like Paul, must learn to be willing and ready to do it.

The Road That Led To Calvary: Mark 14-16

The Tomb: The Place Of Life - 16:1-20

We've been following Jesus on the road that led to Calvary. We followed Him from the Upper Room out to Gethsemane, to Pilate's Judgment Hall, and at last, outside the city to the lonely hill where He died on the cross for us. But His journey was not yet done. Two friends, Joseph and Nicodemus, took His lifeless body down from the cross and began to carry it away. John tells us simply, *At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb, in which no one had ever been laid. Because it was the Jewish day of Preparation and since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there. - 19:41-42.* The tomb was a hole carved into the solid rock of the hillside. They carried His body inside and wrapped it with the spices Nicodemus had brought. And they laid it on a cold stone shelf in the heart of the rock. It took all that both of them could manage to roll the huge stone, the *golel*, into its place across the opening. And with tears in their eyes, they, along with the watching women and other followers, bid Him goodbye for the last time and went back into the city to keep the Sabbath. All through that long Friday night and Saturday and Saturday night, they mourned. They were confused. How could it be that Jesus, whom they were sure was the Messiah and the Son of God, was dead and lying in a tomb? They didn't know what to do with their lives now. Plus, they were afraid. Pilate had killed Jesus; maybe His followers were next. But some of the women loved Him so much that they wanted to see that He at least had a proper burial. So they gathered more spices and planned to go back to the tomb early that Sunday morning and anoint His body. And it was there at the garden tomb, the place of death, that they made:

I. The Amazing Discovery That Jesus Is Alive (1-13) You see:

1. all Jesus' followers were convinced of His death The women, the disciples, all of them. They had seen Him die. They had seen Him laid in the tomb. You can see that first Easter morning that:

a. they came to anoint His body (1) They did not expect to find anything other than a corpse. They were expecting the same scene they had left on Friday. And:

b. they knew the tomb was sealed (2-3) They were discussing how to roll the great stone away. I don't think they even knew that on Saturday the Chief Priests had convinced Pilate to let them guard the tomb with soldiers and seal it with a Roman seal. They couldn't have gotten in, even if they had been able to roll the stone away! But the point is they were expecting a sealed and occupied tomb. All of them were. They were absolutely convinced that Jesus was dead and that was the end of it. Life would have to go on from there. But when they got to the tomb:

2. they were confronted with evidence that He is alive It shocked them. It stunned them. It was totally outside the realm of their experience and their expectation. The first thing they saw was:

a. the moved stone (4) An angel had moved it for them before they got there. And the guards who would have stopped them had all fled in terror and were no longer an obstacle. Can you imagine their bewilderment as they saw it from afar? "Who moved the stone? Jesus couldn't have done it; He's dead. Who would have wanted to steal His body?" But nobody was around. And then, as they cautiously peeked inside, they heard:

b. the angelic announcement (5-6) They looked in and saw an angel all dressed in white sitting there, instead of the body they expected. And they were, literally in the Greek, terrified. Wouldn't you be? And that angel told them, “Jesus isn't here anymore; He has risen from the dead! You're going to see Him!" It must have stunned them. And then the angel pointed out:

c. the missing body (6b) There was no body there on the shelf anymore. John tells us what they saw. The linen strips that had wrapped His body were all lying there undone. And the napkin that was about His head was there, but lying off by itself and folded up! It was as though He had simply sat up and unwrapped Himself and folded it all up. And most importantly, there was no body! And in all the days that followed, none of His enemies could produce one! They were stunned. And then the angel faced them with:

d. the prediction of His own words (7) "He told you!" How many times had Jesus told them, "I will rise again the third day!" But they hadn't heard. It had gone in one ear and out the other. And in the hard reality and sorrow of watching Him die and be buried so fast, it had altogether been forgotten. Yet He had predicted it all beforehand so they would know what was happening while they were going through it. And as the angel reminded them, can you imagine the words coming back to their minds.

You want to see them jump and shout, "Yes!!" As they see the great stone moved and tremble in the presence of the angel and see the graveclothes and replay His words in their minds, you expect to see the darkness give way to the dawning of the great truth that Jesus is alive! But somehow it doesn't. You see all of:

3. the disciples were reluctant to believe He is alive Even:

a. the women were afraid after being told (8) They dashed out the door of the tomb and literally fled at a run. They were trembling with fear and their minds were bewildered and confused. Their logic and senses told them Jesus was dead. But all the things they'd just encountered were so impossibly out of their experience that they

couldn't grasp it. They couldn't believe it and they were afraid to tell anybody. The same thing was true of the eleven disciples who were huddling back in the Upper Room in the city:

b. they refused to believe Mary who saw Him (9-11) We don't have time to piece together the many events of that first Easter day, but Mary had evidently become separated from the group and John tells us that later, while she was by the tomb weeping, Jesus appeared to her in person. Once she saw Him, there was no longer any doubt and she ran to tell the disciples, but they refused to believe her! Jesus also met the other women as they fled and they ran and told them too, but they still would not believe. Luke says their words seemed as nonsense to them! Now there was, not only an empty tomb, but firsthand reports, yet still the darkness is too great. It continued through the day and:

c. they refused to believe the two who saw Him (12-13) on the road to Emmaus. He appeared to them and disguised His identity, until the evening meal when their eyes were opened and they knew Him. They ran back to Jerusalem to tell the eleven, but they didn't believe them either!

You see, it is not enough to have physical and circumstantial evidence to show that Jesus is alive. It is not enough to have somebody else tell you that they have seen Jesus and He is alive.

II. The Convincing Proof That Jesus Is Alive is Personal Experience (14) Jesus finally appeared to them all and then they believed! When they experienced His presence, it could not be denied. He is alive! The darkness of their hearts lifted! He had beaten even death! He had conquered the grave! The tomb, which was supposed to be a place for the sealing of death, became the place for the bursting forth of life! And as we go to that tomb and visit it this morning, we are left with one great truth: Jesus Christ is alive! But how do we know that. We are 2000 years removed from this scene. Jesus has long since ascended to heaven and is no longer available to see with our eyes and touch with our hands. How do we become convinced that Jesus is alive? Well, here's how it works now:

1. the disciples experienced His presence and we believe their word - Acts 1:3, *After his suffering, he showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God.* He appeared to them over and over again and let them experience Him, until they were convinced that, even if it meant death to themselves, that He was alive. John puts it this way in **1 Jn. 1:1-2**, *That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched-- this we proclaim concerning the Word of life [Jesus]. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us.* Those who experienced Him alive were convinced and preached that message to us and wrote it down and (unlike how they responded to the women) we believe their word. We have to take it by faith, to trust with all our hearts that Jesus did rise from the dead. But when we do, the strangest thing happens:

2. when we believe their word, we experience His presence No, He doesn't appear to our eyes and let us touch Him. Instead, He enters our very spirits and changes our hearts! **2 Cor. 5:17** says, *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come*! He makes a discernable change in our very being. We are made brand-new inside. We are born again and become a brand new being from the inside out. If you ask me how I know Jesus is alive, I could cite you all the circumstantial evidence and say it's the only logical explanation, which it is. I could cite you all the people that saw Him and say I believe their testimony, which I do! But you want to know what really convinces me that Jesus is alive? When I was 15 years old, I took their word for it and invited Jesus Christ to come into my life and He did! He changed me! No, not instantly and all at once, and not even completely, as I'm sure you can tell. But just the same, the core of my being, of who I am, is different and I know it. My life shows it. If my life continued as it was before that point, I would never be standing here before you today. Lord knows where I'd be, or even if I'd be alive. I've seen Him work in my life and in the lives of hundreds of others around me. Nothing on the face of this earth could convince me that He's still dead, that He's just another good religious leader who died like all the rest; I've experienced Him in a way that is just as real and valid as those first disciples. Haven't you? Isn't that your testimony as well? If it isn't, then maybe you need to take that same step. Maybe you need to take these women and disciples at their word that He is alive and invite Him into your life today. Wouldn't that be a grand thing to experience on Easter Sunday!?

At any rate, just as we learned something in the Upper Room, in Gethsemane, and even on Calvary, there is something we can learn here, standing with the women by the empty tomb and experiencing the Resurrection, and that is:

III. The Tremendous Effect Of Jesus Being Alive (15-20) Does it make a difference? You bet it does! When we grasp the truth that Jesus is actually alive, right now today, and is with us and in us, it does three things:

1. it gives us a purpose (15-16) Those who experience Him have a new purpose in life, to share the good news with others. The good news is this. **1 Pet. 1:3-5**, *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade-- kept in heaven for you.* Because Jesus rose from the dead and is alive forever, we have the absolute assurance that we too will live forever and that there is an inheritance waiting for us! We're going to live forever! And we're supposed to take that news to everyone on the face of the earth, so they can

have opportunity to believe it and live too! Those disciples were never the same after that. Their lives became consumed with one thing, sharing the Good News that Jesus is alive with others who had never heard and watching it change their lives! When you know Jesus is alive, you've got to tell somebody! And wherever God puts you in life, it's right there that He has the purpose for you to share it! Secondly:

2. it gives us power (17-18) The very things that He had done by His Divine power, He now gave them power to do. He told them to wait in Jerusalem until that power came. And not long afterward it did. The Holy Spirit came and dwelt in the heart of each believer and the power of Jesus began to display itself. Just read the Book of Acts. Every one of these things (except for the poison thing) happened through them and more. The living Jesus was living in each of them and displaying His life and power through them. The way that He does may be different today, but the process is still the same. He's still displaying His power through the lives of His people to indicate His presence. Look at **Eph. 1:18-20**. That power that raised Jesus from the dead, that Divine power that let Him get up and walk out of that tomb, is for us! It is ours, not to run around doing miracles, but to live the life He intends for us to live. How does it come to us? **Rom. 8:11**, *…if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you.* The same Holy Spirit, Almighty God, lives in us and He now gives us life and power! Since Jesus is alive, we have a whole new way to live life. We live it in His Divine power and not in our own feeble strength. We don't have to look at life and say, "I can't". We don't have to look at suffering and difficulty and hardship and say, "I'm too weak; I'll never make it." We don't have to look at what God expects of us and say, "It's too high; I'll never attain to it!" We have His power, everything we need for life and godliness, because He is alive and He lives in us! And what's more:

3. it gives us a partnership (19-20) Here is Mark's two-verse synopsis of the entire Book of Acts. It became a great adventure, a grand partnership. They obeyed and went out and preached everywhere and the Lord Jesus went out with them and worked together with them and in them and through them, and confirmed what He said through them by what He did through them. A partnership, the Lord Jesus and I, facing and enduring and conquering life together. Isn't that what you want? It's what Paul wanted more than anything. He said in **Phil. 3:8,10**, *...I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ... I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection...* He wanted to know the power of Christ's resurrection working through and with Him. He wanted to be so close to Christ that he was conscious of walking together with Him through every moment of every day of life. Don't you?

Oh, when you go out to the garden tomb and find it empty, it makes a difference! Jesus is alive, and that gives you a purpose and a power and a partnership in life that nobody else has! *An agnostic professor once said to a little girl who believed in Jesus, "There have been many who claimed to be Christ. How can you be sure who told the truth? Which one do you believe?" Without hesitation, the little girl replied, "I believe in the One who rose from the dead!"* So do I! He's living right now. He's living in me and in you. And my life will never be the same. Yours won't either!

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THREE PLACES THAT CHANGE YOUR LIFE

Gethsemane: Yielding To The Will of the Father - Mt. 26:36-45

I would like to take you with me to three places. They are the three most important places in the Savior's life on earth and when you understand what they mean to you, you'll find they are three places that literally change your life. To get to the first, you leave the gate of the city of Jerusalem and descend the valley to the brook Kidron. Crossing it, you turn slightly left on a road leading to the Mt. of Olives. After a short distance, you turn off to the right, into a garden called Gethsemane. It was here the Savior came to pray at night before He was crucified. So let us consider together:

I. The Place of Gethsemane (36-37) It was a small property, enclosed by a stone wall with a gate at the entrance. Inside were a variety of trees and shrubs, but mostly olive trees. A quiet place to pray alone. But by the entrance was the feature that gave the garden it's name:

1. the name of the place indicates pressure *Gethsemane*, the oil-press. There was a vat where the olives would be cast and pressure applied, until the precious oil ran out. The very name of the place speaks of pressure. How fitting that here the Savior came to endure His night of pressure. This night, Gethsemane is the press where Christ feels the pressure of the cross, where His spirit is wrung in agony until He sweats, as it were, great drops of blood. But there is another thing here that is also symbolic. Notice:

2. the arrangement of the people symbolizes priesthood Christ comes with eleven disciples to the gate of the garden and there He leaves eight of them, inside the entrance, but able to go no further. Three of them He takes with Him further to a special place of privilege, to watch and pray with Him, but even they cannot go all the way. He Himself goes alone a little farther still, to enter the presence of the Father. Doesn't this arrangement, the many, the few, the one, seem familiar? It reminds us of the Temple. The many may come into the courtyard, but only a few, the priests, could go into the Holy Place to serve and minister to God, and only One, the High Priest, could go into the Holy of

Holies in the very presence of God. To this point in His ministry, Jesus has been the Great Prophet. It is in Gethsemane He begins His work as the Great High Priest, offering Himself to God.

The pressure and the priestly act of prayer in Gethsemane are related, and you will find they have a meaning for us as well. So let's consider first:

II. The Pressure of Gethsemane (37-38) It is difficult to describe the pressure that was upon Christ as He entered that garden, but in verse 37 there are two words which spell out something of:

1. the nature of it

a. sorrow The Greek word means *pain*, whether it is physical anguish or mental anguish. Christ was hurting in Gethsemane; He was feeling pain. What pain? The pain of knowing what lay ahead. And by that, I don't mean the physical agony of being crucified or the thought of dying. Rather, the thing on His mind is "the cup". The Psalmist said in 75:8, "In the hand of the Lord is a cup… He pours it out and the wicked of the earth drink it to the dregs". Isaiah called it the cup of His wrath (51:17) and Jeremiah (25:15) said it was filled with the wine of His wrath. At this point, Jesus is beginning to taste, beginning to feel in His soul, the eternal, horrible, wrath of God against sin which He is going to have to bear on the cross. But He is also experiencing:

b. confusion The word *troubled* comes from a Greek root which means “without knowledge” and it indicates dismay or bewilderment, not knowing what to do. And that's what you hear as you listen to Christ pray, the conflict of desires. *Thy will* and *my will*. *Thy will* being going to the cross and enduring the wrath, and *my will* being not to go! Which should I do? And notice:

2. the extent of it He was exceedingly full of sorrow, even to the point of death. Had angels not come to strengthen Him, as Luke tells us, the anguish of Gethsemane alone might have been enough to kill Him!

Have you been to a place like Gethsemane in your life? A place of pressure. A place where you know that doing what God wants you to do is going to be painful and hurt. It's going to mean giving up something or experiencing something you don't want to. And you're confused, because you want to please God and do His will, but on the other hand, the flesh doesn't want to experience the hurt and would rather go its own way. Have you been there in that place of pressure where you feel the agony of being squeezed by the alternatives? What do you do? You do what Christ did, you pray:

III. The Prayers of Gethsemane Christ went to the Father by Himself and prayed three times. Only brief lines from each time are included here, but the first one I call:

1. the prayer of exploration (39) *"If it is possible..."* For this moment, Christ explores before the Father the possibility of His own desire. Yet note how quickly He adds, "Yet not as I will..." He only explores in the context of obedience, of willingness, of submission. Some people think you're a spiritual weakling if you pray like that; they think you have no faith if you pray and add, "if it be Thy will". But Jesus did it. He prayed, "Lord, I am totally committed to doing your will, but is it possible that your will can be accomplished any other way? Am I missing something? Is there some way for me not to have to do this thing I don't want to do and still be obedient to You? If there is, show me!" That's exploring in prayer and there's nothing wrong with exploring. That's where you begin. But next Christ prays:

2. the prayer of resignation (42) This time it's slightly different. "If it is NOT possible, Thy will be done." "Lord, if there is no other way; if this is the only way, that I must drink this cup, then I'm ready, so be it!" That's resignation to God's will. That's saying, "Whatever you want, Lord, I say yes". That's where God wants you to get to, the place where you are resigned to His will, whether it is life or death, light or heavy, fun or fearful. But the Savior prays a third time:

3. the prayer of ratification (44) He prayed the same thing. Why? Because God didn't hear him the first time? No, to ratify the decision He'd made. To confirm that He was more than just giving up because there was no choice; He was choosing to do God's will above all else. He was certain of what God wanted and what He would do and there was no use for Gethsemane to continue any longer. Now I want you to step back from the passage a moment and look into something the book of Hebrews has to say, so that we can discover:

IV. The Principle of Gethsemane Look carefully here and you'll find that Gethsemane is mentioned in Hebrews and it says that:

1. His prayer was an offering - Heb. 5:7-10 These chapters of Hebrews are presenting the truth that Christ is our great High Priest. And in Gethsemane, He made an offering to God! Here's what He did:

a. action: He yielded Himself to the Father Just as the Levitical priest would take the animal and lay it on the altar and burn it up, so Christ, by yielding His life to the Father's will, took the first step in the sacrifice of the cross. His “YES” to God's will meant the sacrifice of Himself. But notice the:

b. result: He completed God's perfect will His life was brought to its ultimate and final and perfect purpose, the salvation of the world. His yielding to the Father meant that He could shout the next afternoon, "It is finished" and know that He had finished the work the Father had given Him to do and that eternal salvation was secured for all who will believe. And when you think about it, the same thing is true of us:

2. our yielding is offering - Rom. 12:1-2 Here's what God wants of us when we face a Gethsemane, a place of choice, a place of pressure:

a. action: we yield ourselves to the Father Christ's priestly act of worship was to yield to the Father, to present His life to the Father as an offering. And that is our spiritual act of worship, our priestly service. We take our bodies, and by that we mean the totality of our lives, and present them as a living offering to God. We come to the place of resignation where we say, "Lord, if there is no other way, then I am willing to do this or whatever you ask; I am yours!" That is an act of worship, the presenting of an acceptable sacrifice to God. And look at the:

b. result: we experience God's perfect will Then, and only then, do you live out in your experience God's perfect will. You accomplish God's perfect purpose in your life and it is brought to its fruition and fulfillment which He designed it for!

But there's one more thing I want you to notice about Gethsemane. It was permanent. From that moment on, through the arrest and trial and six hours on the cross, Christ never looked back, never re-debated the issue, never had a hint of changing His mind. Gethsemane was the choosing of a path of life between self-will or God's will. And that's what Gethsemane is for you, the choice of how you will live, of what principle will be the bottom-line factor in your life, my will or God's will. You may be forced to make that choice in a time of crisis and difficulty, when there is some catastrophic situation facing you. But you can just as well do it right now. You can come to Gethsemane and face the question of, “How am I going to live my life?” And you can choose, "Lord, I give you my life; I dedicate it to your will. From here on, it will always be, “Not my will, but Thine!" And when you go to Gethsemane and make that decision, it will change your life. It will make you a new kind of person. I did it when I was 19 years old. For me it came in the form of a time of agonizing and struggling over a career choice, over what God wanted me to be. I wanted to be what I wanted, which was to be a biologist, a carpenter, anything but what God wanted me to be, a pastor. And I wrestled and struggled, until one night I fell on my knees and went to Gethsemane and prayed, "Lord, if there's no other way, then I'll do what you want me to do!" And it changed my life. Because, you see, I was doing more than choosing a particular vocation; I was choosing a principle to live by, the principle of His will over my own, always! And that's the choice you as a Christian need to make, if you haven't already. What path will I follow, God's or mine? What principle will I live by, submission or self-centeredness. Doug Oldham used to sing, "Have you had a Gethsemane?" You may have been there long ago and chosen right. You may be there today because of some crisis in your life. Or you may be there because this sermon just put you there. The choice is yours. Will you make it?

THREE PLACES THAT CHANGE YOUR LIFE

Golgotha: Trusting In The Work Of The Son - Mt. 27:32-50

Today I would like to take you to a second place that will change your life. Last week we went to Gethsemane where Christ yielded to the Father's will and saw how that principle of yielding your life to His will will change it for good. To get where we're going today, you take what is called the Via Dolorosa, the way of suffering. You leave Pilate's Praetorium, or judgment hall, and go out through the city gate to the north along a main road, and before too long, you come to:

I. The Place Called Golgotha (32-33) The actual location of Golgotha is debated. On the traditional site, a church was built, called the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and as the city has grown, is now included within the actual city. It has been venerated by pilgrims for centuries. However, in the last century, another site to the north of the present city has been proposed and accepted by a great many, known as Gordon's Calvary. There are proponents of both sites, but there is only one thing we know for sure from Scripture:

1. the location of the place speaks of exclusion It was outside the city walls, outside the place of the people of Israel. To put it in Old Testament language, it was outside the camp. There is something symbolic about that. He was rejected by His own people and it is as though they were saying, "This man is no part of us". He was excluded from Israel in His death. Golgotha is a place of exclusion. We'll see an even deeper symbolism to this fact in a little while, but right now notice that:

2. the name of the place speaks of death *Golgotha* is the Aramaic word for *skull*, just as *Calvary* is the Latin word for it. Nobody really knows why they called the place that. It is generally accepted that it was a hill which itself looked like a skull. Some suggest that it was the customary place of execution for criminals, the place of stoning, but we don't know that either. To me, it doesn't matter why the place was so named, "the skull" signifies what it has always signified in all times and places: death. Golgotha is a place of death. How fitting that here the Son of God came to die. As the story unfolds, we have:

II. The Program On Golgotha Here is a brief record of the events that happened to the Son of God there over a period of six hours, from 9 in the morning to 3 in the afternoon. First there was:

1. the Son's suffering (34-36) He was:

a. nailed to a cross: physical suffering Crucifixion was not a Jewish method of execution. It was a Roman idea. It was a way of dying designed to be slow and painful and highly visible, so that all Rome's subjects would think twice before rebelling against her wishes! They loved to line the roads with crosses, that all who pass by might see and fear. It was very simple really. One was nailed through the wrists and tops of the feet to a cross of wood and left to hang in agony for a day or two, until the body finally wearied of struggling to breathe and died. But the physical suffering was not all that the Savior endured there; He was:

b. identified as a criminal: moral suffering (37-38) The reason there was a sign above Him is that it was the written charge for which he was executed. He was being executed as a criminal. In fact, He was crucified between two robbers without distinction, just three criminals executed for their crimes. Is. 53:12 says that He was "numbered with transgressors". What a moral outrage! The sinless, spotless, Son of God counted as the vilest of sinners and worthy of death. How that must have hurt! But that's how the world counted Him and, as we'll see in a moment, that's how the Father had to count Him as well! Then, He was:

c. mocked by the crowd: emotional suffering (39-44) The people that passed by on the road to Jerusalem taunted Him. The religious leaders mocked Him. Even the thieves, vile sinners, made fun of Him. The things they jestingly told Him to do, He very easily could have done, if it were the Father's will. But as it was, He had to hang there in agony and endure their taunts. Yet worst of all was the agony of being:

d. separated from the Father (45-46) At noon, a great darkness came over all the land, symbolizing the darkness in the Savior's soul. At last, about 3:00, He vocalizes the agony of what is happening, "My God, why have you forsaken Me?" It is at this time that, "He who knew no sin was made sin for us." It was here that, "He himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree." The Father was pouring out on the Son the cup of His eternal wrath against sin and the Son was drinking it to the dregs. He was taking our hell, enduring our punishment. And finally, after the six hours of suffering comes:

2. the Son's death (50) Jn. 19:30 tells us what that loud cry was, "It is finished!" God's plan and purpose is now accomplished. The sin debt of the world is paid. There is nothing left to do, save one thing, to die and shed His blood, for without shedding of blood, the very giving of life, there is still no forgiveness of sin. And so, He dismisses His spirit; He steps out of His body and into the world of the spirit and says, "There, it is done; I have died for sins". That is the program of Golgotha in one word: death. The Son of God had to die. But why, what is:

III. The Purpose of Golgotha We have looked at Golgotha or Calvary from the earthly viewpoint of Matthew. But now let's step back and look from God's viewpoint as the Father in heaven. Compare Heb. 13:10-12. I do realize the context of these verses, which is encouraging these Hebrew Christians to separate from their Judaistic background. But in the process of his argument, the writer uses some facts that make clearer the meaning of what happened on Golgotha. You see:

1. the cross was an altar Christ's death was an act of sacrifice unto God and that makes the cross an altar where the Son of God was offered up. That's why John cried out, "Behold the Lamb of God!" Christ, in dying on the cross, was the sacrificial victim, who for centuries had been represented by innocent lambs dying and giving their lives. Now what kind of a sacrifice was it?

2. the crucifixion was a sin offering There are five types of offerings in Leviticus. All the types of offerings the Israelites brought were burned on the altar in the Temple or eaten in part by the worshippers. However, there was one type where the animal was killed and the blood sprinkled and then its body was taken outside the camp and burned there. It was the sin offering. And that's why Jesus suffered the fire of God's wrath outside the city gate; His death was a sin offering, a sacrifice given to make atonement for the sins of the world, for your sins and mine and the result is:

3. the sacrifice made us holy Before the animal was sacrificed, the worshipper laid hands on its head and confessed his sins over it, thereby symbolically transferring his sins to the animal. The shedding of the blood of the sin offering meant that the worshipper's sins were now paid for and taken away from him and he was now holy before God, clean, pure, forgiven! The animal had taken his place, and therefore his punishment, and he was forgiven. My friend, on Golgotha, Jesus Christ the Son of God took your place! He offered Himself to God in your stead, took the eternal suffering that you deserved, so that you can be forgiven. In a very real sense, His death was your death, died for you ahead of time! So let me show you now:

IV. The Promise of Golgotha - 1 Cor. 1:18, 21-24 What happened on Golgotha bears a relationship to every person that ever lived and those persons fall into two types, and only two. The message that Jesus Christ was crucified as a sin offering comes first:

1. to those who are perishing, lost, apart from God. And to them it is one of two things:

a. a stumbling block To the Jews it was a stumbling block. They could have believed that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah and they might have, except that He was crucified. The Jews demand a miracle of power. If He

had come down from the cross and destroyed His enemies, then they could have received Him. But not a crucified Savior. There was no such thing for them. To some it still is a stumbling block today. The Jews stumble over it. The cults stumble over it. Yet to most people today it is just:

b. foolishness Greeks or Gentiles like us, require logic. It has to make sense. It has to be rational. I have to be able to understand it. How could it be that the death of a man on a cross 2,000 years ago has anything to do with me? How can one man, even if He is both God and man, give his life for the whole world? To most people, Golgotha is a tragedy and a shame, but as far as personal application is concerned, it is just irrational and not believable. And that's because they haven't been to Golgotha themselves. However:

2. to those who are saved Golgotha is a great and wonderful promise. To those who receive the message and believe that the Son of God did indeed die for their sins, to us, the cross is:

a. the power of God It is the Message that changed our lives, that brought us forgiveness of sins and assurance of heaven, that brought a new power and righteousness into our lives. And it is also:

b. the wisdom of God It is a marvelous thing that in God's wisdom He could be just and punish sin and yet by taking the punishment for them, could forgive the sinners. The cross reconciles once for all God's love and His justice. They meet there and are both satisfied!

There was a song I used to hear that said, "I've been to Calvary..." My friend, I want to ask you today if you've been to Golgotha, to the cross, to trust in what Christ did there as the sacrifice for your sins. It is a place that will change your life. You will never be the same. I went there when I was 15 years old. I had been attending church and Sunday School for several years and I was feeling drawn toward God. I thought all I had to do to please Him was to be good, to quit using bad language and read the Bible and pray and be nice to others. I decided to become a church member and there in that membership class, I learned what Golgotha or Calvary was really all about. I came to understand that I was a sinner, separated from God and lost and deserving of eternal punishment. And I understood that Jesus was the Lamb, the sin-offering, who was offered as my substitute on the cross. And one day, I went in prayer to the foot of that cross and asked the Lord Jesus to be My Savior. I trusted in the finished work that He had done there. I invited Him into my life. And I have never been the same. It changed my life. Most of you have already been to Golgotha and trusted in Christ and if so, then rejoice in what the cross means to you. The place of death became the very place that brought life to you. But if you have not, maybe you'd like to go there right now.

THREE PLACES THAT CHANGE YOUR LIFE

The Garden Tomb: Living In The Power Of The Spirit - Mt. 27:57-28:6

We have looked together at two of the most important places in the Savior's ministry, at Gethsemane where He yielded His will to the Father and Golgotha where He accomplished our salvation. And we have seen how our lives are changed personally when we go to Golgotha, to the cross, and receive Christ as our Savior, and also how they are changed when we make the decision of Gethsemane to yield our own will to that of the Father as a way of life. The third important place in Jesus' life doesn't even have a name. John says simply, *At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden and, in the garden, a new tomb, in which no one had ever been laid...and since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there. - 19:41-42*. It was a tomb carved out of solid rock. Only a week earlier, Jesus had said that God was able to make the very rocks cry out in His praise. Well, this garden tomb is one rock that shouts a message loud and clear, a message that will change your life. Let's look together at:

I. The Message of the Tomb But to help us understand it, let's first examine:

1. the physical facts about the tomb (27:57-60) It was located on or very close to Calvary and was built into the side of a hill. It was the tomb of a rich man, Joseph of Arimathea, who had secretly become a disciple of Jesus, but now stepped forth publicly to claim His body. Joseph was rich enough, not only to own a tomb, an above-ground burial place, but to have had a new tomb carved out of solid rock. It is important to understand what a tomb is. It is something quite unknown to us. A tomb is a secure place where bodies would be placed to decay. When only bones were left after a long period, those would be gathered and placed in a box or ossuary to make room for more bodies. Thus, it was used again and again over generations. A normal tomb would first have a court, which could be as large as 9 x 9 feet, where the body and the funeral bier on which it was carried could be laid and the body prepared for burial. Then it opened back further into a vault at least 6 x 9 feet, with niches or shelves for about eight bodies at one time. A tomb like this was no small undertaking. It was tremendously expensive to build, but the fact that stands out about it is that it was obviously meant to last for centuries. And if you can picture the precious body of Jesus laid carefully on that stone shelf in the heart of the rock, that is:

2. the symbolic message of the tomb: permanence Everything about this tomb cries out that death is permanent. It is once and for all. There is no reversing it. It is as sure as the very rock of the earth. None who enter the gate of it ever come out again! And there are two more facts which add to this symbolism:

a. it was closed (60) A huge round stone called the *golel* was rolled into place over its opening. This stone would have been similar to a millstone standing on edge and would roll in a stone track across the entrance. It might weigh as much as a ton or more. Several men would be required to start it rolling out of the way. Permanence! The inhabitants of the tomb are dead; they are sealed forever! And beyond that:

b. it was secured (65-66) The authority of Rome, the mightiest power in the world, put a wax seal on the edge of that stone which said that it would never be moved. Anyone breaking the seal would join the inhabitants inside! Everything about this tomb shouts, "DEATH CERTAINLY CAN KEEP ITS PREY"; it is permanent! But that only makes more pointed:

3. the spiritual message of the tomb: power You see, no matter what Rome said, no matter what the rock said:

a. it was opened (28:1-4) That heavy stone was moved; it was rolled back, but not with human hands! By His mighty power, God's angel rolled away the stone, opened the tomb and shook the very earth in which Jesus was buried. The open tomb says that our God is a God of great power and might. But more important is the fact that:

b. its occupant was raised (5-6) The One who was crucified, the One who was buried there, the One who was certainly in the permanent grip of death, from which no man has ever returned, is not here, He is risen just as He said! Think of the mighty power of God that not only opened the tomb, but raised the dead! This tomb veritably shouts POWER. Our God is not some weak God who tries in vain to influence the world. Our God, by His simple command, created the universe! Our God sustains it all and rules it all. And Our God has power, even over death! That is the message of the Garden Tomb: God's power to bring new life out of permanent death! The Tomb shouts Resurrection Power. And when we begin to think about how that applies to our lives right now, we can look into the Epistles and see:

II. The Message of the Resurrection Let's take it one step at a time. Paul understood resurrection power and here's what he says about it:

1. that power is for us - Eph. 1:18-20 Did you hear what he said? That power, that same great and mighty power which raised Christ from the dead, and later took Him up to heaven and seated Him at the right hand of the Father, that power is FOR US. It is not simply something which God has and uses when He wants to. That power is for us, literally, *unto* us. It is a power that bears a relationship to us and to our daily living. And that's what Paul prays that we might see and understand with our very hearts. Now, if that power works in our lives, where is it?

2. that power is in us - Rom. 8:9-11 Did you hear that? The Spirit of Him who raised Christ from the dead is living in you. The Holy Spirit, through whom Rom. 1:4 says God raised Christ from the dead, that Spirit whose Resurrection Power set Him at the Father's right hand, lives inside every one of us who believes in Jesus Christ! That is, by very definition. A Christian is one in whom dwells the Spirit of Christ, the Holy Spirit. But think what that means; Almighty God with all His irresistible power lives inside your body to accomplish the purposes of God in your life! But notice:

3. that power must be drawn upon by us Just because that mighty power is in us does not mean that it is working in our behalf. Listen again to Paul who says:

a. it must be desired - Phil. 3:10 Here's Paul, an old man now, a believer of many years. He already knows Christ. He's already had Christ's mighty power work through him. Yet what does he want? To know Him more and to know and experience more and more of His power in his life! If we want to know God's power at work in our lives, we cannot be satisfied just to do things ourselves, to go through the motions of life on our own. We have to want God's power to be at work. But it is not enough to desire it:

b. it must be depended on - Gal. 2:20 Here is the animating principle of the Christian life. The resurrected living Christ in all His power lives inside me in the person of the Holy Spirit, so it is no longer I who am doing the living in my own strength. It is Christ who lives in me and through me. The life that I live here and now, I don't live by my own strength, by my own ingenuity, by my own ability. I live it by trusting in the Son of God who died to save me and who now lives to empower me! I must live every moment depending on, counting on, drawing on, that Resurrection Power inside me. Thus, we find that:

4. that power lives our life It is not I that does the living, it is Christ living in and through me, living out His life in me. That power:

a. it sustains us - Phil. 4:13 How do we endure hardship and difficulty? How do we make it through the death of a loved one or sitting by the bedside of one who is ill? How do we stand the pain of suffering or loss? Paul said there is a secret to it. You have enough strength for all things through the power of the living Christ inside of You. All you have to do is to realize that and draw upon it, by depending on it and not on yourself! It is the power of God that sustains you through difficulty. You don't have to just do the best you can! Further:

b. it serves God - Col. 1:29 When you serve God, it is not just that you, in your own strength, decide to do something nice for God. You depend upon His power to work through you and when you do, you'll find that Divine Energy at work enabling you to serve God in truth and power.

Now friend, when you get hold of it, that truth will change your life! Most of us have a picture of the Christian life that looks like this: "I come to the cross and receive Christ and God saves me. Then I yield myself to what He wants and He leads me. But basically, He lays out the path, gives the directions, marks out the map for my life, and it is now up to me to live it. And if I need a little supernatural help now and then, He might lend a hand!" No sir! Christ is your life and He wants in every moment of your life to put His divine resurrection power into everything you do. So many Christians walk around frustrated, thinking, "How in the world am I ever going to be what God wants me to be, to do what God wants me to do?" And they try and they fail and they get frustrated and they do it all over again. God doesn't want you to try. He wants you to give up! He wants you to come to Him, moment by moment, and tell Him, "Lord, You do this through Me! You witness through me to that person, You speak a word of comfort through me to that friend, You love that enemy of mine through me. You do it all, Lord!" He wants you to do it until it becomes a habit of life, the very principle by which you live! I don't know when the understanding of that first caught up with me. At 15, I went to Golgotha and was saved. At 19, I yielded my will to God once and for all and had my Gethsemane. But when I went to the garden tomb and learned to let myself stay buried there and live by His power, I don't know. I don't think it was an instantaneous thing. I think it was forged in me through learning to watch God provide for our financial needs, through watching Him use sermons that I knew were lousy to save people, through standing by the side of persons who had lost a loved one and watching God bring comfort to them. Somewhere in there I figured out that it wasn't enough for me to do things. Christ had to do them or they would be useless and empty. And boy is that liberating! I don't have to please God; I don't have to do the difficult, to manage the unmanageable. All I have to do is to depend on Him each moment and let Him do it through me. The power is His, not mine, and it will always be there in unlimited supply to live my life, and yours too. I wonder if you've been to the Garden Tomb, if you're living in the power of the Risen Christ, or just running about in your own strength. Go there today, won't you?

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Vignettes Of Redemption:
Glimpses Of The Cross And Its Impact On The World

The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the central event of all history. The Cross is the focal point of all time; it is the absolute center of all God's purposes and plans. Everything before the Cross looks and points forward to the Cross for its ultimate fulfillment; everything since the cross looks back to the Cross as its ultimate root. Therefore, it is not surprising that:

The Cross appears in vignettes throughout the Old Testament Jesus said to the two disciples on the Emmaus Road in **Lk. 24:25-27**, *..."How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.* He was talking about His death and resurrection, about the Cross. And He took them back to the books of Moses, to Genesis, and right on through He showed them what was written in place after place that was, in reality, pointing to the Cross! But what did He show them? His Name is not written in the Old Testament. There is no point-by-point explanation that one day the Son of God would come into the world and die for sinners and rise again. So how does the cross appear?

- **it is pictured in the lives of God's people - Abraham** offers His Son as a sacrifice, and out of that shines a glimpse of the Cross. **Joseph** is hated and sold by his brothers into slavery, and (so they thought) to death, but in the third year of prison he is raised up and ascends to the very throne of the kingdom, and out of that shines a glimpse of the cross. **Jonah** is thrown overboard to death and lies buried under the sea in a fish's belly for three days before he is spit out on the earth alive again, and out of that shines a picture of the Cross. Time after time, the Cross of Jesus is pictured in miniature in the events of the lives of God's people. But there is more:

- **it is pictured in the words of God's prophets** Men like **David** and **Isaiah** wrote lengthy descriptions of experiences which they themselves never endured. Psalm 22 portrays the agony of a dying man. Isaiah 53 shares the fate of a suffering servant. The eunuch in Acts 8 asked Philip, "Of whom is the prophet writing this, himself or some other man?" And Philip had the understanding to tell him those things were written about Jesus. They pictured the Cross.

Each of these vignettes is only a limited glimpse. The dictionary says that a vignette is either *an unbordered picture that shades off into its background at the edges* or *a short, descriptive literary sketch*. In these events the Cross of Jesus sort of fades into focus and then blends back in and the story moves on. They're brief, indistinct, not quite clear. In themselves, they're limited, and it is only because we already know the full story of the Cross that we can see the Cross pictured in them. However, <u>because</u> we already know the whole story, they do two wonderful things for us. First:

- **they illuminate vividly the suffering of the cross** The New Testement description of the Cross is often brief and factual. "*And they crucified Him*." The deep emotional meaning of the Cross is spelled out much more vividly

beforehand in heart-rending human experiences and in graphic human descriptions that we can relate to, than it is in the New Testament descriptions of the Cross. But the second wonderful thing they do is that:

• **they clarify distinctly the purpose of the cross**, which is ***to impact the whole world!*** It is so easy for us to view the cross in a self-oriented way. By that, I mean to see it always and only as being "for me". We sing, "For me, He died; for me He lives..." We are taught so much to personalize the Cross that we can sometimes miss the bigger point. When read carefully, these vignettes point out so very clearly for us God's ultimate purpose behind the cross, which is to impact the entire world by it.

So let's begin today by looking at the familiar vignette in Genesis 22 where we:

Abraham's Only Son Offered To Bless The World - Gen. 22

It's a strange and unusual story. God tells Abraham to take his son Isaac and offer him up to God as a human sacrifice. On the surface, it is so very unlike the character of our God; it is seems to be against everything in His character of love. There is nothing like it to be found anywhere else in the Bible, that is except one place, at the Cross. And when we think deeply, what we find is that it is here, instead of in Matthew or Luke, that God chooses to really spell out for us:

I. The Tremendous Love The Father Had For His Son (1-2) Those words, "Your son, your only son, whom you love..." are repeated three times by the mouth of God in this passage. The words fairly jump off the page. God is not just talking about Abraham; He's talking about Himself. You see:

1. Jesus, like Isaac, was His Father's very Son If God was testing Abraham, the test was the most severe of all. He did not ask him to give money. He did not ask him to sell all he possessed and give it away, like the rich young ruler. He did not ask him to give up his family and his homeland. He'd done that many years before, and willingly. He didn't even ask him to lay down his own life; he had already risked that in battle. Now God asked Him to freely offer something even dearer, the life of his very son. And you need only to look at the face of your own child to begin to imagine what that meant. The Father is saying, "Imagine freely putting your own child to death; that's what I required of Myself at the cross!" Scripture tells us:

a. the Son was the expression of the Father's own self - Heb. 1:1-3, *In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being...* When I look at my son or my daughter, I say, "That's me! That's my flesh and blood; that's the fruit of my body. That's an expression of my life bursting forth in him or her. See, he even looks like me! I could no more kill him than I could cut off my arm or leg!" Jesus, God's Son, was of one substance, one essence, with the Father. They were bound in an inseparable unity. In fact, all we experience about fathers and sons is simply a faint reflection of their relationship.

b. the Son was heir to all the Father is and has Everything Abraham was or had he would pass to Isaac; it was all for him. His position, his possessions, everything about him was for his Son. Our Father created everything there is, a whole universe, a glorious earth, an entire race of human beings. Why? For His Son! That He and His Son might enjoy them together forever. And just as Isaac must have spent hours each day simply talking and walking with and teaching and working with and just enjoying his son, so our Heavenly:

c. the Father enjoyed a rich relationship with His Son Jesus spoke about it when He bared His heart to His Father the night before He died in **Jn. 17:5, 11**, *And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began. ...I am coming to you. Holy Father....* "Father, what a rich relationship we had in glory before all this. We made the worlds together. We walked the corridors of heaven together. We doted on one another. We fellowshipped by the hour. There was joy and bliss unlike anything here on earth and now I'm your Son and I want to come back home!" That's who the Father sacrificed on the Cross, His very son! But think of this:

2. Jesus, like Isaac, was His one and only Son It wasn't like Abraham had any other children. God had told him that Ishmael didn't count; it was through his ONLY son, Isaac that he would have posterity. Did you ever wonder why? Maybe because it makes him a better picture of God. If Isaac dies, all hope is gone. There are no others to console him, to whom he can relate in the same way; if his son is gone, there will be no more. And so, John says in **1 Jn. 4:9**, *This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.* The one and only person in the world with whom He did or ever could share that relationship, He sent to the Cross out of love for us. And then God tenderly adds, "your son, your only son, whom you love." You see:

3. the Father, like Abraham, deeply loved His Son We can only try to imagine how much Isaac meant to Abraham. He was born when Abraham was 100 years old, after a lifetime of waiting. Abraham had everything else that life could offer in that place. He was a wealthy man with flocks and herds and servants. But at last came the son, and Isaac was the apple of his eye, the only thing, the only one in life that he loved. Isaac was his very life. As it is said of Jacob's

love for Benjamin, *His life is bound up in the bundle of life with the boy*... And the Son our Father sent to the cross was the Son He loved.

a. the Father declared that love at His baptism - Lk. 3:22, *...the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."* The Father said it out loud before all the world, "Son, I love you! I'm pleased with you!" And Jesus knew He was loved because:

b. the Son declared that love in the parable of the wicked tenants. In describing the owner Jesus said in **Mk. 12:6**, "*He had one left to send, a son, whom he loved. He sent him last of all, saying, `They will respect my son.'"* Jesus knew how much the Father loved Him and then again:

c. the Father declared that love at the Transfiguration Peter testified **2 Pet. 1:17-18**, *For he received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain.* This was not some servant the Father was sending. This was not some angel or some friend. This was His Son, His only Son, whom He loved with all His being, that He sent to the Cross!

Now secondly, the story goes on to picture for us:

II. The Terrible Process The Father Faced In Sacrificing His Son (3-14) Let's take a moment to think how awful this process must have been for Abraham, remembering that:

1. Abraham's personal actions illustrate the crucifixion First of all:

a. he cut the wood to burn his son's body **and led his son** to Mt. Moriah in verses **(3-4)**. He himself personally arranged all the circumstances of his own son's death. Just as our Father arranged all the circumstances of His own Son Jesus' death. Peter reminds us in Acts 4 that Herod and Pilate and all the rest who killed Jesus were merely carrying out what God had decided beforehand to do. He arranged it all. As they went up the mountain, Abraham:

b. he laid the wood upon his son (6a) Mt. Moriah is the place where the temple was eventually built, where sacrifices would be offered. But just across the valley, in plain view, there was another hill, which eventually would be called Golgotha. And there our Heavenly Father laid the heavy wooden crossbeam upon His Son, so painfully that He couldn't carry it up the hill. And then:

c. he explained the process to his son (7-8) and:

d. he laid his son upon the wood (9) Abraham carefully tied his beloved son's hands, but our Father had the soldiers throw His Son roughly down upon the wood and drive nails through His wrists and ankles and hang him up upon the cross. And then came the hardest thing of all; Abraham:

e. he took the knife in his own hand to kill his son (10) Can you imagine, here he is with his heart breaking, standing over his son with the knife raised high to take his life! Could you do it? Could I do it? Of course, God stopped Abraham short of the plunge, but He didn't stop Himself. Put crudely, God killed His own Son! He took the very life of His Son, His only Son whom He loved. Can you imagine the pain in that? How could He do it? Well, it is explained to us in Hebrews 11 that Abraham did it by faith. Compare **Heb. 11:17-19**. So what we're told is that:

2. Abraham's rewarded faith illustrates the resurrection

a. he offered his son, knowing he would be raised He told his servants in verse 5, "We'll go worship and we'll be back!" In His heart he was convinced that God couldn't lie and that God had promised that Isaac would become a great nation, so if God commanded that he die, there is only one logical explanation: God planned to raise him from the dead! That didn't make the process of offering him any easier, but the assured result certainly did help to give him confidence in the end result of what he was doing. Isaac would rise! And so, Hebrews says:

b. he received his son back as "raised from the dead" in a figure, a type, a picture. Of what? Of our Heavenly Father who put His Son on the cross, knowing that He would raise Him again the third day. He knew it would turn out all right in the end! But again, that didn't make the process any easier! So why would He do it? What was:

III. The Ultimate Purpose For Which The Father Sacrificed His Son It's revealed in the next verses, the ones we always skip over **(15-18)**. Listen carefully to what the Angel of the Lord Himself said:

1. because Abraham did not withhold his son, all peoples would be blessed Because Abraham demonstrated through this awful ordeal that he had a genuine faith in and loyalty to God, because he did not choose his son over God and hold him back, but obediently gave him up, God would bless him and through Isaac, there would grow to be a nation of Israel under Joseph and Moses, and that nation of Israel would conquer and live in the land of Canaan under Joshua, and from that nation of Israel would come a King named David, and of his line one day there would come a Savior who would go to a cross and die for the sins of the world, and after His resurrection would send His spirit upon

His followers, who would become His church and would take His message to the uttermost parts of the earth, and all the peoples of the earth would be blessed! The entire world would be affected and that made this terrible act of obedience worthwhile. Of course, I'm sure Abraham was not aware of all that hinged on that moment; he just trusted God and did what He was told. But God knew it, and by Abraham's actions, He is saying something about Himself. You see, in the NIV of this promise there are "descendants" and "offspring," plural. But in the Hebrew, there is one word, *seed*, and it is singular. "I will make your Seed (singular) numerous...Your Seed (singular) will possess the gates of His (singular) enemy and through Your Seed (singular) all peoples on earth will be blessed." Who is he talking about? **Gal. 3:16** says, *The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say "and to seeds," meaning many people, but "and to your seed," meaning one person, who is Christ.* You see, what the text is really saying is that:

2. because the Father did not withhold His Son, but gave Him up to the horrible act of the cross, **all the peoples of earth will be blessed**. Some from every people, tribe, tongue and nation would come to Jesus Christ, become followers of His, be rescued from eternal damnation, and live forever with the Father and the Son. And to both of them, the end result was worth the awful price. Look with me at what Jesus said in **Jn. 3:14-17**. Did you hear it? God loved the WORLD. That's why He gave His Son. He put His own Son on the cross to save the WORLD through Him. Sure, that's you and that's me. We've been taught to put our own names in there because we are "whosoevers" that believe and we qualify. But the statement is so much bigger than just that. God so loved that he offered up His Son on the cross to save John Kless and a whole bunch of other "whoseovers" who would live 2,000 years later on the other side of the earth near a strange city called Philadelphia on a continent that wasn't even known to exist at that time. But it's bigger than just that. God so loved that He offered up His Son to save Yanomami Indians in the jungle of Brazil who abandon their babies to die. He so loved that He offered His Son to save Spanish speaking peasants in the fields of Paraguay, some of whom would shoot His messengers! And to save Kyrgyz and Mongolian nomads riding horses and herding sheep in the high mountain passes of Asia and dark-skinned Fulani tribesmen eking out an existence in the heat and dust of Africa. The end result of the cross was that ALL, not just me, not just white, not just some, but ALL peoples on earth will be blessed with salvation and some from every one of them will believe. That's the ultimate purpose, the reason for which He was willing to sacrifice His Son whom He loved! And notice one thing more:

3. the Father committed Himself to that purpose by oath He said, "I swear by Myself. **Heb. 6:13-17** comments, *When God made his promise to Abraham, since there was no one greater for him to swear by, he swore by himself, saying, "I will surely bless you and give you many descendants." And so after waiting patiently, Abraham received what was promised. Men swear by someone greater than themselves, and the oath confirms what is said and puts an end to all argument. Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath.* But notice that same oath that secures the first part of the promise, secures the last part too. God has sworn and he cannot lie, He has sworn on the most Holy thing in the universe, His very own nature, that because of His Son's death, ALL peoples will be blessed! That's why He sent Him. He SO loved the WORLD.

"Frances Ridley Havergal wrote one of her most famous poems while she was in Dusseldorf, Germany. She had gone to Germany to do some specialized study. While there, she saw Sternburg's great painting of `The Crucifixion.' Above the picture were these words: `All this I did for thee; what hast thou done for Me?' Inspired by that probing question, she wrote her famous poem, now a hymn we still sing, `I Gave My Life for Thee, what hast thou done for Me?'" [Pulpit Helps, Mar 1993. Page 16.] As we look at this painting of the Cross in the colors of the life of Abraham, over it we might see the similar question, "All this I did for thee, but not for thee alone. I did it for the world. What hast thou done to see that the purpose of My love is fulfilled as I said?"

Vignettes Of Redemption:

Glimpses Of The Cross And Its Impact On The World

Joseph's Suffering And Exaltation To Save The World - Gen. 37-50

As I shared with you last week, there are many little vignettes or glimpses of the cross of Christ throughout the Old Testament. We have chosen five key passages that also shed light on God's purpose in it. God the Father chose to spell out for us the agony of offering His Son in the life of Abraham by asking him to offer up his son in Gen. 22. But there he also revealed the purpose of offering His Son, which was that through the Cross He would bless all the peoples of the earth with salvation. Today we'll consider the life of Joseph, to which Moses, the writer of Genesis, gives even more space than the life of Abraham, 14 whole chapters. Have you ever pondered why? Well, perhaps it is because, more clearly than in any other Old Testament figure, you can see:

I. The Person Of Christ Portrayed In The Life Of Joseph (ch. 37) As we found that Abraham portrayed for us the Father, so now we find that almost everything in Joseph's life is arranged to remind us of Jesus, the Son. Even as the story begins, we find that:

1. he was the beloved son of his father (3a) He was the firstborn son of Rachel, the wife Jacob really loved, and the only one he had intended to marry. Joseph was the son and heir he had waited for throughout all the years of Rachel's barrenness and the "baby wars," as I like to call them, between her and her sister. But now Rachel is dead and Joseph has grown into manhood at 17; he is the old patriarch Jacob's pride and joy. All his love is showered upon him. However, in a family of 12 boys that's not a good thing and the human lesson in the whole story is the danger of playing favorites with your children; nevertheless, the picture is clear. Our Heavenly Father had one Son that He loved more than anyone or anything else. Joseph:

2. he was robed in his father's glory and remained in his home (3b) Jacob made him a robe, a long, flowing robe. Nobody quite knows the Hebrew meaning, but the KJV says it had many colors. NIV calls it "richly ornamented". One thing is for sure; it was something so out of the ordinary that it was unlike anything any of his brothers had. When he wore it, it was like Cinderella wearing her magic gown at the ball in front of her ugly step-sisters; it was a display of the best of all that his father had. And we saw last week that our Lord Jesus shared in His Father's glory before the world began. He was robed in light, girded with praise. There was just a little glimpse of it on the Mt. of Transfiguration where His robe began to shine bright white with glory, whiter than any bleach on earth could make it. And while Joseph's grown-up older brothers were out and away from their father pasturing and tending the flocks and herds, getting farther and farther away, Joseph stayed at home with him in Hebron, which means "association". And so, from eternity, Jesus, the Beloved Son, was at home in heaven with His Father, enjoying the fellowship of association with Him, until that appointed day spoken of in **Gal. 4:4**, *...when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son*... So we find that, like Jesus, Joseph:

3. he was sent by his father to his own brethren (12-14) He was sent out of the father's presence to find his brothers for their own well-being. He was sent to inquire after their care and needs for their benefit. But understand, Shechem was not over the next hill; it was 50 miles north and Dothan, where they ended up, was 15 miles further. That's like walking every step of the way from Philadelphia to downtown Lancaster; Joseph went at least two, maybe three days' journey to find his brothers. But Jesus came all the way from heaven to earth to be among His brothers, the children of Israel. And He made it clear in **Jn. 8:42**, *Jesus said to them, "...I came from God and now am here. I have not come on my own; but he sent me."* And that's where the story really begins, as Joseph at the age of 17 now enters into 13 full years of suffering beyond anything he could have dreamed or anything we might have experienced. But as we examine carefully the details of it, we find:

II. The Picture Of The Cross Portrayed In Joseph's Suffering It is simply amazing how many of the things that happened to Joseph remind us clearly of the things that happened to Jesus and the pain those things brought to him. First, after all that journey to find them and help them:

1. he was rejected by his brethren (ch. 37) Instead of welcoming him and being glad to see him and to hear news of their father, his own brothers hated him and turned against him. You know, kids in the same family might not get along, but you never expect your own brothers to truly hate you and actually try to kill you. The family bond is supposed to be better than that. If Jesus had been sent to a tribe of headhunters in the South Pacific and they failed to understand and killed him as an enemy, we could at least fathom that. But **Jn. 1:11** reminds us, *He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him*. His own brothers, the children of Israel, the very sons of Jacob, who were looking and waiting for his coming, who longed desperately for the Messiah, who held the Scriptures in high regard, who were His flesh and blood. If anyone should have received Him, it should have been them, but they didn't. They rejected Him! Why? For the same reason as Joseph's brothers. First, they were jealous of the obvious love which his father showed to him. The Scripture says that even Pilate knew it was out of envy that the Jews condemned Jesus and handed him over to him. The favor of God rested upon Him and they couldn't stand it, but further:

a. they were angered by his prophecies of glory Joseph had dreams, remember? Dreams where he was the standing sheaf of grain and all theirs bowed down to his, dreams where the sun, moon and 11 stars were bowing down to him. And his brothers didn't like that **(5).** So, when he came to them at Dothan, look what they said in **(19-20)**, The dreams were given to him by God; he didn't invent them, but simply told the truth and they hated him for it. It reminds me of Jesus' trial in **Mt. 26:64-65**. How many times was this repeated. He would tell them that He came down from heaven. He would say that God was His Father. And now this. The Jewish leaders hated Him for it all; they could not imagine that all these things could actually be true, and so, like Joseph's brothers:

b. they plotted against him to kill him **(18)** Now read in **Mt. 26:3-4**. And it's not only there. They did it when he healed the man with the withered hand. They did it after He raised Lazarus from the dead. They did it openly throughout the last week of his life. Brazen, bold, His own brothers conspiring to take His life. Joseph's brothers were going to kill him directly, but some Midianite traders came along and his oldest brother had a bright idea, "Let's sell him instead", and so it turns out that:

c. he was sold by Judah for the price of a slave (26-28) Do you know how you say Judah in New Testament Greek? You put an "s" on it, so it becomes Judas. Look at **Mt. 26:14-15**. Joseph was only worth 20 pieces of silver to the Midianites because that was the price of a boy sold into slavery. Jesus was sold for the full adult slave price,

30 pieces of silver. And that transaction changed Joseph's life forever. He was no longer free. He could not go home. He could not stay among his brothers. They had finished with him and so:

2. he was turned over to the Gentiles and mistreated (37:36) Now lest you think this was a pleasant experience, the Psalmist explains in Ps. 105:17-18, *…and he sent a man before them-- Joseph, sold as a slave. They bruised his feet with shackles, his neck was put in irons,* And in those heavy chains, the foreigners made him walk 250 miles to Egypt to be mocked and laughed at, pushed and shoved to the platform, and sold in the slave market. It sounds so much like what Jesus said was going to happen to Him in **Mk. 10:33-34**, *"We are going up to Jerusalem," he said, "and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him.*.." And they did. The Jews handed Him over to the Romans, who beat him, hit him in the face, and whipped His back. They even made a crown out of thorns and shoved it into His head and pretended he was a king and bowed down to Him, scoffing, mocking all His predictions of the Kingdom. In short, like Joseph:

a. he was condemned, though innocent You remember in **(ch. 39)** the story of Potiphar's wife. She was the wicked one who wanted to cheat on her husband, but Joseph was righteous and refused, so she accused him of molesting her and he was condemned and sentenced to prison without a fair trial. Pilate said in **Lk. 23:14, 23-24**, *..."You brought me this man as one who was inciting the people to rebellion. I have examined him in your presence and have found no basis for your charges against him. …But with loud shouts they insistently demanded that he be crucified, and their shouts prevailed. So Pilate decided to grant their demand.* Bad enough to be torn away from the father, be betrayed and rejected by brothers, lose all freedom, and be roughly treated by foreigners, but then to be falsely accused and condemned as a wicked criminal, as an enemy of the state! So, in misery Jesus was led off to Calvary and Joseph was led off to prison and ironically enough, there:

b. he suffered between two criminals We read in **(ch. 40)** how the chief baker and the cupbearer of the king of Egypt were sentenced to languish there in prison with him. And they each had dreams that Joseph interpreted for them. But in the end:

(1) one was later forgiven and restored to his position in the court and **joined him** [Joseph] **in his reign** over Egypt, while **the other was lost** and was hanged. And of Jesus, Luke says in **Lk. 23:32-33**, *Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him to be executed. When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals--one on his right, the other on his left.* The one turned to Jesus in faith and was later with Him in paradise. The other was lost. And notice the language. Oddly enough, Joseph even:

(2) he asked the one to "remember" him in verse 14, when he was restored to his position. Just the reverse of the thief who said, "Lord, remember me when You come in your kingdom." But the same key word. Why that word? Why two criminals and not one or three? Why one rescued and one lost? Because God has Joseph's life all arranged to say, "This is what my Son is going to suffer!" You see, in that whole experience in the prison, Joseph:

c. he was buried in intent and figure (40:23-41:1) For two full years he was locked away in the dim dungeon and forgotten. It was as though he had died. His brothers had wanted to kill him. They had thought it was effectively done by selling him to the Gentiles, that they would eventually kill him. Later we read that they were convinced that he was dead. It is as though here in this prison he was buried in a tomb, locked away from the life of earth, forgotten by all and without hope. Just as when Jesus died, He was taken down from the cross and His body laid in a sealed tomb in the rock. It is as though the world said, "He is gone, forgotten; that is the end of Him!" His disciples lost all hope and agonized in despair. But as the song says, "Then came Sunday..." And Joseph:

3. he was raised from the prison of death in the third year (41:1) In the third year, something happened. Pharaoh had a dream and Joseph was lifted out of that prison to interpret it. It's almost like the resurrection. Verse **(14)**. Here he is lifted from the dungeon to stand before the throne, all at once! And transformed, from dirty, grungy prison clothes which smelled of death, bathed and clean-shaven, transformed into a new man. Just as Jesus was raised all at once in a glorious new resurrection body! But not only that:

4. he was exalted to the position of head over all (41:41-43) In one fell swoop, Joseph is seated next to Pharaoh, clothed in a royal robe, wearing the royal ring and ruling over the whole land, reigning as lord of all the other lords. You can see the picture, can't you? **Eph. 1:20-22**, *...[God] raised [Jesus] from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything...* "Lifted up was he to die, It is finished was His cry, NOW IN HEAV'N EXALTED HIGH, HALLELUJAH, WHAT A SAVIOR!"

What a marvelous picture Joseph's life is of all that Jesus would endure and how in the end He would end up sitting at the right hand of the Father, reigning on high as King of Kings and Lord of Lords!

But we're left to ask the question of purpose. Why did God allow 13 years of suffering in Joseph's life? Why did He allow him to be ripped away from his father, be betrayed and sold and sorely mistreated, falsely accused, imprisoned and buried there in Egypt? Just to be a picture of Jesus? No, all this was to put him on the throne for a greater purpose! All along, God had a larger plan and once he was on the throne, Joseph seemed to know what it was. He was able to look back and see what God was doing and all the bitterness and agony of his suffering was forgotten in the light of knowing its purpose. And if we look carefully, we can see not only the purpose of Joseph's suffering, but we can see:

III. The Purpose Of The Cross Displayed In Joseph's Exaltation Look with me at **(50:19-20)** Did you hear it? "God put me through all that suffering at your hands for a purpose. Literally, the Hebrew says, ***to give life to a numerous people***." A huge company of people were given life by God through Joseph's "cross experience". How? **(41:46-49)** There were seven years of famine coming, not only on Egypt, but on the whole region. People would starve to death. Nothing would grow. There would be nothing to eat. But through God's provision of wisdom, Joseph stored up a supply of life-giving grain so huge it was beyond measure! And by that, he impacted the world in a way that was greater than anything he could have imagined. First of all:

1. through his "cross" he gave life to his own people Look what he told his brothers when they came down to him **(45:5-8)**. There would have been no nation of Israel, no Jewish people. Jacob and his little band of 70 family members would have died in the famine back in Canaan. But now Joseph brought them all to Egypt where they would be safe and protected and multiply and become a nation. Through his suffering, God saved the Jewish people. But there's more:

2. through his "cross" he gave life to the Egyptian people (41:54) Why did God send Joseph to Egypt, instead of using him back in Canaan the same way? Because He wanted to save the people of Egypt! Millions of Egyptians, all of them lost in spiritual darkness, worshipping the sun god, worshipping their Pharaoh, would starve to death and be lost forever. But God declared His Name and His power to the entire nation of Egypt through Joseph. He said, "Pharaoh, I cannot interpret your dream, but God can do it... God is telling you what is about to happen. God wants to save your people!". And for 14 years, the Name of the God of Israel was glorified, as year by year, Joseph's interpretations came to pass. The lives of millions of Egyptians were spared, and we hope some of them came to worship the true and living God as well! That's why Joseph endured his cross. But there's more;

3. through his "cross" he gave life to the peoples of the "world" (41:57) Now I realize that the "world" the author is talking about probably only refers to that larger region, but in it there were Canaanites and Hittites and Jebusites and tons of other "ites". And they would have starved too, except that they came to Egypt and through Joseph, were given life and pointed to the true God. The language is suggestive. It literally says the famine was in "all the earth" and "all the earth" came to Joseph to get life-giving grain. What a picture! John writes in **1 Jn. 4:14**, *...the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world.* **1Joh 2:2**, *He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.* **Heb. 2:10**, *In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering.* The cross was to impact the world. The Son suffered to save and give life, not just to the Jews, not just to us, who like the Egyptians have come to know and meet our Joseph, the Lord Jesus, but that the whole world might have life through Him, that every people, tribe, tongue and nation might have those who believe and have life through His name.

Just after 400 AD there was another young man about Joseph's age who lived in Scotland. *Pagan Irish raiders came to his village and he was carried a captive slave into Ireland, with many others. He writes, "I, Patrick, a sinner, the rudest and the least of all the faithful, and the most contemptible with the multitude, had for my father a deacon, the son of a presbyter... I was then about sixteen years old; but I was ignorant of the true God, and was led away into captivity to Hibernia [Ireland]." Patrick served his master six years as a shepherd. While tending his flock in the lonesome fields, the teachings of his childhood awakened to new life in his heart. Being the son of a clergyman, he must have received some Christian instruction; but he neglected it till he was made to feel the power of communion with God while in slavery. "After I arrived in Ireland," he says, "every day I fed cattle, and frequently during the day I prayed; more and more the love and fear of God burned, and my faith and my spirit were strengthened, so that in one day I said as many as a hundred prayers, and nearly as many in the night." One day Patrick had a vision in which he saw a ship that he knew was waiting to take him home. He simply walked away from his master and, as an escaped slave, crossed 200 miles of unfamiliar forests and fields to come out on the coast where, sure enough, there was the ship which, unbelievably, took him on board and he returned home. But there, he once again had a remarkable dream in which he saw a man, Victoricius, who handed him innumerable letters from Ireland, begging him to come over and help them. He obeyed the divine vision, and devoted the remainder of his life to the conversion of Ireland. "I am," he says, "greatly a debtor to God, who has bestowed his grace so largely upon me, that multitudes were born again to God through me. The Irish, who never had the knowledge of God and worshipped only idols and unclean things, have lately become the people of the Lord, and are called sons of God." He baptized many thousands of men. He founded as many as 700 churches, and consecrated as many bishops, and 3,000 priests (when the whole island had probably not more than two or three hundred thousand inhabitants. In less than a century after St. Patrick's death, Ireland was covered with churches and convents for men and women which were training schools of clergymen and missionaries, and workshops for transcribing sacred books. The Irish became the missionaries*

of the next century. Ireland dreamed the dream of converting heathen Europe and from it went forth teams of apostles to Scotland, North Britain, France, Germany, Switzerland, and North Italy. They covered the land and seas of the West. Unwearied navigators, they landed on the most desert islands; they overflowed the Continent with their successive immigrations. They saw in incessant visions a world known and unknown to be conquered for Christ. [Condensed from Schaff, History of the Christian Church, Vol. 4] Joseph saw the purpose of God in his "cross of suffering", to give life to the world, just as Jesus saw the purpose of His cross, to give life to the world. Patrick saw the purpose of his years of slavery and suffering, to give life to the world. The store of life Jesus procured through the cross is enough to save the world. May we too dare to dream the dream that through us and through our suffering, God's purpose is ever the same, through us to give life to the peoples of the world!

Vignettes Of Redemption:

Glimpses Of The Cross And Its Impact On The World

Jonah's Watery Burial And Later Ministry To The World - Jonah 1-4

In this series we are looking at places in the Old Testament where God has planted pictures of the Cross. So far, we looked at Abraham offering his only son as a sacrifice in Gen. 22 and at Joseph's life of suffering that put him on the throne of Egypt that so closely parallels Jesus' suffering which led to His enthronement in heaven. And we saw in both of those cases that God's ultimate purpose through the cross was to impact all the peoples of the earth. Today we come to consider the life of a most un-Christlike character by the name of Jonah. While Abraham showed us the awesome love of the Father and Joseph showed us the tremendous forgiveness of the Son, Jonah doesn't show us anything like that. In fact, his character and actions are exactly the reverse of Jesus! But God used him anyway to bless the world and in his life, there is a vignette of the cross. How do we know? We have it on the authority of Jesus own words:

I. Our Authority For Seeing The Cross In The Life Of Jonah First, we're told:

1. Jonah was to be the exclusive sign to Jesus' generation - Mt. 16:1, 4 Think about that. The Jews want to see a sign from heaven. They had already seen healings and miracles galore and those things didn't convince them that Jesus was God's Son. But Jesus didn't say, "Go read Isaiah's prophecies about Me or look at Abraham offering his son or see how Joseph was put on the throne of the kingdom after he suffered." He says, "Look at Jonah. If these other things mean nothing, there is only one official 'sign' you will be given and that is Jonah; go look at him!" So that makes Jonah significant, doesn't it? But on an earlier occasion, Jesus had explained more:

2. Jonah's burial was a picture of Jesus' burial - Mt. 12:38-40 Wow! Jonah getting swallowed by a huge fish is more than just a neat story! It's a vignette, a little picture to remind us that just as Jonah was buried for three days in the belly of the fish in the depths of the sea, Jesus would be buried for three days in the depths of the earth! Jonah's experience foreshadows Jesus'! And:

3. Jonah's ministry was a picture of Jesus' ministry - Mt. 12:41 "I'm here preaching to you the same way Jonah went and preached to the people of Nineveh, except they listened and you won't! His ministry foreshadows Mine! Take a lesson from the Ninevites and listen; someone greater than Jonah is here to listen to!" It's obvious that several times Jesus directed the Jews to go back and look at the book of Jonah, the record of Jonah's life, and to look for glimpses of Him in it! So we're going to do exactly that and what we find is that:

II. Jonah's Rebellion Is A Reverse Picture Of The Cross It has the exact opposite motive, but the very same effect. Let's start with this fact:

1. Jonah was the "Son of Truth" (1:1) His father's name was Amittai which means "my truth"; that makes him *Jonah ben-amittai*, "the son of truth". We know from **2 Kin. 14:25** that he was a prophet, *[Jeroboam] was the one who restored the boundaries of Israel from Lebo Hamath to the Sea of the Arabah, in accordance with the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, spoken through his servant Jonah son of Amittai, the prophet from Gath Hepher.* God spoke forth His truth through Jonah and it came true. He was a son who was a conduit of God's truth. And didn't Jesus say in **Jn. 14:6**, *I am the way and the truth and the life...*? *...for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me. - 19:41-42.* He was the Son who was the truth! And:

2. Jonah was sent by God on a mission to save a people NOT his own (1:2) Jesus *came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. -* **Jn. 1:11**. Jonah was sent to a people who weren't his own, but when he finally went, they DID receive him! You see:

a. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria At that time, the ascending world power was the Assyrian empire. They were ruthless, cruel conquerors who often tortured and destroyed their victims. They were **Israel's wicked enemy**; dropping the name of Nineveh conjures up thoughts like the name Berlin did in WWII. It was the capital city of "the evil empire". Jonah and all the other good Israelites hated the people of Nineveh, much the same way we might regard Pol Pot and his Khmer Rouge as butchers who turned Cambodia into "The Killing Fields". They had already conquered many peoples and Israel was in their sights. Indeed, within 50 years or so we know from hindsight that

Assyria would destroy the northern kingdom of Israel and carry off her people into captivity. That's who Jonah was sent to, kind of like Jesus was sent "to this wicked sin-cursed earth", in the language of the hymn. And Jonah's flesh didn't want to go! Not because he was afraid of what the Ninevites would do to him, but because:

b. he knew that God would save them if he went (4:2) "God, I don't want to see them saved; I want to see them die and I knew that you're a God who is full of grace and compassion and you forgive sins. You'd spare them!" The Lord Jesus came to earth on the same premise, knowing His Father was full of grace and love and would save even His enemies. That's what the cross is all about, *...when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son - Rom. 5:10*! And so, there was a conflict of God's will and Jonah's will that we might call:

3. Jonah's Gethsemane: (1:3) Jonah wrestled with this, "Do I obey God, die to self and go save my enemies, or not?" And the outcome was basically to tell God, ***not Thy will, but mine be done*** "I'm not going to do it Your way; I'm going my way! I want them to fry!" And he gets up from his knees and gets on this ship headed 180º in the opposite direction to "flee from the Lord", the only prophet in the Bible who ever tried that! Aren't you glad our Savior knelt down to pray and said, "Not my will but THINE be done!" and went to the cross! His flesh didn't want to go either; everything about the cross repulsed Him. He begged for there to be another way,, but in the end He obeyed the Father and went to Calvary. And so did Jonah, but unwillingly:

4. Jonah's Calvary: the deadly storm (1:4-11) What a contrast! Around the cross stood a crowd of unbelieving Jews, mocking and jeering at Jesus to come down, showing no reverence for God at all. Yet here around Jonah stood a crowd of idol-worshipping Gentiles in absolute awe of the true God, begging him to tell them how to be saved from God's wrath! And in that moment, Jonah made a decision in verse **(12)**. "Kill me", he says. "Throw me overboard and when I die, God's wrath will be satisfied and you will be safe!" That tells us something really deep:

a. he was willing to die to save his people from Assyria He could have repented and changed his heart and told God he was sorry and asked the ship to turn around. But he wouldn't change his heart; he would rather die than save the Ninevites. Why? Because he knew what they would do to his people Israel. He knew they would come and invade the land and destroy it. Other prophets like Isaiah had said so. And he stood ready to die, not to save the world, but to save his people, to stand against God Almighty if he had to, to do it! And so:

b. he was "killed" by pagan sailors who knew what they did (1:13-15) The pagan Roman soldiers who nailed Christ to the cross sat at his feet and gambled for His garments. He prayed, "Father, forgive them for they don't know what they're doing." They had no idea they were taking the life of the Son of God until later. These sailors knew what they were doing and didn't want to do it. But they had to and so they threw Jonah overboard to his death. Nobody, not even Jonah, had a thought that he would survive. But God had other plans **(1:17)**. Here we have:

5. Jonah's Burial: three days in the great fish I don't have time to argue about whether it was a whale or a fish or how it's possible. The whole point is the time frame, three days! Jesus said those three days were a picture of His own burial. Jonah was buried beneath the surface of the sea. Look at his own words in **(2:2b-3, 5-6a)**. As the fish was swimming down, Jonah realized what was happening and he saw it as his own burial! The Son of Man was laid in a tomb carved out of the solid rock of the heart of the earth and sealed in. For three days Jonah remained locked in darkness, shivering, covered with fish slime, struggling to breath the last of the oxygen, terrified and crying to God for help. For three days (by Jewish reckoning) Jesus' body was locked in the stone cold tomb in the absolute confidence that God had already heard His cry and on the third day He rose. And so did Jonah.

6. Jonah's Resurrection is in **(2:10)**. He was **spit out alive onto dry land**. That's a miracle. God spoke the word to that fish and told it to swim back out of the depths and swim to shore and nearly beach itself and spew Jonah out so he'd wind up, not in the middle of the sea to drown, but on the dry land where he started! It's a picture of resurrection. Acts 2:24, *God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.* The grave couldn't hold Him; it spit Him out! Death couldn't keep Him, just like it couldn't keep Jonah.

But now we come to the point. The fish is only half the story. The real story is in chapters 3-4. After being rescued Jonah went to Nineveh and had a ministry and:

III. Jonah's Ministry Is A Picture Of The Purpose Of The Cross Why did God have Jonah thrown into the sea and buried for three days?

1. God put Jonah through his "cross" to save the world, the Gentiles, the other peoples who were not Israel. It began with the very sailors who "killed" him in **(1:16)**. Just like the Roman centurion who said, "Surely this man was the Son of God", they saw the physical signs that accompanied his "death" and worshipped the true God. But the real harvest came afterward in **(3:1-5, 10)**. What an amazing thing! Jonah goes to the capital of the "evil empire", to those who know no fear and are conquering the world, and preaches and they all repent in sackcloth and ashes and they are

saved from destruction!" Think how that change must have affected all the nations under their domination, at least for a few years! The whole world of that day would hear of the change and the reputation of the True God. The resurrected Jesus sent His disciples out to make disciples of all peoples, to go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature and Mark says, *...the disciples went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word. - 16:20.* That's what the cross was all about. It was not to save Israel, not just to bless one people; it was to save the world! And why did they believe Jonah? Jesus tells us the answer:

2. "resurrected" Jonah was a sign to the world - Lk. 11:29-30 Jonah himself, not the three days in the fish, but the person of Jonah standing there alive, preaching to them after having been thrown overboard to death and surviving three days, was the evidence of the power of God to the Ninevites. He was to them a walking, talking, dead man. Maybe the acid in the fish's digestive tract had bleached all the pigment out of his skin, as has happened to sailors who've been swallowed, or maybe they were simply less skeptical than we are when we hear of miracles; we don't really know why. But the fact is that they believed that he stood there, alive from the dead, a miraculous act of God. That's why they repented at his words. **Jn. 2:18-19**, *...the Jews demanded of [Jesus], "What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days."* "I'm the sign! When I stand here alive after you kill me, that will be the sign to this generation and all generations that I am the one and only Savior". In his very first sermon, Peter said in **Acts 2:32**, *God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact.* That is the Gospel message: Jesus died for our sins and HE ROSE AGAIN! And everywhere His church has gone throughout the world, we, like the apostles, have preached one thing, Jesus and the resurrection! And people have called on the living Jesus and He has come into their lives and saved them. He is the living sign of the truth that God wants to save the world! But as He finishes the record of Jonah, what God is telling us is that:

IV. The Cross Reveals God's Heart For The World Even after all this, Jonah's heart still isn't changed. He still doesn't love the Ninevites and he's not happy they're saved from destruction. So he sits outside the city and pouts and wishes he was dead. And it's hot and miserable out there and God makes this vine grow up overnight to give him shade and he loves it and then, over the next night, God kills the vine and he pouts some more and finally, God speaks directly to him to make His point in **(4:9-11)**. That's the punchline of the story; that's what it's all about. God cares about all the people of the world! That's why He sent His Son; that's why He sent Jonah through his ordeal. And yet, much of the time, we find ourselves identifying more with where Jonah is than where God is. Note the four lessons in these verses. First:

1. God cares because He <u>created</u>; God cares about the things He created. Actually, we're a lot like that; **we focus on what impacts us**. The things like that plant that touch or impact our lives directly, the things we have a hand in or a stake in, those are the things that seem to matter to us. The difference is that God created <u>everything</u>. So He cares about the plant. He cares about all the cattle in Nineveh. And He cares about the people of Nineveh and the world because He made them. They're His and He made them all to serve a purpose in His plan. Our challenge is to lift our eyes to care about things we didn't make, people we have nothing to do with and don't even know. The cross is God saying, "I am giving my Son to redeem <u>all</u> of my creation, all of it". And we have to lift our eyes to care about what He cares about. Second:

2. God cares about <u>people</u>; we focus on our personal needs Here's a whole huge city full of people that now have life and all Jonah can think about is that he misses the shade from the little plant which he didn't make or own in the first place. If our car doesn't work or our mail is delivered late or if we're sick or have work to get done, those are the things that occupy so much of our time and energy. People fade into the background. We pass by them with hardly a thought or a care. The cross is God driving His stake into the middle of history to say once and for all, "I care ultimately about people. I gave my son to save people! Nothing else really matters!" Thirdly:

3. God cares about <u>multitudes</u> of people Nineveh had more than 120,000 people, which was huge in that day; God had them counted and knew all their names. He made each one! And each one was of infinite importance to Him. And when you add them all together into a city, He had tremendous compassion on that great city, even though they were not Israelites, even though they were idol-worshippers and the very enemies of His people. But by contrast, **we focus on those we relate to**. Our families. Our close friends. Maybe some neighbors or a few associates. Our church family. Those who care about us. These are the circle that we really care about, that we invest our lives in. The rest hardly seem to matter to us. But they do to God. There are 8 billion people in this world today. Only 4% of them are Americans and .03% of them live in Philadelphia. But today the "Ninevehs" of this world have been multiplied. There are 400 cities with populations of over 1 million and 300 of them are classified unevangelized. Most are in Africa and Asia and a number of those cities have 10 to 15 million people. Today 50% of the world's population live in cities; over the last decade fully 1 billion people have moved to cities and in another 25 years 80% will live in cities! But the cross says to us, "I buried My Son in a grave because I care about them. I care about every one; I care about the great multitudes, the great cities full of people that are out of your sight and out of your mind; they are always in My sight and on My mind." And finally:

4. God cares about the lostness of people They can't tell their left hand from their right spiritually. Jesus said, "They don't know what they're doing." They're lost. But **we focus on their behavior**. All Jonah could think about was how wicked and awful the Ninevites were, what they had done to other nations. We tend to do the same. We see and hear of atrocities being committed; we hear of warring and fighting and innocent people dying in many places. It makes us afraid of them or angry at them. But God sees them as *...without hope and without God in the world*, according to Paul. 3 billion people today have never heard the name of Jesus and have no opportunity to hear it where they live. The cross says that God cares that Ninevites are lost and so must we. After all, we used to be the Ninevites, but now we're the people of God because of the cross!

I think most of us are familiar with the tragic story of the sinking of the great ship Titanic, even if it's just from seeing the recent popular movie. Every woman, man and child aboard that great sinking ship was in need of saving. The aristocrat in first class and the worker in third class were both equally in need of rescuing on that cold night in the North Atlantic. But there were not nearly enough lifeboats for all of them and the first-class passengers were the first to board. Eyewitnesses told how many of these boats were lowered only half full while passengers in third class were, at first, denied even access to the deck. They died while others floated to safety in half-empty lifeboats. Our anguished hearts cry, "It was just not fair," No, it wasn't fair. It wasn't fair at all. But think about this for a moment. The Titanic is the world, a lost and sinking ship. We, who have the gospel that saves us, are the first-class passengers. The third class-passengers are those two billion people locked below the deck in the two-thirds world without any access to the gospel lifeboat, no access to a local church, or even a Bible, no access to the Savior. It isn't fair. It isn't fair at all. Through the Cross God cries out to us that we cannot continue to rest in half-empty lifeboats like Jonah while so many are locked in darkness with the waters rising. Some of us must leave the security of the lifeboat, swim to the sinking ship and open the locked gates of third class and make access to the lifeboat possible. Others of us must hold the lifeline attached to them by praying every moment and helping every way we can and giving all that we can so that they too can be brought aboard the Gospel lifeboat. [adapted from "Third Class On The Titanic", Mission To The World Network magazine, Winter 2001, p. 3. Eric Vess is the founder and president of Video Vision in Lynchburg, VA.] That's the message of Jonah. That's the message of the cross. "Should I not have compassion on that great city?" Should we not?

Vignettes Of Redemption:

Glimpses Of The Cross And Its Impact On The World

David's Preview Of The Crucifixion That Touches The World - Psalm 22

Thus far we have looked at three glimpses of the cross in the lives of Old Testament people: Abraham, Joseph and Jonah. But it is not only in people's experiences that God has placed these vignettes of His Son. Sometimes it is in their words, their writings. Today, let's take, for instance, Psalm 22. David wrote this Psalm in the first person, as though it was happening to him, yet there is no experience in the life of David that is even remotely like what he wrote here. The Psalm basically describes the execution of an innocent man, surrounded by a mob, who is delivered by God in the end. I'm pretty sure David didn't even know why the Spirit of God moved him to write it. But we do. Peter said in 1 Pet. 1:10-12, *...the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things.* David was writing by the Spirit of God as a prophet. He was describing beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glory that would follow, and he was doing it for our benefit without even understanding it! How do I know? Jesus spoke the opening words of this Psalm from the cross and the Gospel writers quote verses from it three times, saying they were fulfilled at the cross. The New Testament description is simply, *There they crucified Him* and the seven short phrases He was able to utter. But through David, the Holy Spirit told us ahead of time the thoughts and feelings of the Savior as he was being crucified. It is through Psalm 22 that we begin to understand:

I. The Agonies Of The Crucifixion (1-21) And I deliberately say agonies because there were many types of agony that Jesus suffered there for us. One was:

1. the pain of separation (1-5, 9-11) From all of eternity, Jesus, the Son, had enjoyed complete oneness with the Father. He was sent by the Father into the world to become incarnate. From the very moment of His birth and through His earthly childhood, the Father was with Him. At twelve, He was about His Father's business. During His ministry He said, *And He who sent Me is with Me; He has not left Me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to Him. - John 8:29.* At the tomb of Lazarus He prayed, *I knew that you always hear me... - John 11:42.* But now He has hung on the cross for six hours and the words are different, *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? - Mt. 27:46.* "Why are you so far away now? Why don't you hear me? Why don't you answer like You did for our forefathers, like you did for Me throughout my life?" You see, on the cross our sin was placed on Him. He bore our sins in His own body on the tree. God made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us. And a holy Father cannot fellowship with sin. He withdrew His holy presence for the first time in all eternity from His Son. And that agony of separation, of feeling forsaken by God, the very agony we would have experienced in hell being separated from Him forever, tore at His very soul. The hopelessness of being abandoned by God, who can describe it? Try to imagine the feeling of being slowly beaten to death

with clubs by a gang in the street, while your dad, who's a cop, stands by and watches with his gun still in his holster. The greatest pain is slowly realizing that he's not going to save you, that he's going to let them kill you and there is nobody else to help you. You would cry, "Why? Why won't you help me? You've always been my dad. You held me on your lap; we did everything together. Why are you letting this happen to me?" How that would hurt, but multiply it a million times and that's what Jesus felt for you. Then there was:

2. the pain of mockery (6-8) Listen to Matthew's record in Mat. 27:39-44, *Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, "You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!" In the same way the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders mocked him. "He saved others," they said, "but he can't save himself! He's the King of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, `I am the Son of God.'" In the same way the robbers who were crucified with him also heaped insults on him.* He knew who He was. He knew He could call 10,000 angels to set him free. He knew He was the King and the Son of God. He knew He did trust in God. Yet He knew He had to stay on the cross. He couldn't prove Himself to them or we would be lost. He had to let them win and hang there helpless. Here's how it felt in **(12-13, 16a)**. It's like being surrounded by a herd of strong massive bulls who are closing in to gore and trample you and there's no place to run. It's like a pride of lions roaring loudly at you to terrorize you before they seize you and tear into your flesh. It's like a pack of wild dogs harrying you from all sides, biting at your hands and feet before they all jump on you at once. What a graphic description of the mental anguish Jesus endured at the hands of His enemies. Then there was:

3. the physical pain When we want to use a word to describe the most awful kind of pain we can feel, we say the pain was *excruciating*, a Latin word that means "out of the cross", that is, "like the pain of being crucified". Crucifixion is one of the most painful methods of torture and death that has been invented and the Romans had worked hard to perfect it to an art. First, the victim was scourged, whipped until the flesh of his entire back and legs was a mass of bleeding raw meat, but not quite enough to kill him. Then came:

e. piercing (16) They threw Jesus down on the wooden beam and drove an iron spike through the joint of each wrist. Then they hoisted it and Him up into place and put His bare feet one on top of the other and drove a spike right through the arches of both into the upright. In the middle of each wrist is the median nerve which the spikes would tear, sending bolts of fiery pain up both arms and rendering the hands useless. The nerves in the feet would likewise be torn. The slightest movement would send the shooting pain again and yet each breath would require pulling and pushing and rubbing the bleeding back against the rough wood. The agony was intense. Then David mentions the:

a. bones (14a) The whole weight of the body is sagging and hanging on those nailed wrists. There is a great pull on the sockets and the joints. The chest muscles are stretching the ribs outward, like they are after you inhale. Try it. Usually, you release your muscles in order to exhale. But on a cross you have to forcibly contract your muscles to exhale. And the only way you can do that is to push and pull yourself upward a bit to release the tension and that twists your flesh on the nails. Everything in you feels like it is pulling apart. Then he mentions the:

b. heart (14b) That may be a symbolic mention of fear, but medically speaking, you usually die on a cross by being unable to lift yourself to breathe or by congestive heart failure. The breathing grows less and less and the blood and fluids begin to pool around the heart. It begins to pump feverishly to try to get oxygen, but is itself slowly weakened by the lack of oxygen and begins to beat more and more faintly. Eventually you reach:

c. exhaustion (15a) Your muscles are filled with lactic acid. It takes more and more effort to raise yourself the few inches you need to breathe. Just think of how quickly your arms give out while doing pullups and how you get to where your arms won't pull anymore. You have massive blood loss. You're simply weak. And you get dry, thirsty:

d. thirst (15b) by forcing yourself to exhale. After six hours of it, Jesus finally exclaimed, *"I thirst" - Jn. 19:28.* Eventually you can't move and can't breathe and you lose consciousness and die. But it takes hours, sometimes days. The physical pain of crucifixion is unthinkable, but Jesus bore it for us. Then there is:

4. the pain of shame (17) He hung there with His ribs stretched out and his eyes staring down and counting them, like it was someone else's body. He was naked, except for a simple loincloth, and a whole crowd standing around staring and jeering. It's like having your clothes all ripped off and being hung publicly in only your underwear, while people laugh. It's a feeling of shame, of awful people seeing you in the most private and vulnerable way and wanting to cover yourself so they won't see, but you can't move. Jesus bore that for you. And then there was:

5. the pain of indifference (18) The Roman soldiers didn't care about any of it. They were just doing their job. He was as good as dead anyway, so they might as well make an extra buck. So Matthew says in Mat. 27:35, *When they had crucified him, they divided up his clothes by casting lots that the word spoken by the prophet might be fulfilled*, referring to this very verse. And Jesus hung there, realizing as He was dying, that his life had no more value to that crowd than

the worth of a garment. Murder was taking place and it meant no more than the commercial in the middle of the football game that you can't even remember. And finally, there was:

6. the pain of losing life itself (19-21) There is a great deal of pain in knowing that shortly you're going to die. Even if you're not afraid of dying, just the knowledge that very soon you'll be gone, that you won't be on this earth, that you won't be with your family and loved ones, that everything that is near and familiar to you will be over and will go on without you is painful. Just ask anyone who knows they have a terminal illness. Life is a precious thing and to lose it is painful. Jesus bore that pain too for us!

But then, suddenly, there is a change in this prayer. Verse 21 in the Hebrew ends with the words, "You have heard!" In the next three verses you can see:

II. The Confidence Given During The Crucifixion (22-24) There on the cross, just before He died, our Savior experienced a tremendous resurgence of confidence and assurance. What began with the cry, "My God, why have you forsaken me," gave way in a very short time to another cry, *Father, into your hands I commit my spirit - Lk. 23:46*. A change came over the Lord Jesus, and these verses explain it. Confidence was given Him:

1. that God had heard Him and would answer (24) He became confident that the Father had heard His cry for life and was going to answer Him, not in the way we would mean it by rescuing our physical life, but by resurrecting Him to life on the third day. Look back to **Ps. 21:4** which also speaks of Jesus, *He asked you for life, and you gave it to him--length of days, forever and ever.* The Father answered him, not by a brief continuation of life on earth, but by raising Him to the power of an endless life! Jesus became confident:

2. that He would live to declare God's name to his brothers (22) And **Heb. 2:12** quotes this verse and tells us that the brothers He's talking about are US! He would live so that He could bring you and I and millions of others like us to give glory and praise to God and worship Him for our salvation!

And that's where we usually quit reading this Psalm. But it doesn't end there. Just like all the other glimpses of the cross we've seen, David goes on to declare:

III. The Purpose Of The Crucifixion: To Touch The Whole World (25-31) Why did he do it? Why did He endure the torture and death of the crucifixion? Our heart cries, "It was for me!" And it was. Hallelujah! But God's heart is even bigger. It cries, "It was for the whole world!" Look at the Good News He declares here. Because of the Cross:

1. all the families of the earth will worship Him (27-28) It will not be just the Jews. It will not be just the peoples living near to them. It will not be just the Greeks or the Romans. The Good News will be preached to all nations before the end comes. It is because of the cross that John says in Rev. 7:9-11, *After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb." All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God.* Every extended family, every clan, will yield up worshippers to that throng. Even some from where we live! That's the joy that was set before Jesus, for which He endured the cross, despising its shame! But He adds another purpose. He endured it so that:

2. the poor of the earth will be satisfied at His table (26) In our world of 8 billion people, 1/3 have never made a phone call. 40% have no regular access to electricity. 50% suffer in some degree from malnutrition and 70% can't read. Millions have an income of less than $500 per year. Millions of people live in shantytowns in cardboard and tin shacks clustered around the fringes of the huge cities of the third world. Thousands live by picking through garbage dumps. But the Good News will come to many of them too and they will come from the east and the west and the north and the south and sit down at Jesus' table in the Kingdom with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and they will eat and be satisfied forever! He had compassion on them and endured the cross. He also did it so that:

3. the dying of the earth will be given life through Him (29) The rich aren't excluded; some of them will come too. But His heart goes out for the dying, those who cannot keep themselves alive. 33 million people in 1998 were living with the HIV virus. Since 1981, 12 million had already died of it and in the countries of Africa below the Sahara there were 4 million new infections in 1 year and they estimate 5,500 funerals a DAY! And that's only one thing that is killing people. Millions of innocent people have died in civil wars in Rwanda, Sudan and many other places. But many, many of these too, these dying ones, will hear the Gospel and be brought into His Kingdom and inherit the blessing of life forevermore. For these too He died! And finally, He endured the cross so that:

4. generations of people yet unborn will serve Him (30-31) It was not just for those who lived in 30 AD, but for those in the first century when the church was planted throughout the Roman world, and for those who endured the great persecutions of the second and third centuries and died willingly in the flames, and for those thousands who came to faith when Christianity became the religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century; it was for those pagan Irish whom Patrick brought to faith in the fifth century and the millions who believed throughout Europe through the

Irish missionaries like Boniface and Columban and many others who were sent out in the sixth century and the story goes on and on. He endured the cross for the generations who were touched by the heroic faith of Wyclif and Huss and the great restored truths taught by Luther and Calvin in the 16th century; it was for the thousands of coal-miners and laborers who responded to the preaching of Wesley and Whitefield in the 18th century, for thousands of India and Burma who responded to William Carey and the tens of thousands in China who were brought to faith through Hudson Taylor and his workers in the China Inland Mission in the 19th. It was for the millions who, for the first time in history, heard His Name among thousands of hidden peoples in South America and Africa and Indonesia in the 20th century, for millions who languished in darkness behind the Iron Curtain and the Bamboo Curtain that today are coming to faith in droves and for the 1 billion who are still held in the bondage of Islam and are just now beginning to hear. And it is for generations yet unborn, for our children and their children, until He comes. That is why He chose to endure the agony of the Cross!

The last words of this Psalm in the Hebrew could be translated, "For He has finished it!" which is exactly what Jesus said before He put His spirit in the Father's hands and gave it up. This is what was finished, the redemption of the world. But Ps. 22 graphically reminds us of what it cost, of the agonies of the cross. *Dr. Tom Dooley wrote of building a cage for a small Himalayan moon bear someone had given him. An old Chinese man came by and saw the cage and began to cry. When Tom Dooley asked the old man why he was weeping, he told him a dark story. He and his son had been harvesting rice on a commune in Red China. They were not allowed to keep any rice for personal use. The son had hidden a small bit of rice in his clothes to take to his mother who was suffering from beriberi. The rice was discovered, and the soldiers put the boy in a cage in the middle of the town. The cage was so small his son could not sit up or even move. The father and mother watched their son slowly die in that cage under the hot sun, starving, with insects crawling over his body. Many years had passed, but the man still cried every time he saw a cage. The man could not see a cage without becoming passionate. How did Peter and John react whenever they walked by another crucifixion? Could they ever look at even an empty cross without being shaken? [Tabletalk, Feb 1996. Page 28.]* To us, the cross is so often a piece of jewelry to hang lightly about our necks; it is traditional emblem to put on our church steeple or our sanctuary wall. Through Psalm 22, it can be more than that. It can fill us with passion and tears as we remember the suffering of our Savior for us and it can fill us with determination to yield up our lives to give Him the reward for which He suffered, that all the ends of the earth, that all the families of the nations, will bow down and worship Him.

Vignettes Of Redemption:

Glimpses Of The Cross And Its Impact On The World

Isaiah's Prophecy Of The Servant Who Suffers For The World - Is. 53

David was not the only one to whom God gave a detailed picture of the death of His Son. As we saw last week, Psalm 22 was written ahead of time to help us enter into the depths of the suffering of Christ on the cross. In the same way, the prophet Isaiah was given by the Holy Spirit a "song" to write down, a piece of Hebrew poetry. It was about a person who is called the Servant of the Lord and Is. 52:13 - 53:12 is known as a "Servant Song," but we know who it was written about. It's about Jesus. How do we know? Philip met a man from Ethiopia reading this very chapter of Scripture in his chariot one day in Acts 8:30-35, *Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked. "How can I," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?" So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. The eunuch was reading this passage of Scripture: "He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth." The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?" Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.* Isaiah 53 is the Good News about Jesus; it is **The Gospel In The Old Testament** Now I want you to go with me to **Lk. 24:44-47**. I discovered something here that I had never noticed before. All my life I've heard the Gospel defined as the "death, burial and resurrection of Christ" from Paul's statement in 1 Cor. 15. But here, Jesus Himself appears to His disciples and tells them that what was written about Him in the Old Testament, that is, the Gospel, has a third part. The Gospel is (1) that Christ would suffer and die, (2) that He would rise from the dead, and (3) that repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in His Name to all nations! Isaiah 53 is the clearest explanation of that Good News anywhere in the Old Testament and it includes all three of those elements. Through Isaiah:

I. It Is Written That The Christ Would Suffer And Die (53:1-9) First:

1. Isaiah said that Jesus would be ordinary (1-2) He was born an ordinary child. He had a normal growth and development and was, to all appearances, an ordinary human being, though He was the Son of God. He was not the epitome of human beauty, nor did He dress and live in a majestic, regal fashion. He was no superhuman superman. He was just another poor Jewish carpenter turned itinerant preacher. All people ever desired was for Him to fix their problems, to take away their sicknesses or to feed them when they were hungry. Most of the crowd had no true desire for He Himself. That's why:

2. Isaiah said that Jesus would suffer (3-4) Isaiah paints it in the first person plural, so that it would include not just the Jewish leaders in Jesus' day, but also himself and by extension, all mankind, all of us. He said that:

a. we would despise and reject Him Mt. 8:16-17 makes it clear that verse 4 refers to His miracles of healing and driving out demons. Even though He did many miracles, even though He healed our sick and released our oppressed, we would hate Him and arrest Him and condemn Him to death for blasphemy. Then we would turn Him over to the Roman governor, who would condemn Him to death on a cross as an enemy of the state, simply because we human beings cried out for His blood. He would suffer deeply because of us and we would stand around that cross watching Him die, mocking and jeering at Him because:

b. we would consider His punishment just We would call him a blasphemer, a pretender claiming to be the Son of God. We would think He was getting what He deserved. God was punishing Him for His own sins. Not one of us would stand up in His defense. We hid our faces from Him and let Him die. But while we were thinking like that:

3. Isaiah said that Jesus would be our substitute (5-6) We're all like sheep who have strayed away from the Shepherd to go our own stubborn, sinful way. We've all broken His laws and disobeyed His commands, which were only meant for our good. Every human being is a black sheep, stained with the nature of evil and iniquity. And Isaiah says:

a. we all deserved punishment for our sins We were the ones with iniquities and transgressions and sins, not Him. We deserved the punishment of the wrath of Almighty God because of our sins. But the reason He was suffering on the cross is that there:

b. God would place the punishment due to us upon Him We drove the nails through His hands and feet, but they paid for our transgressions. We crushed out His life, but it was to pay for our iniquities. We punished Him with the punishment that we deserved, but in the end, it was to provide us peace with God. We wounded His hands and side, but it was for our own healing, though we didn't know it. He was our substitute. He took our place! Because, you see:

4. Isaiah said that Jesus would be our sacrifice (7-10a) His death was no ordinary death; His life was made to be a guilt offering for us, a blood sacrifice that took away our sin and guilt before God. Isaiah said that:

a. He would be led to the cross as a willing victim (7) You remember how the Gospel writers record several times that they made all kinds of false charges against Him, but He would not answer. He would not protest. He would not resist Pilate nor struggle against going to the cross. He was led just the way an innocent sheep to be slaughtered as a sacrifice doesn't resist, but goes willingly with the shepherd. And Isaiah said it would not stop with just suffering:

b. He would be killed as a sacrificial victim (8) He was taken away. He was cut off from the land of the living. He poured out His soul unto death. He humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even the death of the Cross! And then, Isaiah said:

c. He would be buried as an innocent victim (9) He would die between two thieves, condemned as a criminal Himself. A rich man named Joseph would take down His body and bury it in his own new grave, a tomb carved out of solid rock in the hillside. And He would be buried an innocent man, having done nothing wrong, having deceived no one. He was not deserving of one thing that we did to Him, yet He was laid in that tomb for us. But Jesus told His disciples those things were written about Him in the Old Testament, that He would suffer and die. But He also told them:

II. It Is Written That The Christ Would Rise From The Dead (53:10-12) All of this was no accident. It was all in God's plan; the Cross was His will. And it had a surprise ending that none of us expected:

1. Isaiah said that after suffering and death, Jesus would live After the agony of the cross and being laid in the grave, He would see the light of life. He would be raised from the dead. He would extend His days, not just by a few, but forever and ever. He was raised no more to die, but to continue to carry out the will of the Lord. And:

2. Isaiah said that His sacrifice would result in many spiritual children He would see His offspring, His spiritual seed or children. Who are they? Us! The many who would be justified, that is pardoned from our sins, by His death! He bore our sins and made intercession for us. He cried, "Father, forgive them!" and because of His death for us, the Father did. We are forgiven, justified, pardoned. Our sins which were many are all washed away; they were red as scarlet, red as crimson, but now we are washed whiter than snow. And Isaiah says that He is satisfied, He is pleased. That is what He died and rose again to accomplish!

And that's where we usually stop and celebrate! We are saddened by the Cross, but filled with joy by the Resurrection. Most of us have come to Jesus and confessed our own sinfulness. We have recognized that He died for our sins. We have come to the Living Savior and asked Him to forgive us and to come into our hearts and lives. If you haven't done that, then I challenge you to do it right now, to take Jesus as your Savior. He died for you. You should have been crucified, but the Lord took your sins and put them on Him. And the minute you believe that and you ask Him, the Living Jesus

will come into your life and save you once and for all. And you can rejoice with all of us this morning that our sins are washed away. But that's only two thirds of the Gospel. Jesus said there is a very important third part, remember?

III. It Is Written That The Gospel Will Be Preached To All Nations And Isaiah said that too. You realize, of course, that all the chapter divisions in our Bible are just handy helps to locate references that were added many, many centuries later. Isaiah's song about Jesus doesn't begin at chapter 53; it actually starts with **(52:13-15)**. There it is, the Old Testament way of saying that repentance and remission of sins will be preached in His name to all nations.

1. Isaiah said Jesus would be exalted to the highest position (13) Paul put it like this in Eph. 1:20-22, *...[God] raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet...* That's where He is today, but look at this:

2. Isaiah said His cleansing would extend to many peoples (14-15a) Did you see it? His blood will sprinkle many nations, many peoples, and take away their sins. That's the message of the Old Testament, the message of the entire Bible, from the beginning in Genesis to the end in Revelation, that God is going to redeem out from among all the peoples of the earth a people for His name. All the families of the earth will be blessed, Gen. 12:3. The Gospel must first be preached to all nations and then the end will come, Mt. 24:14. And Rev. 5 and 7 show us the picture of that redeemed throng around the throne from every people, tribe, tongue and nation. That was the purpose of the cross, to touch the entire world. That's the part of the Gospel that He is about right now in our day. And look how Isaiah said it would be done.

3. Isaiah said the message concerning Him would impact them (15b-53:1) What message? The message of verse 2 and following, that we just looked at. The message that Jesus died for our sins and was raised to life the third day. That message will be told to those who have not heard, to the very ends of the earth. Repentance and remission of sins in his name will be preached to all nations, beginning in Jerusalem and now having spread all the way to America. But today 3 billion people, one third of the population of our world, are still waiting to hear and have no opportunity to hear or understand or believe, because there is no church planted in their culture; they have no Gospel radio to listen to, no Bible study to attend, no Scriptures to buy or read. A great many have never once heard the Name of Jesus Christ, or if they have, have no clue who He really was. Beyond those, another 2-3 billion have an opportunity to hear in their culture, but they either haven't heard or they haven't yet chosen to believe. And then there are the other billion and a half who profess some form of Christendom but have never met the risen Christ. Only 1 in 10 people in our world today has personally received the forgiveness that is found only in Christ. And they will die in their sins unless we commit our lives to reaching them by praying, giving and going to them, whether across the world or across the street.

Edith Burns was a wonderful Christian who lived in San Antonio, Texas. She was the patient of a doctor by the name of Will Phillips. Dr. Phillips was a gentle doctor who saw patients as people. His favorite patient was Edith Burns. One morning he went to his office with a heavy heart and it was because of Edith Burns. When he walked into that waiting room, there sat Edith with her big black Bible in her lap earnestly talking to a young mother sitting beside her. Edith Burns had a habit of introducing herself in this way: "Hello, my name is Edith Burns. Do you believe in Easter?" Then she would explain the meaning of Easter, and many times people would be saved. Dr. Phillips walked into that office and there he saw the head nurse, Beverly. Beverly had first met Edith when she was taking her blood pressure. Edith began by saying, "My name is Edith Burns. Do you believe in Easter?" Beverly said, "Why, yes I do." Edith said, "Well, what do you believe about Easter?" Beverly said, "Well, it's all about egg hunts, going to church, and dressing up." Edith kept pressing her about the real meaning of Easter, and finally led Beverly to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. Dr. Phillips said, "Beverly, don't call Edith into the office quite yet. I believe there is another delivery taking place in the waiting room. After being called back in the doctor's office, Edith sat down and when she took a look at the doctor she said, "Dr. Will, why are you so sad? Are you reading your Bible? Are you praying?" Dr. Phillips said gently, "Edith, I'm the doctor and you're the patient." With a heavy heart he said, "Your lab report came back and it says you have cancer, and Edith, you're not going to live very long." Edith said, "Why Will Phillips, shame on you. Why are you so sad? Do you think God makes mistakes? You have just told me I'm going to see my precious Lord Jesus, my husband, and my friends. You have just told me that I am going to celebrate Easter forever, and here you are having difficulty giving me my ticket!" Dr. Phillips thought to himself, "What a magnificent woman this Edith Burns is!"

Edith continued coming to Dr. Phillips. Christmas came and the office was closed through January 3rd. On the day the office opened, Edith did not show up. Later that afternoon, Edith called Dr. Phillips and said she would have to be moving her story to the hospital and said, "Well, I'm very near home, so would you make sure that they put women in here next to me in my room who need to know about Easter." Well, they did just that and women began to come in and share that room with Edith. Many women were saved. Everybody on that floor from staff to patients were so excited about Edith, that they started calling her Edith Easter, that is, everyone except Phyllis Cross, the head nurse. Phyllis made it plain that she wanted nothing to do with Edith because she was a "religious nut". She had been a nurse in an army hospital. She had seen it all and heard it all. She was the original G.I.Jane. She had been married three times; she was hard, cold, and did everything by the book. One morning, the two nurses who were to attend to Edith were sick. Edith had the flu and Phyllis Cross had to go in and give her a shot. When she walked in, Edith had a big smile on her face and said, "Phyllis, God

loves you and I love you, and I have been praying for you." Phyllis Cross said, "Well, you can quit praying for me; it won't work. I'm not interested." Edith said, "Well, I will pray and I have asked God not to let me go home until you come into the family." Phyllis Cross said, "Then you will never die, because that will never happen," and curtly walked out of the room. Every day Phyllis Cross would walk into the room and Edith would say, "God loves you Phyllis and I love you, and I'm praying for you."

One day Phyllis Cross said she was literally drawn to Edith's room like a magnet would draw iron. She sat down on the bed and Edith said, "I'm so glad you have come, because God told me that today is your special day." Phyllis Cross said, "Edith, you have asked everybody here the question, 'Do you believe in Easter?' but you have never asked me." Edith said, "Phyllis, I wanted to many times, but God told me to wait until you asked, and now that you have asked..." Edith Burns took her Bible and shared with Phyllis Cross the Easter Story of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Edith said, "Phyllis, do you believe in Easter? Do you believe that Jesus Christ is alive and that He wants to live in your heart?" Phyllis Cross said, "Oh I want to believe that with all of my heart, and I do want Jesus in my life." Right there, Phyllis Cross prayed and invited Jesus Christ into her heart. For the first time, Phyllis Cross did not walk out of a hospital room; she was carried out on the wings of angels. Two days later, Phyllis Cross came in and Edith said, "Do you know what day it is?" Phyllis Cross said, "Why Edith, it's Good Friday." Edith said, "Oh, no, for you every day is Easter. Happy Easter, Phyllis!" Two days later, on Easter Sunday, Phyllis Cross came into work, did some of her duties and then went down to the flower shop and got some Easter lilies because she wanted to go up to see Edith and give her some Easter lilies and wish her a Happy Easter. When she walked into Edith's room, Edith was in bed. That big black Bible was on her lap. Her hands were in that Bible. There was a sweet smile on her face. When Phyllis Cross went to pick up Edith's hand, she realized Edith was dead. Her left hand was on John 14, "In my Father's house are many mansions. I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also." Her right hand was on Revelation 21:4, "And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes, there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying; and there shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away." Phyllis Cross took one look at that dead body, and then lifted her face toward heaven, and with tears streaming down here cheeks, said, "Happy Easter, Edith! Happy Easter!" Then Phyllis Cross left Edith's body, walked out of the room, and over to a table where two student nurses were sitting. She said, "My name is Phyllis Cross. Do you believe in Easter?"

Oh friends, if you believe in Easter, if know Christ died for your sins and that He rose again, the third part of the Gospel is “repentance and forgiveness of sins must be preached in His Name to all nations” beginning right here! God help us who believe in Easter to share it with our neighbors and our friends. God help us to commit our time, our prayers, our money, our efforts and our lives to sharing it around the world with those who have not heard and especially those who cannot hear!

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FOURTEEN INDIVIDUAL EASTER MESSAGES

Because He Lives - John 14:18-20

The reality of death has been brought home to many of us in this past year and even in these past few weeks through losing loved ones. We all face death and as we do, that age-old question nags at our hearts, “How can we be sure there is life after death?” As Jesus' disciples gathered together with Him to celebrate the Passover on the last night of His earthly life in the Upper Room, He was trying to prepare them, to make them ready for what was about to happen the next day when He would be taken from them in the cruel death of the cross. He'd already taught them many, many times that He was going up to Jerusalem to die, but throughout that evening He declared over and over that He was simply leaving them, *Yet a little while I am with you... Where I am going, you cannot come... You cannot follow Me now, but you will follow afterward... I am going to the Father's house*... None of it sunk in at the time, yet in the very middle of His deep conversation that night, Jesus spoke these few simple words which would have made all the difference for them, if they had only been listening, and they make all the difference for us: **John 14:18-20**. First of all, notice:

I. The Promise Jesus Made He said, "I won't leave you like orphans, like poor helpless children with no parent to take care of you. ***I will come to you!*** I myself, not someone else, will come to you. You will see me, even though I die! Death will take me out of sight for the world, but not for you. You must be patient." What a claim! How preposterous it must have seemed to them at the time! Dead men don't live again. Dead men don't come to you; you don't see them, ever! Yet Jesus said, *I will come to you!* And He did come, in three different ways, all of which are in view here. Obviously:

1. He came to them in His body after His resurrection Luke wrote in **Acts 1:3**, *[Jesus] presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.* Hear what Paul writes in **1 Cor. 15:3-8**, *I passed on to you what was most important and what had also been passed on to me. Christ died for our sins, just as the Scriptures said. He was buried, and he was raised from the dead on the third day, just as the Scriptures said. He was seen by Peter and then by the Twelve. After that, he was seen by more than 500 of his followers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he was seen by James and later by all the apostles. Last of all, as though I had been born at the wrong time, I also saw him.* He literally

came to them after His death, to hundreds of His followers, and not merely in a vision. They saw Him, they talked to Him, they touched Him, they ate together with Him. And not just once, but repeatedly over a period of 40 days. He proved to them beyond any possible doubt that He was alive, that He had come to them as He promised! Yet at the end of that time, He DID leave them; they stood on the mount and watched Him ascend up to heaven. Now He WAS gone. Yet even so, His promise was intended to mean even more than His bodily presence:

2. He came to them at Pentecost and to us ever since by His Spirit In the last words of verse 17, Jesus told them, *The Holy Spirit dwells with you and will be IN you* and then adds, *I will not leave you, I will come to you.* The two thoughts are tied together. Look down further to verse **23**. He's saying, "After My body has left you, I will come by My Spirit and live inside you!" In **Gal. 4:6**, Paul explains a little more fully, *...God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, prompting us to call out, "Abba, Father."* On that day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came in the visible shape of flames of fire that settled upon His followers and went down into the depths of their beings, joining Himself to their very souls. The spirit of Jesus came to them and dwelt in them and on that same day, Peter declared that this promise of the Holy Spirit is for every one of us who believes. God sends the Spirit of His Son into OUR hearts when we place our trust in Him as they did. He comes to us! Wherever we live, whoever we are, whenever we believe, Jesus comes to us and makes His home in us and dwells in us by His Spirit. He can't do that if He's dead and gone! He is alive and because He is alive, He comes to live in us! Hallelujah! Yet His promise means still more:

3. He will come to all of us in His glory at the end of this age He told them that night, *I will come again and take you to be with Me where I am!* As they stood gazing at Jesus going up into the sky, the angels told His disciples, *...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*. **- Acts 1:11**. One day, when the plan of God is accomplished, when some from every people, tribe and language have believed and this Gospel age is over, He will come to take all of us, His children, home to be with Him in heaven forever. They weren't parted from Him by death back then, we aren't parted from Him now, and none of us will ever be parted from Him forever!

He has come to us as He promised! We can look back and see it 2,000 years ago, we can see it in our lives right now, and one day we will see it all together as He comes in glory. Jesus lives! *Charles Talleyrand was Napoleon's chief diplomat in the late 1700's. An anti-Christian intellectual named Lepeau had created a rational new religion, but, despite its supposed superiority to Christianity, it had failed to catch on and he came to Talleyrand to ask for suggestions. "M. Lepeau," the diplomat dryly replied, "to ensure success for your new religion, you need only two things. Arrange to have yourself crucified, and three days later rise from the dead."* The empty tomb of Jesus Christ declares to the world that He is a living Savior and only a living Savior can come to you! Only a living Savior is worth following! But these words of Jesus are deeper still than this promise He made; they explain:

II. The Life Jesus Gave Us He said, ***Because I live you also will live!*** He didn't say, "Because I am resurrected, you will be resurrected too." He said, *Because I LIVE*, present tense. It is not that He lost His life and then got it back; He never stopped living! He had the kind of life that could not be quenched by bodily death! Jesus is saying, "You'll watch me die and then come back to you and that will prove to you that I live eternally, that My life is undying, that even the death of My physical body has no grip on the real Me. I laid down that body and I took it up again, but I never ceased to exist. I live!" The Bible declares over and over again very plainly that:

1. He Himself IS eternal life Listen to **Jn. 1:4**, *In Him was life...* **Jn. 11:26**, *I am the Resurrection and the Life...* **Jn. 14:6**, *I am the Way, the Truth and the Life...* **1 John 1:1-2**, *We proclaim to you the one who existed from the beginning, whom we have heard and seen. We saw him with our own eyes and touched him with our own hands. He is the Word of life. This one who is life itself was revealed to us, and we have seen him. And now we testify and proclaim to you that he is the one who is eternal life. He was with the Father, and then he was revealed to us.* In other words, "We touched Him, we heard Him, we saw Him in a body, but He is life itself, eternal life, that was with the Father from all eternity past, that appeared to us for a season in a body on earth and then returned to the Father in glory forever. It's not that He HAS life, but that He IS life; eternal life is the very nature of His being!" Jesus is Himself eternal life, life that can never cease, life that has no beginning and has no ending. That's what He wanted to convey and what the disciples eventually came to understand, *I live!* But then, when He added, *you also shall live*, He meant that:

2. we receive the same eternal life that is His He was not just saying that some day after you die, I'll make you live again. He's saying that, "From now on you will live, just as I live. When I come to you, I will give you life that is eternal, My life, My life that has no beginning and no ending, My life that not even bodily death can touch! I am the resurrection *and the life*. Since you believe in Me, you will absolutely never die in eternity! Your body will die, but YOU have life that is eternal! *[paraphrasing Jn. 11:25-26]*" Now, how do we get this life?

3. we receive it because of our union with Him Life is not some separate thing that Jesus gives to us apart from Himself. He is saying, "When I come to you, when my body is resurrected so that you can see I live and when I come to dwell in you by My Spirit, I will impart to you My very life!" And Jesus went on to explain to them and us how this works in verse 20, *I am in my Father and you in me and I in you*. The first thing we come to understand, as they did, is that:

a. Jesus has complete union with the Father *I am in my Father*... How many times did Jesus say things like, "I and the Father are one", "He that has seen Me has seen the Father", and so on. Over and over, Jesus declared the complete union which he had with the Father. Well, that union is what gives Him this eternal life. Listen to **Jn. 6:57a**, *...the living Father sent Me and I live because of the Father.* In other words, "The Father has eternal life. He is life and I live because I am in union with the life of the living Father. I am one with Him and so I have His life!" And the reason he explains that is to show us what it means when He says that, *you [are] in Me*:

b. we have the same complete union with Jesus The whole of **Jn. 6:57** says, *Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me [that is, who becomes united with me] will live because of me.* The union that Jesus has with the Father, that oneness of being, is the same oneness of being that we now have with Jesus. And just as the life that the Father has is the life of the Son, so the life that the Son has is our life, because we are one with Him! His life has become OUR life! Understand? And how does that union occur? He says, ...*I am in you:*

c. His life is ours because He is IN us Look down to verse **23**. The Father and the Son dwell with each of us individually. But He doesn't mean that they are somewhere externally alongside us; the Father and the Son come to actually live inside us when we believe. And even more, they don't stay separate from us in there like some isolated tumor in our spirit. **1 Cor. 6:17** says, *...he who unites himself with the Lord is one with him in spirit.* Our spirit and His Holy Spirit are joined into one and that's what makes His life our life. John put it this way in **1 Jn. 5:11-13**, *God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.* When Jesus comes into you and unites Himself with you, you have His life, not the same *kind* of life, but literally, THE very same life that He has, HIS eternal life! His life is your life!

Hallelujah! But Jesus' point in telling us all of that is:

III. The Assurance Jesus Wants Us To Have He said in verse 20, ***In that day*** *[that day when I come to you]* ***you will KNOW...,*** that is, "you'll realize, you'll comprehend that I live and I am your life. You'll have assurance of it." We just read that God wants us to KNOW that we have eternal life! John wanted us to KNOW that we have eternal life. Jesus wants us to know that have eternal life. Knowing that we are joined to Jesus Christ is what gives us that assurance. *In his book Divine Lord and Savior, theologian Albertus Pieters tells about a man who was known as "Old Pete." Although he had little education, he had a good grasp of God's Word. On one occasion when he was visiting Dr. Pieters, Old Pete made a simple yet profound observation. He said, "If God should take me to the very mouth of hell and say to me, 'Here you go, Pete; this is where you belong.' I would say to Him, 'That's true, Lord, I do belong there, but if You make me go to that place, Your dear Son Jesus Christ must go with me. He and I are one and we cannot be separated anymore.'"* That's the kind of assurance I'm talking about! Now how do we get that, for real? Well:

1. our understanding comes from His Word We need the Scripture; we need to know what Jesus said, in order to realize how this works, how we get life. We would never be able to figure this out without it. However, let me be clear that our eternal life does not come simply from understanding it; it is not enough to know *about* eternal life. Life does not come from knowing information or believing a certain set of facts; **our life comes from experiencing Him**! It comes from His Spirit actually coming to us and living in us! But once we know that He has actually done that, that He IS in us, we have perfect certainty about our own future. Look with me at **Col. 1:27.** According to verse 26, how God would give us eternal life in heaven with Him was a mystery, a sacred secret that God kept hidden for ages and generations. Abraham and Moses and David and Elijah never knew it! They all trusted God, but He never revealed to them that one day His Son would actually come and live inside people and give His very life to them! But He has now shown it to us and that's why:

2. Christ living in us now is our certainty of future glory The word *hope* in the Bible doesn't have any uncertainty about it, like it does in the way we use it today. It's not wishful thinking. It means a future certainty that we are anticipating, waiting for and looking forward to. God has shown us that we WILL be with Him and share in His glory and the reason for our confidence and our assurance of it is that Christ is in us! In fact, Paul goes on to say more. Look at **Col. 3:3**:

3. our life is already safely concealed with Him in heaven Think about it. If we are joined to Him and we are one, then wherever we are, He is. There is never one moment on this earth when we are separated from Him! But the reverse is also true; where He is, we are! So, if He is seated on His throne in heaven, then WE are seated there with Him. If He is there joined to the Father in glory, then WE are there joined to the Father in glory. The old life that we had is dead and gone; Jesus' life is our life now, so in Him we are already there! You just can't see it! It's hidden, concealed, covered up for now. And finally, look at **Col. 3:4**:

4. because He is our life, we appear with Him when He comes When that day, that great day of His appearing, shall come at last, we will appear together with Him. Why? Because HE IS OUR LIFE! His life is our life today, His life is our life tomorrow ,and His life is our life to the end of time. He lives and because He is our life, we live! Hallelujah!

Watchman Nee, the renowned Chinese church leader, teacher and author wrote this in his book The Normal Christian Life: "...God has wrought an intimate union between ourselves and Christ in this matter of death and resurrection. One day I was seeking to emphasize this truth to a Christian brother. We happened to be drinking tea together, so I took a lump of sugar and stirred it into my tea. A couple of minutes later I asked, 'Can you tell me where the sugar is now, and where the tea?' 'No', he said, 'you have put them together and the one has become lost in the other; they cannot now be separated.' It was a simple illustration, but it helped him to see the intimacy and the finality of our union with Christ in death. It is God that has put us there, and God's acts cannot be reversed. That, dear friends, is our assurance, our hope of glory! Christ and ourselves are inseparable; we have become lost in each other. He lives and so do we! His life is our life! Listen, have you united yourself with Him? Have you asked Him to come and live in you and become your Savior? If you haven't, I urge you to do it right now. If you have, rejoice today. His life is your life and you will live forever.

CHRIST'S RESURRECTION AND ME - Eph. 1:19-2:9

The big question everybody seems to have today is, "What does that have to do with me?" We are very reluctant to learn about or give any effort to anything that does not have direct application to our lives. This morning we celebrate an event that took place 2,000 years ago, the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. What does that have to do with me? That's the question we're going to answer together from the Book of Ephesians. In short, I'd like to talk to you about two words: Power and Grace. That's what the resurrection means to me. In Phil. 3:10, Paul said that his surpassing desire was to know Christ and the POWER of His resurrection. And in Eph. 1:19, Paul says it again. He says his prayer is that we might know His incomparably great power and then he talks immediately about the resurrection. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is a demonstration of the POWER of Almighty God.

I. The POWER of His Resurrection (1:19-22) Now just what is:

1. the nature of that power (19) What's it like? Well, notice here two important facts about that power. First of all:

a. it is incomparably great There is nothing with which to compare it. It is so vast that it is beyond human comprehending. We have bombs so powerful that one will destroy an entire city. We look at the forces of nature at work, the violent force in a tornado or a hurricane and the devastation it can cause. But no force we have ever known compares to the power of God. It created the whole universe out of nothing with a word, hung it all in place, and set it in motion. We're talking about a power so vast that it covered the entire world with a flood and dried it up again. There is no way to describe it. In the Greek language, Paul just stacked up all the available synonyms, power, strength, might, energy (working), in one verse. We might well use the phrase INFINITE power, power without limit. That's the kind of power we're talking about. And what does that have to do with me? Well, look who it is for:

b. it is for us who believe It is directed. Litrtslly, "toward" us. Those who believe on Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior experience that infinite mighty power. We experience the power that brought about His resurrection. And that's what the resurrection is:

2. the display of that power That power is so great that it accomplished three impossible things. First:

a. it raised Christ from the dead (20a) Death is the strongest force we know. Despite all our technology and medical advancements, we have never been able to conquer it. When death lays its claim on a person, no force on earth can bring him back to life; there is no power great enough to do it. Some time ago, I was at the funeral of an elderly friend. She looked so life-like lying there in the coffin, almost like you would expect her to sit up and greet you. Yet to actually have that happen is the most impossible thing in the universe, humanly speaking, because the soul, the life-force is gone. All the shaking, all the drugs and chemicals, all the electrical shocks in the world cannot produce life out of death. Roman soldiers nailed Christ to a cross; they spilled out all his blood with a spear. His body was laid in a stone-cold tomb till the third day. It was the most impossible thing on earth to bring Him back to life. But God, by His Almighty power, raised Him from the dead. And not only did the spirit, the life-force, return to that crucified body, that body was transformed into a brand new one by the power of God, one that had absolute energy and defied all known physical laws, a resurrection body! That's the power of God. But it didn't stop there:

b. it lifted Him to heavenly realms (20b) Think how impossible this is, for a man to go up to heaven alive! It is not just a matter of going up. We can put a power pack on a man and make him fly. We can put him in a rocket and lift him all the way up into space. But no matter how hard we try, we cannot send him to heaven; heaven is in another dimension! Heaven is a spiritual place and you can't get there by physical means. But the power of God took Christ in that new body all the way from earth to heaven, into the very presence of the Father and seated Him there. He's staying! But that's not all:

c. it exalted Him to control everything (21-22) That power put all things under His feet; it put Him in control of everything that happens. From heaven He runs the universe. He controls the weather and all the other natural phenomena of the world. He controls the affairs of men. He is the King over all kings and the Lord over all lords, who

turns their heart where He wishes with His hand. He moves nations with His command. And He controls the Church, His body. He moves and directs and builds it as He designs; He is bringing it to maturity as He planned. And that means He exerts that power in controlling the events of your life! You experience that power at work every day. But that is not the sense in which we really experience that great power. We experience that power in:

II. The POWER of Our Resurrection Life (2:1-9) The same power that worked in Christ to raise Him from the dead, lift Him up to heaven, and place all things under His control, was at work directly inside us from the moment that we believe in Christ as our Savior. First:

1. it raised us to life with Christ (1-5) Just as Christ was raised from the dead, we have already been resurrected spiritually. It happened to us! You see:

a. we were spiritually dead And I don't mean just lost. I mean dead! Sin had killed our spirits, so that we were cut off from God and powerless to even want to do anything about it. We could no more want to be saved and to know God than a dead squirrel can want to get up and run off the highway. We were as hopeless spiritually as a corpse in a coffin is physically. In the natural, there is no hope of life. But God began to work in us. He placed in us a desire to be saved. He brought the Gospel message to us somehow and at last brought us to believe on His Son. But then a marvelous thing happened:

b. we were placed into Christ when we believed We were united with the living Lord Jesus. His Spirit came to dwell inside us and our spirit was joined to His. We became ONE with Him. That mighty power of God that was controlling us from outside now was inside of us and was bound to us and so:

c. we were transformed with Him into new people We were made spiritually alive, given a new nature, a new spirit, made a new perspm on the inside. And that, my friend, is just as impossible as raising the dead physically. Nothing in the world could work over and renovate my dead, rotten, sinful heart. But Jesus' power created in me a brand new one. Since I was placed into Him, my life was bound with His life; my old man died with Him on that cross. And when He came up out of that cold tomb, that was me rising with Him, being transformed into a brand-new person, being born all over again in my spirit! His resurrection is MY resurrection. The power that raised HIM raised ME to a new life. But it didn't stop there:

2. it seated us with Christ in heavenly realms (6) Since by His power I was bound to Him, what happened to me? He is seated in heaven on the throne and so am I! I'm not talking about "will be some day". Yes, my body will be there someday. But I am right now in Him seated there by His power. And that means a couple of things to us:

a. we are sharing in His authority That's why the gates of hell cannot prevail against us. We go forth in the world obeying His will, conquering in His name, and Satan and all the hosts of hell cannot withstand us because we share in His authority! But it also means:

b. we are secured with Him forever We're seated! We're not going anywhere. As long as He is there, we're going to be there. And He is going to be there forever. His power holds us secure forever and ever. That's why I say I have eternal life right now; I'm not waiting to get it when I die. I began to live the moment Christ rose from the dead, it was made real in me the moment I believed, and it will continue in Him forever and ever, even when my old body has to die! That's the power of God at work in us! And you know what?

3. it will display us as eternal trophies (7) Let me put that more simply. You know how when you make something with your own hands, you take pride in displaying it? Well, in all the ages to come, God is going to point to us who were dead, now raised to life, lifted to the heavenly realms, seated with Christ, and say, "There is what My power and my grace have done!" We are going to be His trophies, on display to the whole universe, His great eternal art show of His finest work. And Romans says that whole universe is groaning because it can't wait to see the show, to see the sons of God revealed, uncovered, unveiled, in eternity! Now that brings me to point out another word: GRACE:

III. The GRACE By Which We Received It (8-10a) You see, all of this working of His power in us:

1. it is a gift completely from God He saved us, He raised us from spiritual death, He lifted us and seated us. We had nothing to do with it. We didn't merit it or deserve it. We didn't help the process. Jesus did it all. It was a gift. It was all done for us out of love. If we had worked to help achieve it, we could boast and say, "I changed my life" or when we get to heaven we could say, "I got myself here by what I did." But you can't get there that way. It takes the power of God. We must be His workmanship, not our own. It is a gift. How then do we get it?

2. it is received simply by faith We simply believe and say, "Thank you". We believe that Jesus died for us and that He rose again. We believe that He will come into us and save us and do everything we just said. And we say, "Thank you". That's all.

It is said that when one of the most noted English physicians was succumbing to a fatal disease, he went from one authority to another until he had reached the highest on the continent. Telling this man his trouble, he received the reply, "The

only man who can save you is an English physician, Dr. Darwin of Derby." Sad was the reply, "I am Dr. Darwin of Derby." He was the best, but he could not save himself. Even the best of us cannot save ourselves. We have no power to bring life to our dead souls and set ourselves on high. But the power that raised Jesus from the dead and set Him on high will do the same for you. By grace. It's a free gift. Have you received it? If you have, then give thanks to the Lord this morning for His resurrection power and grace!

Fishing After Easter - John 21:1-19

Does anybody know what yesterday was? It was the opening day of Pennsylvania's trout fishing season! Thousands of men, women and children across the state gave up whatever else they would have done on a spring Saturday, dug out their gear, put on their boots and went out to their local stream and lined the banks to try to catch a few fish. It happens every year, but this time was unusual. Since Easter came very early at the end of March, they all went fishing after Easter, which is exactly what Jesus' disciples did and also the title of this message. Turn with me to John 21. Jesus had made several appearances on that first Resurrection Sunday and then one appearance a week later, as the disciples were gathered together, so He could set Thomas straight. But now, a short while later, we find them, no longer in Jerusalem, but back in northern Israel, in Galilee, where the majority of Jesus' ministry took place and where His disciples were from. There on the shores of their familiar and beloved lake, the sea of Galilee, a very important scene takes place as:

I. The Disciples Went Fishing (1-3) Now, you might be thinking, "Why are Jesus' disciples back in Galilee?" The answer is that:

1. the disciples returned to Galilee at Jesus' command When He appeared to the women that Resurrection Sunday, He told them to tell His disciples to go to Galilee and then **Mt. 28:16** says, *Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them.* Evidently, while He was with them in the Upper Room, He gave them direct instructions to go to Galilee and specifically where He would meet them. It was in Galilee that Jesus wanted to spend the larger portion of the next 40 days with them before His ascension, away from the pressure of the authorities in Jerusalem. When they arrived there, I'm sure they saw their families and they seemed to be still somewhat unsure what to do. So, on this particular day, seven of the group happened to be together and, since at least four of them were fishermen and their families still owned fishing boats, they did what came naturally to them:

2. Peter returned to fishing and the rest followed him. They got in his boat at evening for a night of fishing. I'm sure they needed both food and income and this was a ready means at hand. But they **failed utterly**. They fished the entire night, these seasoned fishermen, and had not a single fish to show for it. As morning dawned, they were coming in to shore, discouraged and empty-handed. But as they drew near:

3. a person appeared on shore and gave them direction (4-6) They were still about a hundred yards out, so they couldn't see clearly who it was. Yet sometimes people on shore can see schools of fish from their angle that people out on the water can't see. And, whether to humor him or just to give it one last try to catch some breakfast, they threw their net out again on the right side of the boat at his suggestion and, to their shock and surprise:

4. their net suddenly overflowed with fish It was so loaded that they couldn't pull it out of the water. Later they counted them and there were 153 fish in the net! That just doesn't happen, not even on the best of days! So, as these disciples were standing in the boat, struggling against the impossible weight of the net, suddenly:

II. The Disciples Recognized Jesus (7-8) John was the first to catch on, to realize that nobody could do this except Jesus and all were quick to agree. But how did they know? Well, I'm quite sure what dawned on them was that:

1. this was an exact replay of Jesus' initial call to them When Jesus first called them to leave their nets three years earlier, He had done almost the exact same thing. Look with me at **Lk. 5:1-11**. It's uncanny how similar these two events are. After they had been fishing all night and caught nothing, Jesus came by and used their boat to teach from. Then He told them to launch out into the deep and let down their nets. Peter had moaned, "We've worked hard all night and have caught nothing, but because You say so, we will." So they threw their nets in and suddenly, they were not only full of fish, but so full that they began to break when they tried to pull them in! In that moment they had realized Jesus' Divine power and had left everything to follow Him. Now here they stand again with nets suddenly, miraculously, full and in that moment, they remember! It could only be the Lord! Peter is so sure of it that he forgets the net and simply dives into the water to get to Jesus as fast as he can! However, Jesus did this specifically for a purpose:

2. it was a reminder of Jesus' commission to them On that initial occasion, He then called them to leave everything and follow Him. And with that call, He gave them this commission, ***Don't be afraid; from now on you will catch men!*** Or, as Mark records it, *"Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men."* That was to be their calling in life. They were no longer to be fishers of fish and now, Jesus made it clear to them that there is no going back to that. There was not going to be a return to life as usual, now that He was leaving. No, they were going to catch men! And if they would listen to Him and obey Him, instead of following their own plans and depending on their own abilities, they

would be successful; their nets would be full. They would catch men! By the way, that's not a bad lesson for us either; the call to follow Jesus is the permanent call to be fishers of men. Ever after, that's what our lives are to be about, catching people for Jesus, bringing them to faith in Him. But, just as in the story, He knows where the fish are! He knows exactly where to let down the nets, where, when and how to share the Gospel. And if we do what He says, the way He says it, and depend on Him and not on ourselves, there will be a harvest, and perhaps a harvest that will astound us! People that we share with will be caught in the Gospel net and will become followers of Jesus. No matter what we do in life, whether we're a fisherman or an accountant or a carpenter or a teacher or a secretary, none of those things is our primary role or identity. Wherever God has placed us, in whatever station in life, He has put us there to be fishers of men! Well, the disciples finally arrive on shore with their huge load of fish and:

3. He reassured them that He would be with them (9-14) They found Jesus had bread at hand and fish already roasting on the fire, to which they added more. His appearance seemed to be slightly different somehow, but not one dared to ask who He was, because they knew; they were sure it was Jesus. And, no doubt, when He took the bread and gave it to them and took the fish and gave it to them, it increased their certainty because:

a. it reminded them of Jesus multiplying the bread and fish Once before, in this very region, He had taken bread and given thanks exactly like this and given it to them and taken fish like these and given them to them and more than 5,000 people were fed. And, even though there was no actual multiplication in this moment, it must have seemed as though Jesus brought them 153 fish out of nothing! So they sat together and ate their meal. This whole experience:

b. it verified again to them as a group that He was alive Verse 14 tells us that this was now the third time He had appeared to them as a whole group. It was not merely the report of one individual that He was alive, but together they saw and experienced Him, talked with Him and ate with Him. And **it demonstrated again the reality of His new body**. They touched Him and He ate the fish with them. This was no ghost, no spirit. This was Jesus in the flesh, risen from the dead! You see:

c. it was an infallible proof that Jesus is alive Acts 1:3 tells us, *He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.* And this whole experience on the seashore was one of those *many proofs*. The Greek word means "a convincing proof", "an indisputable proof", or "an infallible proof", as the KJV translates it. Beyond the shadow of a doubt, they knew that they knew that they knew that Jesus was alive, and our faith is based on theirs! Peter says, *For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. - 2 Pet. 1:16.* John wrote, *We proclaim to you the one who existed from the beginning, whom we have heard and seen. We saw him with our own eyes and touched him with our own hands. He is the Word of life. This one who is life itself was revealed to us, and we have seen him. And now we testify and proclaim to you that he is the one who is eternal life. He was with the Father, and then he was revealed to us. We proclaim to you what we ourselves have actually seen and heard so that you may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. - 1 John 1:1-3.* We know with absolute certainty that Jesus is alive because they KNEW with absolute certainty Jesus is alive! And then, when we believed their word, we experienced Him for ourselves! Our lives were changed by His Spirit entering us and causing us to be born again. Despite what our culture may tell us, despite what our enemies may tell us, we KNOW that Jesus is alive!

About 1930, Nikolai Bukharin journeyed from Moscow to Kiev. His mission was to address a huge assembly; his subject, atheism. For a solid hour, he aimed his heavy artillery at Christianity, hurling every argument and ridicule he could think of. At last, he was finished and viewed what seemed to be the smoldering ashes of men's faith. "Are there any questions?" Bukharin demanded. A solitary man arose and asked permission to speak. He mounted the platform and moved close to the Bolshevik. The audience was breathlessly silent as the man surveyed them, first to the right, then to the left. At last, he shouted the ancient Orthodox greeting, "CHRIST IS RISEN!" The vast assembly rose as one man and the response came crashing like the sound of an avalanche, "HE IS RISEN INDEED!" [Dick Innes, https://aksermonillustrations.blogspot.com/search/label/Resurrection] Hallelujah! Despite what anyone says, we KNOW our Jesus is alive! But the real point of Jesus' appearing to them this day was not so much about fish or breakfast or even assuring them that He was alive. Rather, on this occasion:

III. Jesus Restored Peter And The Disciples To Their Calling (15-17) Peter had already seen Jesus alive at least three times, but one issue remained to be addressed. Peter was once the spokesperson of the disciples, the first to open his mouth, the one who was first to say, *"Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you!"* at the Last Supper. And Matthew adds, *...And all the disciples said the same.* Yet a few hours later, when Jesus was arrested in the garden, all the disciples forsook Him and fled and still later, when his words were put to the test, Peter denied Jesus three times. This had impacted him deeply; the text says he went out and wept bitterly, and I'm sure all the disciples felt some of the same measure of guilt. Only John stood openly by Him while He was on the cross. So, in this moment:

1. He reassured Peter He asks him, "Simon, do you love Me more than these others do?" That night he had boldly declared, "Even if all the rest fall away from you, I won't. No matter what they do, I am willing to die for you!" But he wasn't, and he knows it. His boasting is gone. He won't compare himself to the rest again. He won't even use the

strong word for love that is in Jesus' question. Jesus uses *agape*, sacrificial love. Peter simply replies, "Lord you know I care for you." He uses *phileo*, which means family love or friendship. Jesus asks him a second time and he still won't say it, so finally Jesus asks the third time using his word, "Do you care for Me?" Peter knows the pride of his heart. He knows how lifted up he was and the depths to which he fell. But Jesus reassures him by giving him the opportunity three times to state his love. Peter couldn't have missed that; three times he had denied, but now Jesus lets him affirm his love three times. It's clear that he is forgiven, accepted, still loved, and that Jesus still wants to use him. But Jesus is doing more than that:

2. He reiterated to them all His first concern He's not looking for an apology or even an admission. Peter is already forgiven. Jesus has one thing on His mind. Three times He gives Peter the same command, ***Feed My sheep***. "Take care of them, shepherd them, pasture them, feed my precious lambs! That's what is on Jesus' heart. He's leaving soon; He's going back to heaven. He has to have somebody to tend His precious flock of followers, someone to lead them, to show them the way, to watch out for them and warn them of danger, someone who will love them like He does, to whom they will also be precious. You see, Jesus loves His sheep! He laid down His life for those sheep! He is looking for people, then and now, who will be pastors, "pasturors", literally, shepherds, who will take care of His flock, leaders who will love them and tend them when they have problems and feed them with His word. He needs people who will leave the 99 and go after His lost sheep. He has "other sheep" who are not yet in His fold and He needs someone to bring them in. His point was, "If you love Me, then focus your life on My sheep! Find them, feed them, care about them, shepherd them!" I was 19 when I heard that call, when Jesus made it clear to me that I was to be a pastor, to take care of His sheep. And after nearly 50 years of doing it, it seems to me that one of the most needed things, both here and around the world, is pastors. Jesus needs pastors to shepherd His flock, but today, at least here, not many seem to be signing up for the task! In other areas of the world the church is growing by leaps and bounds and the crying need is always for pastors, experienced mature leaders to tend the flock. Maybe He's calling some of you, some of you younger men, to that very calling, to shepherd His flock. Maybe He's saying to you, "Do you love Me? Then give your life to pastoring; feed My sheep!" But that call is not only for those in full time ministry; all of us have the responsibility to find His lost sheep and bring them home. They are perishing and, unless someone searches them out and brings them home, they will die in the wilderness and be lost forever. Jesus said, "I MUST bring those other sheep!" and He does it through us. He wants us to have that same compulsion; that's why He gave us all the same commission, "Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to the whole created family of people. My sheep are out there among them! Make disciples from among all the peoples and then baptize them and teach them; shepherd them!" That's the calling we all have; it's what our lives need to be focused on. What we do for a living is secondary to that; it supports us so we can fish for men, so we can seek His sheep. And many of us have a little flock that we are directly responsible to care for, whether it's our family, our own children, our class of Kingdom Kids, or our Pioneer Club or our Bible study, some little flock of His sheep for whom we are responsible. Jesus' challenge is the same to us, "Do you love Me? Then love them! Feed them! Shepherd them! Care for them the way that I, your Great Shepherd of the Sheep, care for you!" Then finally, Jesus was doing one last thing:

3. He restored Peter to leadership By commanding Peter to feed His sheep, He, in essence, said, "You fell, but it no longer matters. You are forgiven. You are restored. I put YOU in charge. I TRUST you! I entrust you with My sheep!" Now there's a word of encouragement for me when I fall or when I fail, and for all of us, because we all fall and fail! We are forgiven! He will not hold it against us! He is willing to trust us again. He will not keep us from serving, lay us aside as useless on the shelf. Listen, if you are feeling like Peter, "I denied Him when I should have spoken up." or "I messed my life up so badly that I don't know that He could ever use me again.", then just look what He did with Peter! No matter how deeply we have fallen, if we are now humble and we love Him, He has a place in His program for us to serve! He is a God of the second chance! And the third and the fourth and more than that! And by the way, that's the same grace He calls us to extend to others when they fail us, to really forgive them, to lay aside the hurt they caused and to extend to them the grace of trusting them again. Jesus lifted Peter out of the ashes of failure and humiliation and extended to him that marvelous grace and He will do the same for you; just come to Him and tell Him you love Him!

Jim Cymbala, pastor of the Brooklyn Tabernacle shares this story: *It was Easter Sunday and I was so tired at the end of the day that I just went to the edge of the platform, pulled down my tie and sat down and draped my feet over the edge. It was a wonderful service with many people coming forward. The counselors were talking with these people. As I was sitting there, I looked up the middle aisle, and there in about the third row was a man who looked about fifty, disheveled, filthy. He looked up at me rather sheepishly, as if saying, "Could I talk to you?" We have homeless people coming in all the time, asking for money or whatever. So as I sat there, I said to myself, though I am ashamed of it, "What a way to end a Sunday. I've had such a good time, preaching and ministering, and here's a fellow probably wanting some money for more wine." He walked up. When he got within about five feet of me, I smelled a horrible smell like I'd never smelled in my life. It was so awful that when he got close, I would inhale by looking away, and then I'd talk to him, and then look away to inhale, because I couldn't inhale facing him. I asked him, "What's your name?" "David." "How long have you been on the street?" "Six years." "How old are you?" "Thirty-two." He looked fifty—hair matted, front teeth missing, wino, eyes slightly glazed. "Where did you sleep last night, David?" "Abandoned truck." I keep in my back pocket a money clip [and] I fumbled to pick out a bill thinking, "I'll give him some money. I won't even get a volunteer. They are all busy talking with others." Usually, we don't give money to people; we take them to get something to eat. I took the money out. David pushed*

his finger in front of me. He said, "I don't want your money. I want this Jesus, the One you were talking about, because I'm not going to make it. I'm going to die on the street." I completely forgot about David, and I started to weep for myself. I was going to give a couple of dollars to someone God had sent to me. See how easy it is? I could make the excuse I was tired. There is no excuse. I was not seeing him the way God sees him. I was not feeling what God feels. But oh, did that change! David just stood there. He didn't know what was happening. I pleaded with God, "God, forgive me! Forgive me! Please forgive me. I am so sorry to represent You this way. I'm so sorry. Here I am with my message and my points, and You send somebody and I am not ready for it. Oh, God!" Something came over me. Suddenly I started to weep deeper, and David began to weep. He fell against my chest as I was sitting there. He fell against my white shirt and tie, and I put my arms around him, and there we wept on each other. The smell of His person became a beautiful aroma. Here is what I thought the Lord made real to me: "If you don't love this smell, I can't use you, because this is why I called you where you are. This is what you are about. You are about this smell." Christ changed David's life. He started memorizing portions of Scripture that were incredible. We got him a place to live. We hired him in the church to do maintenance, and we got his teeth fixed. He was a handsome man when he came out of the hospital. They detoxed him in six days. He spent that Thanksgiving at my house. He also spent Christmas at my house... A year later, David got up and talked about his conversion to Christ. The minute he took the mic and began to speak, I said, "The man is a preacher." This past Easter, we ordained David. He is an associate minister of a church over in New Jersey. And I was so close to saying, "Here, take this; I'm a busy preacher." We can get so full of ourselves. [Contributed by Davon Huss, https://aksermonillustrations.blogspot.com/search/label/Pastors] We all do that. Jesus reminds us three times, "I have made you fishers of men. Focus your life on finding and feeding My sheep!"

GUARANTEES OF THE RESURRECTION

In our world everybody is looking for a guarantee and nobody's got one. It applies in little things and big things. When you buy something, whether a car or a hair dryer, you look for a guarantee in case it is defective; you want to make sure your purchase will last. But almost all guarantees are limited, 90 days, 1 year, sometimes more. Some few things carry an absolute lifetime guarantee. But that's OK with things you buy, because you can always get another one! It is not so with life and eternity. You only go around once; nobody wants get down to the end and die and find out that their beliefs and their life were faulty and miss a glorious eternity. It has become quite popular to say, "There are no guarantees about anything," but I'm happy to report that God has one! The resurrection of Jesus Christ is my absolute, lifetime, eternal, no need to ever get your money back, guarantee, that God has given to me to seal the purpose and destiny of my life! It guarantees for me three things:

I. It guarantees my faith in Christ People speak of Christianity as though it is a "blind faith" type of thing. Folks, Christianity is based on an indisputable fact of history, that Jesus Christ rose from the dead. And that fact guarantees that my faith in Him is right and my allegiance to Him is proper. It guarantees a number of things about the One I am trusting in. It guarantees:

1. that Christ is God - Rom. 1:4 It is easy for a man to claim to be the Son of God. Any Jim Jones or Rev. Moon can do that. Jesus claimed very directly that He was God before all, by forgiving sins, receiving worship, and even verifying directly before the Sanhedrin that He was the Christ, which to them was utter blasphemy. But that claim had to be substantiated; there had to be a way that for all time would stand to prove the truth of His claims. Jesus told everyone beforehand what the test would be, "Destroy this Temple and I will raise it up in three days!" "No sign will be given this generation except that as Jonah was three days in the belly of the fish, so the Son will be three days in the heart of the earth". He told his disciples repeatedly, "On the third day I will rise again!" Here is the acid test of His identity, of whether He really is who He claimed to be. It all hinges on Sunday morning and God proved it once for all by raising Him from the dead! Harry Houdini the great escape artist told his wife he would return to her from the dead, even if he had to go to hell to do it. For 10 years she watched and waited and held seances before giving up. Houdini couldn't keep his promise and resurrect himself. Jesus Christ could! I'm believing in the right Person! The resurrection guarantees:

2. that Christ is Savior - Rom. 4:25 "OK, I see He is who He said, but how do I know He did what He was supposed to do for me?" Paul's point in the early chapters of Romans is that a man is not saved by the law or by circumcision or by good works. He is saved by believing that Jesus died for his sins! How do I know He accomplished salvation for me there, that the effect of His death was forgiveness for me? What guarantee do I have that I am actually forgiven, that I stand before God justified, just-as-if-I'd-never sinned? Paul answers, "God raised Him from the dead!" The Resurrection is the sign that the sacrifice of the cross is accepted, that the payment for sins was enough. In 1 Corinthians, Paul said, "If Christ did not rise, you are still in your sins." In other words, "Without it, you have no certain Savior; we don't know what's become of Him nor the meaning of His death." But, oh, He did rise and we do have that guarantee! Third, it guarantees:

3. that Christ is Judge - Acts 17:31 Jesus made a lot of claims about a second coming, a coming in power and might and glory to judge the world. The world has always been unwilling to accept that. People tend to have a feeling that things will always go on and on forever as they always have, and maybe even improve. But God has set a day; there is

a time limit on this world when it must step forth for judgment and it is not Buddha or Mohammed who will be the Judge. It is Jesus Christ. How can we know? God raised Him from the dead! It is God's sign to all men everywhere and in all time that they will have to answer to Somebody and that Somebody will be Jesus Christ! Listen, our faith is not blind faith! It is guaranteed by the Resurrection. It proves beyond a shadow of a doubt who He is and what He did for us and what He will do! It proves that He is true and that my confidence in Him is not in vain. But it does more than that:

II. It guarantees my fruitful service Being committed to Christ is not simply a momentary act; it means a lifetime of serving Him. It is not always easy. It means labor and hardship and suffering and persecution many times. When you do a job, it is so encouraging to know it will be profitable. When you spend all day repairing a car, you want to know that it will run. When you spend 18 years pouring your life into a child, you want to know that they will stand true to the values and lifestyle they have been taught. How about when you spend an entire lifetime serving Christ? Is there a guarantee that it is worth it, that out of it something good will result? The Resurrection is that guarantee.

1. it gives me vision for service - 1 Cor. 15:58 This verse begins with a "therefore" which connects it to the rest of the chapter. Chapter 15 is about the Resurrection of Christ. It gives the evidence of the ressurrection, then the importance of the resurrection, then the effects of the resurrection. Paul closes by saying, "Stand firm, don't quit, serve the Lord, because you know that your labor is not empty, not vain." How do I know? On the basis of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus said so and His say-so is guaranteed by His Resurrection. Jesus promised in Scripture over and over again that we would be rewarded for our service and His resurrection stands as proof that He knows what He's talking about! But also:

2. it gives me power for service - Eph. 1:18-21 How do I know I can accomplish the job He asks me to do? Listen to what He says, "The mighty power of God that raised Jesus from the dead, exalted Him to Heaven and made Him Lord of all, is the same power that is now directed in and through us!" Paul prays that the Ephesians might know and experience it, might recognize who they are in Christ and by His power. It is the Resurrection of Christ that guarantees to me that I can serve God, that I can do His will, that I can endure all things through Christ who strengthens (literally in Greek, in-dynamites) me! If God can do what He did, then He can do what He promised to do with me! If His power is great enough to raise Christ from the dead, then it can help me to endure hardness as a good soldier of Jesus Christ! The Resurrection means something for today, for right now, for this minute. It is the guarantee that my purpose in this life is bearable and valuable. Don't you wish you had a guarantee like that about your secular job? But lastly:

III. It guarantees my future Here's what everybody really wants, a guarantee that when death finally catches up to them and they step into eternity that there is something wonderful awaiting them. People would give anything for that kind of assurance, but we have it in the Resurrection of Christ! It guarantees:

1. my resurrection - 2 Cor. 4:14 Mankind has always feared what existence will be like after death; it has been commonly viewed as kind of a shadow world of spirits. How do I know that when I cross death's river that I will be a real somebody, that I will continue as a real individual personality, that I will have a real personal existence? Paul has been talking about the things that have encompassed him on every side and alludes to how death is always at hand for him. Yet he is not worried because God raised Jesus from the dead, and so He will raise us from the dead too! Now notice that we are not talking about immortality of the spirit here; Paul is not just saying that if I die, my spirit will live on in heaven. The word *raise* means the resurrection of the body. It means what happened to Jesus; His body was raised in a glorified, perfected form. He was recognizable, real, made of a new order of flesh and bones. He could be touched, seen, and spoken with. That is exactly what God is going to do to me; the Resurrection is a demonstration of what awaits me at the Rapture, when we are all presented in heaven in our new bodies! Folks, I'm not just looking forward to having a spirit-existence; I'm going to be me, the perfect me with a perfect nature and a perfect body! And the Resurrection also guarantees:

2. my inheritance - 1 Pet. 1:3-4 I not only have a living hope, but I also have a guaranteed inheritance that is laid up for me right now in heaven. It can't be destroyed, it can't spoil or deteriorate, it can't fade away. It belongs to Jesus and I am joint-heir with Him, so it is mine. But the best part is that I know I will get to enjoy it! How do I know? Because Christ's Resurrection proves to me that I will be a living, real person and able to enjoy real things!

Oh, do you see how central the Resurrection of Jesus Christ is to Christian faith? My present and my future hang on it. But the most wonderful thing is that it really happened! It happened as a fact, before I ever had to believe it. It is not a matter of faith in an event that may or may not have happened; it is a matter of seeing an event that happened and understanding that it guarantees what will happen to me!

Jesus Christ Our Living Hope - 1 Pet. 1:3-5

This certainly is a different Easter for all of us. Instead of being all together to celebrate at church or gathering around a table with our extended family to eat a huge meal, we're by ourselves. We're watching the news and as the number of coronavirus cases increases

beyond the 400,000 mark in the US and the number of deaths grows, we're becoming more anxious and more diligent in our precautions to prevent getting it. The longer we can't work, the more we become worried about how we're going to pay our bills or whether our whole economy is going to collapse. We wonder more and more, "What will the future hold?" Well, the answer as far as these sorts of earthly questions go is simply, "I don't know." "Will I lose my money, my house? Will I get sick and if I do, will I recover?" "I don't know." But there is one thing I DO know that transcends all these things and that one thing is the very thing we celebrate today: Jesus Christ lives and because of Him I will live forever! Hallelujah! Take a Bible or use your Bible app and turn to 1 Peter 1 and let's read about:

I. The Living Hope That We Have As Believers In Christ (3) Listen church, the Bible says we have a hope. Hebrews says, *We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure*... It's like an anchor that is sunk solidly into the floor of the sea and can't be pulled loose, no matter how violent the storm that threatens to sweep away the ship up on the surface to certain destruction. It is sure, it is steadfast, it is immovable! You see:

1. biblically speaking, hope is a certainty about what will occur in the future We most often use the word *hope* to indicate a sense of un-certainty. "I hope things will get better." "I hope my family will not get sick." "I hope this will be over soon!" But when the biblical writers use the word *hope*, in almost every instance:

a. it is more than a wish or desire for something to occur It is more than wanting something to happen or wishing something will happen (that might not). Rather, in the Bible, *hope*:

b. it is waiting with expectation for something we are sure of that simply hasn't happened yet. Every believer should be able to plainly say, "I have the hope of heaven!" That doesn't mean, "I hope that I will go to heaven (but I might not)". It means, "I know I am going to heaven! That is what I am looking forward to and longing for because it hasn't happened yet. But I am sure of it and can hardly wait for it to happen!" When I was 20, I met this lovely young lady named LuAnn at church one evening. From the moment she said "yes" to my asking her for a first date, I "hoped" that she might be willing to marry me, but I didn't know for sure and there was always a chance that she might not. Three months later, we got engaged (Listen teens, don't come to your parents and say, "The pastor got engaged after three months. Why can't I?" Call me and I'll answer that question for you!) My point is that after that, getting married became a genuine hope! The date was set. I knew it was going to happen and when it would. I looked forward to it; I could hardly wait for it. And I lived joyously looking forward to it every day because I was sure of it. That's how it is with our souls! We know that no matter what life may throw at us, we are certain of what will happen to our souls forever. Now look again at what Peter says, "We have a LIVING hope..." Or to put it another way:

2. we have hope because we are joined to a living Person, Jesus Christ Our hope is not based on what some material thing is going to do for us. It is not based on what some other human being is going to do for us. It is based on what Jesus Christ has already done for us! Peter says He was raised from the dead. Of course, to be resurrected, you have to first be dead. So Jesus:

a. He was first put to death on a cross That's what Good Friday is all about. But why the cross? Why did Jesus die?

(1) He died to free us from the penalty of our sins Listen to **Heb. 9:15**, *That is why [Jesus] is the one who mediates a new covenant between God and people, so that all who are called can receive the eternal inheritance God has promised them. For Christ died to set them free from the penalty of the sins they had committed under that first covenant*. Oh listen, I came to Jesus when I was 15, but in my short life, I had lied, I had cheated, I stole, I lusted, I swore and took the name of God in vain and a whole lot more. And my sins carried with them a penalty, the penalty of being separated from a holy God forever and experiencing an eternity of suffering in a lake of fire. In order for me to receive an eternal inheritance with and from God, those sins had to be paid for, that penalty had to be inflicted. And that's why Jesus died. 2 Cor. 5:21, *For our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.* I ran to Jesus and when I did, I was joined to Him; my sins became His and were punished in His death, and His righteousness became mine and gave me His life! But:

(2) it was necessary for His death to come first You can't get the inheritance that somebody prepares for you unless they die. **Heb. 9:16-17**, *For where a will is involved, the death of the one who made it must be established. For a will takes effect only at death, since it is not in force as long as the one who made it is alive.* To give us the glorious eternal inheritance that He planned to give us, Jesus had to die first. His precious blood had to be spilled; His life had to be poured out unto death to pay that awful penalty that I deserved. But then something marvelous happened, the very thing we celebrate today:

b. He was raised out of death and that means He is alive forever *...we know we will also live with him. We are sure of this because Christ was raised from the dead, and he will never die again. Death no longer has any power over him. When he died, he died once to break the power of sin. But now that he lives, he lives for the glory of God.* - **Rom. 6:8b-10**. Our hope is not in a man who died 2000 years ago; it is in a man who died for our sins 2000 years ago and then came out of that tomb alive and will live on forever and ever and never die again! HE is our living hope! Jesus is just as alive today as He was when He walked on earth. He lives and I can have a living relationship with a living Jesus today, right now, and all the days of my life on this earth and forever! Jesus made it so plain. He said:

c. because He lives, we shall live also in **John 14:19**. "Since I live, YOU live, forever with Me and joined to Me!" No matter what happens to my body, whether I live or die, whether I have plenty or starve, I am alive forever more! Jesus is my living hope, my living assurance that I will experience all that He has planned for me.

Now, speaking of that, let's go back to Peter and look at verse **(4)**. Listen, through Jesus:

3. we are certain of a glorious eternal inheritance that there are no words to describe. It's an existence that is imperishable; it can't decay or be destroyed. It's undefiled, pure, holy and without sin. And it's unfading; it will never diminish in any sense. It is perpetual, eternal. The Scriptures say, *"No eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind has imagined what God has prepared for those who love him." - 1 Cor. 2:9.* It's a life and a relationship and an experience beyond our very imagination that lasts forever. And we're certain that we have it because of Jesus our Living Hope! "But couldn't I lose it? Couldn't the devil or even me myself do something to have it taken away?" Look at verse **(5)**. Peter says:

4. we are safely guarded by God until we receive it Paul said, *...I know the one in whom I trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him until the day of his return. - 2 Tim. 1:12*. He gave me this gift of eternal life through Jesus and He lives to guard me and see to it that I enter into this glorious inheritance from Him one day!

So, I have complete forgiveness of my sins, a constant Companion to carry me through life and a guaranteed glorious future, all in Jesus my Living Hope! That's what His resurrection means to me! But now let's go back to verse **(3b)** and notice:

II. How We Receive This Living Hope First, Peter says:

1. it is through the mercy of God, through Him having compassion on us, because there was nothing we could do to atone for our sins. If we come to God thinking that we're pretty good and God should accept us, that our good points outweigh the bad, we are sorely mistaken. **We don't deserve this Living Hope!** We are sinners through and through and we deserve eternal punishment! This hope is a free gift, not something we could ever earn or deserve. Second, Peter says:

2. it is given to us through the experience of a new birth When we come to Jesus and cry out for His mercy and salvation, His Spirit comes into our very soul and transforms it. The old me dies with Him and He creates in me a brand-new spirit that is pure and holy like His. I am born all over again, born from above, transformed in the innermost part of my being by His presence. And third, Peter says that:

3. it is God who creates this new birth experience in us It is a work of God in us. It is not simply my accepting a doctrine or making a commitment; it is God creating a transformation in my very spirit.

Has God caused YOU to be born again so that you have this Living Hope? If not, you can be right now, right where you are, in this very moment. If you realize that you are sinful and lost and can't save yourself and you believe Jesus died for your sins, then why not bow your head and ask Him for the gift of this new birth. Now, for all of us, here's what should be:

III. Our Reaction Because We Have This Living Hope Verse 3 tells us, *BLESSED BE THE GOD AND FATHER OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST!* Oh, we should be filled with **PRAISE!** Hallelujah! Thank you, Father, for Jesus our Living Hope!

James Deloach writes this: *I am not a connoisseur of great art, but from time to time a painting or picture will really speak a clear, strong message to me. Some time ago I saw a picture of an old burned-out mountain shack. All that remained was the chimney...the charred debris of what had been that family's sole possession. In front of this destroyed home stood an old grandfather-looking man dressed only in his underclothes with a small boy clutching a pair of patched overalls. It was evident that the child was crying. Beneath the picture were the words which the artist felt the old man was speaking to the boy. They were simple words, yet they presented a profound theology and philosophy of life. Those words were, "Hush child, God ain't dead!" [James DeLoach, associate pastor of the Second Baptist Church of Houston, quoted in When God Was Taken Captive, W. Aldrich, Multnomah, 1989, p. 24.]* Listen, no matter what virus or sickness or tragedy or suffering or even if death itself comes your way, the message of Easter is simple, "God ain't dead!" Jesus Christ is alive and He is and always will be your living hope! He has prepared for you a glorious inheritance in a heavenly future and He has guaranteed He will guard you and make sure you get it! So praise His Name!

Meet Our Living Jesus

When you read the gospel accounts of that first Easter morning and you reduce them to their simplest terms, each one of them amounts to this: the person met Jesus alive when they knew He was dead and it transformed their lives. They had watched Him die. They knew where His sealed tomb was. They knew his body had laid there cold in the stone since Friday. But all of a sudden, there He stood alive and it changed them forever. Mary Magdalene stood there weeping over the disappearance of His body when He walked up and spoke to her. When she looked up and saw Him alive, she could do nothing but fall at His feet and then run off in total excitement to tell the world. Peter, the disciples, Thomas, all of them had the same reaction. They fell at His feet in utter shock and astonishment saying, "My Lord and my God," but their lives were never the same. They went out and turned the world upside down and died for His Name. It is difficult to convey in words the impact of meeting someone alive that you had been convinced was dead. *Jerald January of Compassion International tells this story he heard from his grandmother when he was a boy: "Because Papa was a preacher," she would say, "he'd often take me along to the weddings and funerals he performed. Now one of those funerals was for Mr. Jones. Mr. Jones was one of those quiet people in town. Not flashy, not loud, just ordinary. He died in an ordinary way--suddenly at home, presumably from a heart attack. In those days it was the custom to hold a wake for the departed in the living room of his home. Friends and family would all come to the house to view the body and pay respects to the widow. There would be a brief word from the minister, and then the food brought by all the neighbors would be shared. That day of Mr. Jones' funeral, his home was so crowded that the children had to be sent outside to look in through the windows. Everything was going as planned. Papa was finished with his message and was closing the service, as I recall, when Mr. Jones sat straight up in his casket and opened his eyes! It wasn't an ordinary funeral anymore! People ran around screaming, including the Widow Jones. Some folks dove through the windows of the house to get out of there! But, sure enough, there was Mr. Jones with his eyes open, alive and breathing! Now, Papa explained to us children that Mr. Jones probably had a stroke and his heart rate had been so slow that the town doctor couldn't detect it. He'd just been in a coma, as far as Papa was concerned, and Papa was probably right. But he never could convince me or any of the other kids in town of that. Mr. Jones always walked with a limp from then on. Whenever any of the children in town saw the poor man coming, they'd run the other way. I heard he died a few years after the funeral I attended with Papa, and that he stayed dead for his second funeral." [A Messed-Up Ride or a Dressed-Up Walk by Jerald January with Steve Wamberg. Zondervan, 1996.*

Pages 23-24.] Now I know that's kind of funny and it's not about a real resurrection, but just try to imagine the impact of meeting someone you know was really dead, but is now alive. You see, as long as someone is dead to you, he doesn't impact you. He's no longer real. We often put it like this, "He's dead and gone". And that's:

I. The World's View Of Jesus: He's another dead man like all the rest In Acts 25:19 a Roman governor named Festus tells a friend he was involved in a dispute about *...a dead man named Jesus who Paul claimed was alive*. That's how everybody pretty much sees Him. He's a dead man that Christians claim is alive, and He may be in some spiritual sense in heaven or nirvana or some supernatural sense, but the reality is that in body and in point of fact, he's just a dead man like any other human being, like all the great religious leaders. He's dead and gone. If you ask your neighbors if Jesus is really alive in the same sense that you or I am alive, real and present, someone you can talk to and interact with, they'll look at you like there's something wrong with you! Even if they're somewhat religious, even though they may express intellectual belief in the doctrine that Jesus rose, in the way they think every day, the way they live their lives, He's dead and gone. He's off the scene like every other dead person who lived hundreds of years ago. But the Bible declares to us:

II. The Good News About Jesus: He was raised out from among all the rest! The New Testament is filled with statements like 2 Tim. 2:8, *Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead. This is my gospel*, my good news! Jesus was raised from the dead. That phrase "Christ was raised from the dead" is used over and over again. But have you ever thought what it means when it says:

1. He was raised from the dead? Dead is an adjective, not a noun. Death is the noun. We think it means simply that Jesus was brought back *from death*, that is, *the state of being dead.* That is true, but that's not what the words mean. "The dead" is a group of people, "the dead ones", all those who have died. When we say Jesus was raised from the dead, the Greek literally means that He was raised **out from among the dead ones**. He's not like all the rest. Go back and read the genealogies of the Old Testament. Adam lived so many years and he died. Noah lived so many years and he died. Abraham lived so many years and he died. Moses, David, all of them. They died, but not one was raised! The same is true of every human being down through history. Paul, Augustine, all the great leaders and emperors. Every human being that ever lived has the same epitaph, "He lived so many years and he died." Every one, that is, except Jesus! Out from among all the millions and billions of dead ones, He was raised to life, never to die again. It was not just a resuscitation to give him a few more years on earth before dying again, but a resurrection in a brand-new resurrection body that lives eternally. That makes Him unique. That sets Him apart from all the rest. He is the firstfruits, the very first and only one. And that means:

2. He is the only eternally LIVING ONE Look at **Rev. 1:18**, *I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.* He's the Living One. He's the One who is always alive forever and ever. He literally, became dead, from Friday to Sunday morning, but He's alive forever and ever and if He's alive and real, you and I have to reckon with Him! So, what's:

III. The Point: It Is Meeting This Living Jesus That Changes Our Lives It is not accepting a doctrinal belief that transforms us. It is not considering and accepting all the tenets of Christianity that makes you a true Christian. It is meeting the living Jesus that transforms you and in fact, you may have precious little information about Him or about the meaning of His coming and His death at that time. Turn to Galatians and let's take, for instance, the example of the Apostle Paul:

1. God revealed the living Jesus <u>TO</u> Paul Now, you remember that Paul was originally Saul of Tarsus, a zealous Jew. Let me point out that:

a. he had never been taught the gospel - Gal. 1:11-14 Paul had heard about Jesus; he wasn't stupid. He knew that Christians claimed that Jesus was alive. But:

(1) he saw Jesus as a dead man He was a zealous leader of a sect and he had been put to death. His followers were cult members and deluded. Jesus was dead and gone. And:

(2) he saw believers in Jesus as enemies of his own belief system They were leading people astray from true faith in the God of Abraham to follow this Jesus. So he hated them and he persecuted them with great zeal. He wanted to eradicate them. He had never had anyone explain to him the whole gospel, how Jesus was the Messiah and died for our sins and then rose the third day. He never had anyone point out all the Old Testament Scriptures that predict this. Christians were too afraid of him to talk to him, let alone witness to him. And then one day:

b. he met the living Jesus - Gal. 1:12b says literally, *I received it through an apocalypse, an appearance, of Jesus Christ.* You remember the story, don't you, how he was on the road to Damascus preparing to hunt down more followers of Jesus and haul them off. Listen to Paul tell the story in **Acts 22:6-10**. Imagine the shock! He thought Jesus was dead and Jesus' voice speaks to him by name! At that moment he didn't even understand the Gospel; He knew only two things. ***He knew only that:***

(1) Jesus is alive He's real; He's here. And that meant:

(2) Jesus is Lord He bows before His feet and says, “Lord, what will you have me to do; what are my orders!” In that instant, he was transformed. He went from persecutor to servant in a split second.

c. he was transformed by the living Jesus and later shown the Gospel Over the next weeks and months and even years, God explained to him the whole story and he relearned the Scriptures and got all his beliefs in line, but the transformation did not come by intellectual information; it came through an encounter with the living Christ!

Now God revealed the living Jesus TO Paul externally on a road, but that doesn’t happen to too many of us. Instead:

2. God reveals the living Jesus <u>IN</u> us - Gal. 1:15-16 The appearance that Jesus makes to us is not external but internal. He does not appear outwardly to our eyes and our ears, but just as certainly, He appears to us. How? First:

a. He causes His light to shine in our hearts - 2 Cor. 4:6, *...God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.* Paul was struck by an external light that blinded him and a voice that knocked him to the ground. But in us, God speaks to our hearts and says, “Let there be light!” And in that instant, we see only two things, Jesus is alive and Jesus is Lord! When that understanding dawns inside us, when God calls to us and our heart hears, all of a sudden, one thing becomes clear, Jesus is alive, He’s real, He’s here and He’s Lord! And we call out to Him, “Lord!” Then, at that moment, a second thing happens:

b. He causes His Spirit to enter us and bear witness - Rom. 8:10-11, 16, *But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you.* And then He adds this, *The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.* In that moment when we cry out, the living Presence of the Living Jesus, the Spirit of Jesus, the Holy Spirit, enters our very bodies to stay and once and for all puts an end to all our doubts. He gives us complete assurance that we now belong to God, that we are His children, that we are His heirs, and that Jesus is real and living in us! So, it’s true, not just for Paul, but even for us that:

c. we are transformed by the living Jesus, not by a system of beliefs And that’s why it works all around the world.

In Tostedt, Germany a 16 year old girl felt strongly impressed that God wanted her to say a special word to the congregation. She had no idea why and apologized that it was so short but said, I’m sure God wants me to say, “God loves you”. That afternoon a man called the pastor and said, “I have been an atheist and I was prepared to commit suicide but yesterday I challenged God. ‘Tomorrow I will visit a church and if you tell me that you love me, I will believe you.’” When God spoke to him through the girl he gave his life to Christ! To him Jesus was a dead man, but the reality of the living Christ broke in on His life and transformed it. In northern Mongolia, there is a man who had been a painter of Buddha images and an alcoholic for 22 years. After he watched the Jesus film, he cried out to Jesus to save him and today he has stopped drinking and paints pictures of Bible stories! The living Jesus burst into his life and transformed his heart. In Asia there is a Buddhist woman named Grace who asked an American woman to help her learn English, so they studied the Bible together and she learned about God. One day she removed her jade Buddha pendant and told it, “If I am truly to become God’s daughter, then you break!” Two weeks later she heard something fall into the sink and looked down to see the jade Buddha broken in two. She immediately gave her life to Christ and since then has witnessed to family, friends, coworkers and taxi drivers and has led her niece, a former coworker and her 81 year old grandmother to Christ! Jesus was just a dead man, but He became real in her life and transformed her! All over the world, this living Jesus is stopping people like you and I on our Damascus Roads and in this way and that way turning that light on in their hearts so they call out to Him and then entering them and transforming their lives, even though they know so precious little about Him. He broke into my life when I was 15 years old and one Saturday morning I knew He was real and I prayed and asked Him into my life and I was transformed. In that instant, I knew I was a child of God and I still know it. Person after person in this room could say the same. It still works just like it did then. The people around you need to meet the living Jesus! They don’t need religion; they don’t need assent to all the facts. God will take care of that. They need Jesus to break into their lives, through you, through your life, through your prayers, through your testimony. And by the way, since you’re sitting here on Easter Sunday, how about you? Have you met our Living Jesus? Or are you just religious and know all the right facts? He’s calling out to you today, “I am Jesus; I’m alive. It’s hard for you to fight that, so why don’t you stop and call out to Me. I’m real. I’ll come into you and change your life!”

RESURRECTION TRUTHS FROM JOSHUA 3-4

Years ago at Easter time, I was reading the story of how Israel crossed the Jordan and God dried up the waters before them. I noticed how the ark going into the waters dried them up for the people to pass over, and with my thoughts on Good Friday and Easter, I couldn't help but see in this story a beautiful picture:

I. The Picture of Christ's Death and Resurrection Let me take the picture apart for you:

1. the Ark represents Christ The Ark itself is a miniature representation of throne of God in heaven and so always represents the presence of God in the Tabernacle and Temple. God would speak from above the ark between the cherubim, thus identifying the ark with Himself. When Israel went to battle, the ark would go out with the army to symbolize that God was with them. Well, the One who is the visible presence of God with His people is the Son, Emmanuel, God with us. So, the fact that the ark has now come out of the Tabernacle and gone down among people to the Jordan river pictures the incarnation of Christ becoming a man and dwelling among us.

2. its entry into the Jordan represents His death Waters often symbolize death in the Bible. For example, Jonah prays out of the belly of the fish about the waters that had compassed his soul. 1 Cor. 10 speaks of crossing Red Sea as baptism, which is a burial according to Rom. 6. The waters of the Red Sea brought death to the Egyptians. And even Isaiah 43's promise that the waters will not overflow us, speaks of waters as taking life. So, going down into Jordan can easily symbolize the death of Christ.

3. its abiding in the Jordan represents His burial It remained there temporarily while Israel crossed.

4. its emerging from the Jordan represents His resurrection The ark emerged unscathed by the waters and stood in victory over them, even as Christ emerged from the tomb and stood victorious over death and the grave! Now, if you're willing to accept this scene as a picture of Christ's death and resurrection, even though it is limited in scope and incomplete and not every detail matches perfectly with what it symbolizes, then you'll see:

II. Some Beautiful Truths From This Picture This scene will become an easy and wonderful reminder of some truths we already know, because they are clearly taught in the New Testament. We know that:

1. Christ passed first through the waters of death to resurrection (11) The ark went into the waters before the people did. So, from our perspective in the church age, Christ passed through the waters of death before us and on to resurrection. Isn't it wonderful that He went first? Children, and even adults, when there's something scary to face, say, "You go first". I can't think of anything scarier to face for a human being than death and to enter the waters of death not knowing the certainty of the outcome would be fearful indeed. But we have One who went first, who showed us that there is a victorious passage through the waters of death and on to resurrection. And after Him:

a. we follow at a distance (4) There was a considerable distance between the ark going in and the people going in, perhaps 1/2 mile. I am reminded of Paul's words in 1 Cor. 15, "Christ is risen...the firstfruits of them that slept...but every man in his own order, Christ the firstfruits, then they that are Christ's at His coming." Our death certainly is later in time than His, but our resurrection is in the proper order; Him first, then we follow at the Rapture! Moreover:

b. we follow because He went first We've never been that way before; it is a unique experience to us, but because He went first, we can follow Him into death and resurrection with no hesitation; He knows the way. It is not only great to have someone who is brave enough to go first, it is even better to have someone who goes first successfully; this gives us confidence. We have One who stepped into the waters of death and was not swept away; we can follow Him without fear! Second, we know that:

2. Christ transformed the waters of death (16-17) The raging, destructive Jordan, which was overflowing its banks and uncrossable, was changed when the priests bearing the ark stepped in! One would have expected them to be swept away, but miraculously, in place of the raging torrent was dry ground. The priests stood in the riverbed on firm, dry ground, not even on mud! And because the ark stood there, the waters could not touch the people. Likewise:

a. the waters of death cannot touch us Christ changed the nature of death; He took the sting out and transformed it from the raging river that swallowed men up eternally into dry ground. The sting of death is removed; it holds no more penalty for us. Consequently:

b. we see, not a raging wall, but an open path Note where the raging waters piled up, at Adam, which was a great distance away, approximately 15 miles north. They never even saw the destructive waters piled up in a heap, like a tidal wave waiting to rush down on them. All they saw was the water level go down and the ground dry up and an open crossing to the promised land. Compare 4:23. Christ dried up the waters, so now we have a new view of death. It is still as destructive as ever to unsaved people, but for us, we see it, not standing as our destroyer, but as an open path to glory. Friend, if you're a believer who is sitting around terrified at the prospect of dying, you're not looking at it correctly. It is dry ground; Christ passed through unscathed and so will you! Thirdly, we know that:

3. Christ triumphed over the waters of death (4:18) Can't you just see Christ stepping out of the tomb that Easter morning? See how complete a job God did in Joshua's day. The soles of their feet never got wet! Their feet only touched the water's edge (3:15) and it began to recede. They didn't even get muddy, but stood on dry ground the whole time and it wasn't until their feet were completely out that the waters returned. God wrought a complete victory over the waters! See how completely Christ triumphed over death. It could not hold Him or even lay a hand on Him. He was in complete control, a victor! He picked up His life again and raised His body and death itself could not stop Him. And because of that, nothing will stop you either. One day you'll have a new resurrection body and stand totally victorious with Christ on resurrection ground as these people did! Fourth, we know that:

4. Christ took His people with Him If you remember the story, the Israelites took 12 stones and set them up in the middle of the Jordan and then 12 other stones out of Jordan to set up as an altar at Gilgal in the promised land. Twelve is number of Israel and these stones were to remind Israel that they had passed through the waters with God and God had brought them through on dry ground. I am immediately reminded of a number of New Testament expressions which tell us we are identified with Christ in His death and resurrection. Compare **Rom. 6:1-4**:

a. we have died with Christ (1-2) When He died, we died! Here is the doctrine of identification. We were united with Christ; our spirit was joined to the Holy Spirit and made one. So, when He died, we died with Him. When He suffered the penalty of sin, we suffered it. When He, through death, broke the power of sin, He broke its hold on us. Our old nature is dead and gone. The same thought is in Gal. 2:20. Moreover:

b. we have been buried with Christ (4a) The symbol of our baptism tells us that we were buried with Him. Just as the stones remained in the water as a reminder that they had stood there, so, as He lay in death in the tomb, we are reminded that we have been there with Him. But best of all:

c. we are risen with Christ (4b) We stand on resurrection's shore with Christ, having resurrected spirits, born again and brand-new lives with Him. Not only that, we are counted as already having our resurrection bodies. It is as good as done because we are joined to Him. In fact:

d. we are exalted with Christ - Eph. 2:6 We are already with Him in the promised land, just like the people of Israel and the ark went on to rule in Canaan. Check out Col. 3:1-4. We are already, right now, seated in the heavenlies with Christ. That is our guaranteed position because He took us with Him through the waters of death and on to glorious resurrection!

Oh, aren't you glad Christ crossed the Jordan of death and emerged victorious? Aren't you glad your crossing is guaranteed in His?

The Assurances Of His Resurrection - 1 Cor. 15:3-8

There are some things in life you don't want to be wrong about. Important things. You don't want to be wrong about who you marry, for instance. You don't want to be wrong about whether or not your hand is clear of the saw blade before you turn it on. Certain things in life demand assurance. You need to be sure about them because your life and well-being depend upon them. As a believer in Jesus Christ, the very first thing you need is assurance of your salvation because your whole eternal future depends on it. But another thing you need as a believer is assurance that the things you believe are actually true, that you haven't put your faith in some cunningly devised fables. The world around you is constantly denying and making light of the things you believe. How about the resurrection of Jesus Christ? What assurance do we have that He is really alive, that what we are celebrating today is true? Well, in Corinth there was a group of people who had infiltrated the church there who had begun to teach that there is no resurrection of the dead and of course, that called into question Christ's own resurrection. They wrote to Paul and asked him about this. They needed assurance that Jesus really did rise. And 1 Cor. 15 is the detailed answer that Paul wrote back to them about this question. Paul says, "I want to remind you again about the first and most important things that I preached, that you believed, and that you have taken a stand on: (1) Christ died for our sins and the evidence of that is that He was buried. And (2) Christ rose from the dead and the evidence of that is that He APPEARED." And the overarching assurance of both of those facts is:

I. The Integrity Of The Scriptures (4) The resurrection of Christ was not just a surprise turn of events in the story of His life on earth. At least 1,000 years before, God had begun preparing for it by causing Old Testament writers to refer to it ahead of time. That way, when Christ rose, it would be "according to the Scriptures;" it would be just as God had predicted ahead of time. And His followers would be able to say, "Oh yes, now I understand. God had intended this all along!" The first and most important of these references is:

1. the prediction of David - Ps. 16:10 Who was David talking about? Well, Peter, after reflecting on that, comments on it in Acts 2:25-31. David couldn't have been talking about himself. He died and was buried and his tomb was still there and occupied. He couldn't have meant that his own body would not see decay. The "Righteous One" had to be a reference to Christ. Christ would not be abandoned to the grave; Christ's body would not see decay. He was simply a

prophet, speaking beforehand of Christ. And Peter's implication is, "Hallelujah, God did just what He predicted He would do 1,000 years ahead of time!" Then we move to:

2. the promise of Isaiah - Is. 53:10-11 This is that great chapter about the suffering and dying of Christ. It paints so vivid a picture of the cross that it cannot be mistaken as referring to anyone other than the Messiah, the Christ who was to come. Yet in that very chapter, Isaiah promised that after God had, through His death, made Him to be a sin offering for the sins of the world, He would prolong His days. He would see the light of Life, that is, He would live again! 750 years beforehand, God had made the promise that after He dies for the sins of mankind, Christ will rise again! And He did! But it gets even more specific than that in:

3. the implication of Hosea - Hos. 6:1-2 While this is not definitely a messianic passage that we would identify outright, it nevertheless does have a marvelous implication: that the time of restoration and resurrection would be on the third day. This becomes all the more significant when you notice that Jesus repeatedly told His disciples that He would be killed and that on the THIRD DAY He would rise again. And when He appeared to them after His resurrection and opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, He said in Lk. 24:46, "This is what was written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day..." Jesus is saying, “Hosea was talking about ME, implying that I would rise on the third day, don't you understand?” And the final Old Testament reference is not a saying at all, but a sign:

4. the sign of Jonah - 1:17 says that Jonah was in the belly of the fish 3 days and 3 nights. Jesus said in Mat. 12:39-40 that Jonah's 3 days in the belly of the fish was a visual portrayal of His own 3 days in the grave! He would give His generation the same sign Jonah gave his. In fact, He said that more specifically in Lk. 11:30, "For as Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites, so also will the Son of Man be to this generation." Jonah's coming to Nineveh was a miracle; it was life after certain death. That sign led them to believe his message. Christ would give His generation the same sign, the sign of His resurrection, so that they would believe. He's saying, "Jonah graphically illustrated what is going to happen to me hundreds of years ago! Let that be the sign you look for, My resurrection!”

So, the Old Testament Scriptures laid out beforehand, not only that Christ would die but that He would rise from the dead on the third day! Do you trust the Scriptures or don't you! Oh, I know that doesn't mean much to the world around you; they don't believe the Bible anyway. But you do. You have staked your life and eternity on the truth of this Book! You trust the integrity of the Scriptures and Christ's resurrection is something that was planned and predicted and laid out beforehand in them. They prove themselves trustworthy over and over and over again. God says things will happen and they happen. The Scriptures prove themselves true and so they are my first line of assurance that the resurrection really happened. I trust the Book! But I have another entirely different source of assurance:

II. The Incontestability Of The Appearances - Acts 1:1-3 Over a period of 40 days, Jesus appeared repeatedly to His followers and gave them convincing, incontestable proofs that He was alive. And in 1 Cor. 15:5-8, Paul gives a detailed list of some to whom Christ appeared. First, he mentions that Christ appeared:

1. to Peter who had denied Him - Lk. 24:34 This verse mentions that Christ had appeared to Simon Peter on that first Easter Sunday. The exact time or manner has not been recorded for us, though it must have been before evening when the two from the Emmaus road arrived. Peter was among the first to see Him. Now remember when he last saw Him! It was on Thursday night in the house of the High Priest where Jesus was on trial. And Jesus had stared at him with that look that said, "I heard you deny knowing Me just now!" And he ran out into the night weeping. Where had he been all day Friday while Jesus was on the cross and Saturday? We don't know, probably hiding back in the Upper Room where they all still were on Sunday! He was one who doubted, one who faltered, one who failed and ran away, one who cowered in fear! Yet Jesus appeared to him and look what happened. He became the first man to stand up and preach a sermon before a whole crowd and the theme of it was, JESUS ROSE FROM THE DEAD! There is no way he would have done that unless he had SEEN JESUS alive! He would have gone back and buried himself in fishing in the Sea of Galilee again! Then Jesus appeared:

2. to the Twelve who knew Him best - Jn. 20:19, 26 It's kind of hard to know which time Paul is referring to. Jesus appeared to the Twelve once on Easter Sunday and then again, the week following when Thomas was with them. These were His disciples. They were men who spent three years with Him night and day, men who knew Him better than anybody. They could not be fooled or deceived. And when He appeared, they talked to Him and touched Him and ate with Him. To a man, they came away preaching, "Jesus is alive; we have seen the Lord!" And to a man, they willingly gave their lives and died spreading that message all over the world! Then He appeared:

3. to 500 who could not be fooled, a gathering of more than 500 people at one time. This probably happened on the occasion recorded in Mt. 28:16 on the mountain in Galilee where He gave the great commission. We do not have an exact record of the event. But Paul says, "One man might be mistaken or fooled, but not 500 all at the same time and besides, most of those 500 are still alive now, 30 years later. You can ask them! 30 years later they're still convinced that this wasn't a hallucination or a hoax. They saw and heard Jesus alive!" But these are all people who were at least Jesus' followers to start with. He also appeared:

4. to James His unbelieving brother - Acts 1:14 lists Jesus' brothers as among those who were present and saw Christ go up to heaven and then returned to the Upper Room. James was Jesus' brother, born by the natural means to Mary and Joseph after Him. But despite growing up with Him and watching Him through three years of ministry, Jn. 7:5 says His own brothers did not believe in Him! They had contempt for Him and His ministry. But not anymore! James became the head of the church at Jerusalem. You'll find him leading it in the Book of Acts. He also wrote one of the Books of our New Testament. What changed him and made a believer out of him? Simple. He saw Jesus alive after His death. Jesus appeared to him and it changed his life forever! Then Paul says He appeared:

5. to all the apostles who saw Him ascend - Acts 1:9-13 His appearances did not simply die out and become less frequent or cease. All the apostles watched Him rise up into the air before their eyes. They followed Him up into the clouds until they could see Him no more and knew that He had ascended to heaven! They no longer went around looking for Him or seeking further appearances. They were confident of where He was and that He was going to stay there until the time of His promised return! They could not be persuaded that it had all been a dream or that perhaps they were mistaken. They had seen Him and were convinced He had left and was coming back again and they waited for His coming! And then finally, as if to seal it all, He appeared:

6. to Paul, His malicious enemy (9) - Acts 9:3-5 tells the story of how Saul the Jew and persecutor of Christians, the enemy of Christ, was going along the Damascus road and was struck by a light from heaven and heard the voice of the Risen Christ speak to him. Certainly, he was not one predisposed to believe. He was killing those who preached that Jesus was alive! But from that instant, he himself was convinced Jesus was alive and began to preach it. He became the great Apostle Paul who turned the whole Roman Empire upside down and spread the message of the Risen Christ as far as Rome and beyond in the space of 20 years. He became the greatest missionary the Church has ever had and was beheaded for his faith in a Roman dungeon. What could make a change in a man like that? Nothing except the appearance of Jesus alive and well! Friends, there are hundreds of facts of history that we believe on far less evidence than that. It is incontestable. You can't argue with it. Either Jesus actually rose and appeared, or these hundreds of people all suddenly went crazy in the same way for the rest of their lives! You can rest assured that Jesus is alive because you have a Book that says so that has been proved trustworthy and accurate over and over again, and because you have the repeated testimony of hundreds of eyewitnesses who staked their lives on that fact. What more assurance could you possibly want?

Houdini, the great magician, told his wife that he would attempt to return to her from the dead, even if he had to go to hell to do it. For 10 years she carefully followed the conditions and instructions he left. On the tenth anniversary of his death, the final seance was held at the Knickerbocker Hotel in Hollywood CA. 25 other seances were held round the world simultaneously. For more than two hours they prayed, pleaded, and begged for Houdini to manifest his presence. Finally, Mrs. Houdini said, "I now turn out the light. It is finished." Houdini couldn't do it. Nobody else in human history has ever done it, though many have wanted to. But Jesus Christ said He was going to do it and He did it. The Book doesn't lie and the witnesses don't lie! My friend, Jesus Christ is alive. He's here this morning. And He's willing to give you the full and final proof that He's alive. He's willing to come and live inside you personally and make His presence known by transforming your heart! I know He's alive because He's done it for me. And He's done it for hundreds of people that I know and thousands that I've read about. If you've never invited Him into your life, won't you do it today?

The Likeness Of The Man From Heaven - 1 Cor. 15:49

Easter is a time when people often worry about what clothes they're going to wear. Boys and men have their "Easter Suit", while girls and women always have a beautiful "Easter Dress". Now we all know that Easter is not about our appearance and the clothes we wear; it's about Jesus rising from the dead! But there is another sense in which Easter IS about our appearance and what we will wear. Let me share a verse with you this morning, 1 Cor. 15:49, which says, "We shall bear the likeness of the man from heaven!" What a thought! The word *bear* in the Greek means literally “to wear” and is the common word for wearing clothes. So often we think about our future just in terms of getting to heaven, which is guaranteed by Christ's resurrection. But we so often forget that we are not only going to heaven, we are going to experience a bodily resurrection ourselves. We are going to wear the likeness of the man from heaven, Jesus Christ. So, I'd like to talk to you this morning a little more about what you'll be wearing, not for Easter, but for Eternity. In order to understand my resurrection, the first fact I must know is that:

I. Two Men Determine The State Of My Being (22) My parents' genes may have determined my eye color and my height, but there are only two men to whom I am related who determine the state of my being. I come into this world IN ADAM, as a descendant of Adam, and because of that, I inherit the makeup of his being, just as any tiger is born with the being of a tiger, not an elephant. Adam's descendants are wearing all kinds of variations of his pigmentation and characteristics, but each of us still wears the nature of his being because he was our biological ancestor. Now let's read verses (44-47) and find out what that means:

1. the first man, Adam, is my biological ancestor We know that:

a. his bodily origin was material He was made of the dust of the earth. And if you check the chemical composition of your body, you'll discover that every one of the elements in your body is found somewhere in the dirt beneath your feet. God just rearranged them in a miraculous way to create the marvelous structure known as our body. But the real point is that Adam's bodily origin was material in nature, composed of the elements of the physical world. And then God breathed into the material body the breath of life, literally, the spirit of life. So:

b. he began as a living spirit in a sinless, non-dying, material body Look all through the chemicals of the earth and you won't find life among them. God put it there. He gave Adam a living spirit which dwelt inside that material body and gave it its life. That spirit was in contact and fellowship with God. It was sinless and perfect. So was the body. It was a perfect creation. It was material, but it had no sin in or about it. And consequently, it was a body that would not have died, but would have continued on. It was subject to dying; it COULD die because God said so ("You will surely die.") But it was non-dying. It was not deteriorating and breaking down and growing old, just going on and on. But then, of course, Adam took that fatal step; he chose to sin and so:

c. he became a dead spirit in a dying body - Rom. 5:12 And when he died, he died thoroughly. His spirit became dead, not that it ceased to exist, but dead toward God, cut off from God by the presence of sin. And at the same moment, his body began the process of dying. It began to age and decay and became subject to sickness and disease and corruption. He became a dead spirit in a dying body. But there's more. That sin let death enter both the world and the human race and death passed to all men, because IN ADAM all sinned. That means that all descendants of Adam inherited the nature of Adam's being. And that's how I was when I came into the world. I came in in Adam's likeness, indwelt both in body and spirit by the spiritual force of sin, with a spirit that was dead toward God and a body that was dying, from the minute I was born! Now fortunately, I came to Christ and something wonderful happened to me:

d. I'm now a living spirit in a dying body - Rom. 8:10 The Holy Spirit regenerated me. He killed and cut out that old dead spirit in me and replaced it with a brand-new living one made in the image of Christ. My spirit is righteous and holy and pure. It has no sin. And God can live in it. Jesus dwells there in all His sinless purity. But unfortunately, salvation did not change my body. I'm still wearing that same old dying body that I got from Adam. He determined the nature of the body that my spirit wears now. But let's switch gears a minute and see that:

2. the last man, Christ, is my spiritual ancestor "In Christ all will be made alive", verse 22 said. I am now IN CHRIST. Now what do verses 44-48 say about Him?

a. His origin was spiritual He was not made of the materials of the natural world. He was from heaven. Heaven is not material in nature; it is spiritual. The Bible says God is spirit. Jesus was a spiritual being and then a marvelous thing happened. We call it the INCARNATION. Phil.2:7-8, "Jesus was made in human likeness". He took to Himself the very nature of man and:

b. He came as a living spirit in a sinless, non-dying, material body Through the mechanism of the virgin birth and the Father's preparation of a special body to plant in Mary's womb, Jesus took a material human body, only one without sin, the same kind Adam must have had originally. One that, though capable of dying, was not dying of itself. Nevertheless, it was material. So here He is, a living, eternal spirit united to a material body and something else happens. Man crucifies that body, kills it dead, but the third day God raises that body from the dead. Only now it is different. It is real, but it is no longer material:

c. He became a life-giving spirit in a spiritual body It was a body of a different order. It was recognizable. It was similar. But it was no longer material; it was spiritual. There is a natural body which I get from Adam and there is a spiritual body that I will get from Christ. But the key word here is LIFE GIVING. In the Greek it is *zoopoieo* which means "to cause to become alive". Verse 22 says in Christ all shall be caused to become bodily alive! I am already spiritually alive. But because I am in Christ, I not only got a spirit like His, but I will get a body like His as well! He will give life to my mortal body and make it like His glorious body. So:

II. There Are Two Likenesses I Must Wear (48-49) I am descended from two men. And it is a law of the universe that I must wear the nature of my ancestors. I have no choice:

1. what I must wear now: the material body of Adam (50, 53) I am stuck wearing Adam's bodily likeness right now and there are two facts about it that you well know:

a. it is perishable: subject to deterioration It, like everything else in the material world around it, is subject to the second law of thermodynamics. It is deteriorating. It is wearing out, running down to a lower level of energy! Most of us start to become acutely aware of that when we hit our thirties or so and we start to discover how all the physical features of adulthood we had looked so forward to developing throughout our childhood are deteriorating a bit at a time, our appearance, our hair, our muscles, our athletic ability, our stamina and strength. This is a dying body. It's on the way out. It's in the process of returning to dust. And that points out the second fact:

b. it is mortal: subject to death It can and will die, unless the Lord comes first. How can God take something like that to heaven, a spiritual place, and keep it there forever? He can't. It is impossible for something perishable and corruptible and full of sin to enter the purity of heaven. I can't go to heaven wearing this old thing! I need a change of clothes for my spirit. So, God has provided one for me! He is going to clothe my spirit in a brand-new resurrection body, a spiritual body, a pure body:

2. what I must wear then: the spiritual body of Christ I have inherited and worn Adam's body all my life, and in the order of things, I must also wear the body of Christ. John wrote in his first letter, "It's not too clear yet all we shall be, but I do know this one thing, that when He shall appear we shall be made like Him because we'll see him as he is!" We have worn the likeness of the man from earth and we SHALL wear the likeness of the man from heaven

a. it is imperishable: not subject to deterioration Listen to this, you suffering ones, "There will be no pain!" You weary ones, “There will be no more tiredness, only eternal energy.” You handicapped ones, “There will be no limitations, no incapacities, no infirmities.” You old ones, “There will be no aging, only eternal youth. No more teeth that ache and hair that falls out.” There are no hospitals and no doctors and no therapists, no vitamin pills and medications. You'll wear a body that is no longer subject to deterioration in any form. It is made of spiritual materials. And the best part is:

b. it is immortal: not subject to death It will never die! You'll never change it again. If you were honest, you'd have to admit that the most scary thing you face here is dying, not that you don't have faith that you'll go to heaven, but it's the process of leaving this body that's scary! Will it hurt? Will it be a painful thing? And besides that, letting go of something as precious as your body has been to you is not an easy thing. Well, when you get your new one, you'll never have to do it again. It will be yours forever. So when's it going to happen?

III. The Time When I Will Change Likenesses (51-52) Notice three things:

1. it is instantaneous, not a process It happens in a flash. The Greek word is *atomos*, from which we get "atom". It is literally that which cannot be divided, the smallest particle, in this case, of time. It happens in the twinkling, the blinking of an eye. It is not a process of molding and shaping and changing from one into the other, but an instantaneous transformation. Secondly:

2. it is at Christ's return, not my death It is at the last trumpet that the dead are raised, made to live, that is, given resurrection bodies. 1 Thes. 4 says the Lord Himself will come down from heaven with that trumpet call. We do not get our new bodies individually when we die. When you die, your spirit leaves your body and is instantly in heaven, at home with the Lord. But that is not the end. As wonderful as it is, that is still incomplete. You are a spirit, a soul, but you don't yet have a body like Christ does. You have to wait and all of us get our bodies together in one moment, millions and millions of us. Those who have been dead for 2,000 years and those who are still alive at that moment. What a fashion show; can you imagine it? And notice that:

3. it is universal, not just for some believers We shall ALL be transformed, ALL get that new body. It is not based on performance. It is not only for the few who are the best. Every believer will get that new imperishable, spiritual body that has been prepared for him by God in that same moment.

And that means you! Christ rose from the dead and His resurrection guarantees yours! My friend, YOU will wear the likeness of the man from heaven. This sermon is a word of encouragement. I know how tired you get, how weary. I know how this old body is frustrating and failing, how for some of you it has become a veritable prison, jailing you from day to day. But you have been placed in Christ and you MUST, you WILL, wear His likeness. One glorious day, in a split second, whether you die first or are living still, that trumpet shall sound and you will put on an immortal, imperishable, spiritual body; you will be clothed with the likeness of the man from heaven. Hallelujah!

The Message Of The Empty Tomb

The most precious truth we hold as Christians, the Resurrection of Christ, centers around, of all things, a rock tomb in the side of a hill in a garden just outside Jerusalem. Back then, it wasn't a place people visited very often. In fact, it was slated to become a place to be avoided, a painful reminder of death, a place of sadness and weeping. Yet today it has become one of the spots most visited by Christian pilgrims (if indeed, we have the actual site). The physical sight of it has brought joy to the heart of many a weary believer, I'm sure. But this morning I'd like you to see that tomb with spiritual eyes. It's made of rock but it has a voice. And it's been shouting a message for two millennia now for all the world to hear. The message comes from a drama that was lived out on that spot one sad Friday evening and one glorious Sunday morning by our predecessors in the faith 2,000 years ago. It's a message in two parts, so let's listen with spiritual ears as we examine:

I. The Message Of The Sealed Tomb - Mat. 27:57-66 Though this spot is never given a name, we know a surprising number of facts about it:

1. the facts we know about the physical tomb First, we read:

a. it was Joseph's own tomb (60) This piece of property and the tomb in it were owned by Joseph of Arimathea. Joseph was a good man, a leader in the Jewish community, a member of the Sanhedrin. But he had not consented to their deeds. He himself had quietly and secretly become a disciple of Jesus. Yet now in the moment of Jesus' death, he boldly came forth and claimed Jesus' body for burial. Though he himself was from and perhaps still lived in Arimathea, some 20 miles away, he had bought a piece of land near Jerusalem to serve as a burying place. In the haste of that black Friday afternoon, it was there that he determined to lay Jesus' body to rest. But note this; that tomb was not only owned by Joseph, it was intended for him. It was the place he himself expected to lie one day. It was his own tomb. And the reason, I guess, that he decided to use it is that:

b. it was nearby It was "in the place where Jesus was crucified" according to **John 19:41-42**. It was right there at Calvary, right on the side of the hill. Close enough that Joseph and Nicodemus, his fellow secret-disciple who now joined him, could carry the body without help. Then we read that:

c. it was a new tomb (60) Joseph himself had it constructed. John tells us that no one had ever been buried in it. You've probably never thought of it, but tombs in ancient Israel were not individually used. Several people would be buried in a tomb, each in a separate niche or tunnel. But once the bodies had totally decomposed, the bones would be collected and placed in a box called an ossuary in another part of the tomb. This meant the tomb could be re-used by the family, generation after generation. It was a continual place of decay and death revisited year after year. But not this one. It was brand new. John tells us specifically that no man had ever yet been laid in it. That was significant. Not only did Jesus' body not decay itself, but it was never even brought into proximity with decay and corruption, a fulfillment of the prophecy that God would not allow His Holy One to see corruption! And:

d. it was hewn out of rock (60) It was not a natural cave; rather it had been chiseled out of the solid rock cliff. This was no small feat, when you consider that a tomb from that period usually had an entrance chamber as big as 6 feet by 9 feet by 6 feet high, where the body and its bearers could enter to prepare it for burial. Then burial niches, 3 to a side and 2 on the end, would extend like tunnels out into the rock. That's a lot of cutting in solid rock with hand tools. It had taken, perhaps, years to carve out in preparation before Jesus' body was laid to rest in it. But it was, and then it became something else:

e. it was a sealed tomb It was late. The Sabbath was beginning. Joseph and Nicodemus hastily closed the tomb. We're told:

(1) it was closed by a very large stone (60) Mark adds that it was an exceedingly large stone. Though two men were able to roll it into place, the women coming to the tomb were convinced that they couldn't move it by themselves. Some tombs were closed simply by large boulders rolled against the door opening to keep out animals, intruders, and grave-robbers. Others, however, particularly those which would have a flat vertical face, might have a hewn stone, something like a millstone set on edge, which would roll in a crude track and seal more readily against the flat face of the tomb. Such a stone might weigh 1 to 3 tons and require several men to move. It seems likely to me that this was the case here. But the Jews grew worried about the disciples coming to remove the body and claim a "false resurrection", and so another step was taken.

(2) it was sealed by the authority of Rome (66) Wax was placed on the edge of the stone where it touched the wall, perhaps on both sides with a string across between them. In this was impressed the imperial seal, so that no one would dare to even attempt to open it upon the penalty of Roman justice! Yet even that was not enough for them:

(3) it was guarded by Roman soldiers (66) Probably by four of them, armed and ready. No disciple was going to intrude here. The long Sabbath night and day drug on in silence.

But let's back up from the physical details a minute to listen to what the tomb is saying, to look at:

2. the facts it suggests about death First:

a. death is a personal thing Joseph knew he was going to die. He had prepared for it by building his own tomb. I've often said it would be healthy for every person to go buy a cemetery plot and have a stone put there with their name on it and go out to visit it once in a while just to remind ourselves, "That's my earthly end. I'm going to die. Life is valuable and precious and should be used wisely." Somewhere, my friend, there is a grave, not dug yet, but with your name on it. Unless the Lord comes first, you will die; I will die. It is a personal issue each one of us must face and guess what:

b. death is a near thing It won't take long to get there. It's not far from the cross to the tomb. And it's not far from birth to death. Joseph knew that. That's why he built the tomb. Some of us live as though we're going to live physically forever. But it's closer than we think. Then:

c. death is a universal thing Your grandparents die, your parents die, you'll die, your children will die. Generations upon generations all lie in the grave. It's not something you can avoid or get out of. There is no fountain of youth to find to keep you from it. You may start a new tomb, but even if you do, there's a full one somewhere and this one will be the same. It comes to all of us.

d. death is a permanent thing Tombs were not made out of wood. They were carved out of stone. Tombs carved 2 and 3 thousand years ago are still standing. They are built to last as long as the death of their occupants lasts, forever! Death is permanent. Once your body stops breathing, there is no return, no coming back, no second chance. It is for keeps. And:

e. death is an inescapable thing Not only can't you avoid it, but once it has you, you can't escape from it. There's no coming out, any more than there is getting out of the tomb once the stone is in place. It's a one-way door with no turning back. And:

f. death is an impenetrable thing Nobody from outside can get in to rescue you either. Remember, the tomb wasn't sealed to keep Jesus in; it was sealed to keep the disciples out! Divine authority has decreed that nobody can reach into death and help you and pull you out. Nobody can pray you back or make it better for you somehow. When you go into death, you go in alone.

Oh what a terrible message. Every grave in the world shouts it, “Death is the end, death is permanent, death is for all.” Some even dare to put a message on the tombstone:

"Beware O man as you pass by, as you are now so once was I.
As I am now you too will be; prepare for death and follow me!"

In one cemetery a man found a piece of wood next to a tombstone with that inscription. It read:

"To follow you I'm not content, until I know which way you went!"

However, content or not, Rom. 5:12 says that through Adam's sin, death came to ALL men. All men die. That's what the sealed tomb says on Friday. But on Sunday morning, the tomb began to shout an entirely different message:

II. The Message Of The Empty Tomb - Mat. 28:1-10 When the women arrived, they found they found, instead of a sealed tomb, an unsealed tomb. God had opened it up. Why?

1. God unsealed the tomb that the women might see in It wasn't to let Jesus out. He was already gone; He'd already left. In His resurrection body, He could appear behind closed doors at will. God didn't have to open that tomb at all. But He did. Why? So the women could see into it and so we could look over their shoulders and see into it with them. There's a message in this. Just think about:

a. why they came The text says a very interesting thing:

(1) they came to look at the tomb (1) To watch it. To look at it. They didn't really expect to get in! The whole way there, Mark tells us, they were wondering among themselves who was going to roll away the stone for them. And:

(2) they came to anoint the body - Mk. 16:1-3 They didn't know the guard had been posted. They only hoped that somehow they might happen upon a couple of men who might roll the stone away so they might properly embalm the body and close it back up. If they couldn't, they'd just sit there and mourn awhile. You see, they heard the message of the sealed tomb loud and clear, “Death is the end. It's over and it's permanent.” But when they got there at dawn, here's:

b. what they saw

(1) they found the stone moved, though they knew they couldn't do it The stone they knew they couldn't move was rolled away. And there was an angel sitting on it! The unmoveable had been moved. And:

(2) they found the tomb empty, though they saw it occupied The angel told them to look in and see that it was empty and they did. They saw death claim the Master; they saw Him laid there. But now He was gone. That doesn't happen. Dead men don't get up and leave. They heard the words, "He is risen", but didn't quite grasp them. They still continued to halfway think that the body had been taken away. But then:

(3) they found Jesus alive, though they saw Him die Jesus Himself met them alive. The One whom they'd seen hang His head and die on the cross was standing before them alive and well. They fell down and grabbed His feet and worshipped Him!

You see, the empty tomb meant a resurrection! And just as God unsealed that tomb and opened it for the women to see in and understand that Jesus had risen:

2. the Resurrection unveiled the nature of death that we might see in, that we might see the marvelous nature of what the Cross accomplished. The very nature of death was transformed at Calvary. And the empty tomb, the Resurrection, is what shows us the changes God has made. First, we know that:

a. death no longer has power over those who enter it in Christ Christ burst the bonds of death asunder. Death is swallowed up in victory, Paul wrote. 1 Cor. 15:55-57, *"Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ*. The sealed tomb shouts what the human race has always known, “You can't cheat death and you can't beat death. When the tomb is shut; it's shut.” But Christ did. Death could not hold Him. His power is stronger than that of the grave. He beat it! He is victorious. And He has given that victory to all of us who know Him as our personal Savior. When you get saved, you are placed in Him, so that His victory is YOUR victory. You, my friend, right now, YOU have victory over death. Death has no power over you. It can't hold you. It's sting has been removed! The empty tomb shouts, "Look, He's not here. He beat death. I couldn't hold Him. And I can't hold you either!" Hallelujah! Now understand, your body will still die, but :

b. the grave is now merely a temporary resting place for the body This tomb became the first in a whole new order of tombs. This tomb was just a resting place for Jesus' body overnight until the resurrection. And if you're trusting in Christ, your tomb is the same kind. It's just a resting place for your body to lie temporarily until that glorious resurrection morning when all the dead in Christ will rise, when all the bodies of the redeemed will be re-created and transformed and glorified and made just like His glorious body! The tomb that used to shout, "I've got you forever", now shouts, "Look, I'm temporary! I'm only for a little while. I'm just a storage cubicle to keep your body until God gets ready to resurrect it!" You can go out to that cemetery and look at that tombstone with your name on it and instead of saying, "There's the spot that's going to swallow me up", you can say, "That's the place my body's going to rest for a while until Jesus is ready for it!" And the third thing the empty tomb shows us is that:

c. death is now merely the gateway to life The person laid in this tomb, though he was very much dead in the body, was very much alive still. Death did not end his life; He merely stepped through it to a whole new order of life. The tomb shouts, "Death is not the end. He lives and you too shall live.” Turn to **John 11:25-26** with me! *Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.* This empty tomb shouts, "Because of Jesus, even when your body dies, you will not die. You will be alive. In fact, you will never ever die, not for eternity." That's what the Greek says. Death is only the gateway to life that never ends for you. Heb. 2:14-15 says that by His death He freed those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. That's us! The empty tomb shouts, "You're free! You don't have to be afraid anymore! Death can't hold you; it's the door to life!"

At the funeral of a minister, a little child was seen tripping lightheartedly through the cemetery at dusk. Someone asked, "Aren't you afraid of this place?" "Oh, no," she replied, "I only cross through here to get home." That's what the empty tomb says, "You just cross through here to get home". My friend, Jesus has a question for you today. He asked it of Mary and Martha. He said, "Do you believe this?" And the reply was, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world." How about you? Do you believe that Christ is the very Son of God who died on the cross for your sins? Have you trusted in Him and Him alone to save you from death and the grave? If you have, then take heart today. Listen to the empty tomb comfort your heart, "You shall not die but live!" If you haven't, why not make this the day when you do!

THE RESURRECTION, SO WHAT? - 1 Cor. 15:12-19

Verse 12 is a giveaway that in the church at Corinth, some folks have brought in a false idea, that there is no resurrection of the dead, that dead bodies do not rise. Where did it come from? As always, both in Israel and in the church, God's people are prone to try to incorporate the ideas of the culture which surrounds them into their faith. Israel incorporated the worship of idols and the idea of having a king. Likewise, some not-so-well-taught Christians in the culture of Greece could not escape the ideas which flourished in their society. Greek culture was laced with prevalent ideas and philosophies, just like ours is saturated with the concept of evolution and the all-importance of reason. Three particular tracks of thought were prevalent in Greek society in that day. The Epicureans believed that all reality was material, that when a man dies, he ceases to exist. The Stoics believed that god is the principle which animates everything, that when a man dies, he loses personal identity and merges into god. At Athens, followers of these two groups laughed at Paul and derided him because he preached Jesus and the Resurrection. You won't have to look far to find a great many Americans who, though they couldn't pronounce the names, believe the same things and laugh at you because you believe in a bodily resurrection! The third group was the Platonists who believed all reality was spiritual, that when a man dies, his spirit continues to exist free of the body; they believed in the immortality of the soul. As far as it goes, this idea agrees with Christianity and no doubt, many Platonists easily embraced Christ. But they found the idea of the resurrection of the body very repulsive to

their old way of thinking and to their friends, and soon began to say that there is no resurrection of the body, only the immortality of the soul. There are thousands of people round about you who do the same. This lit Paul's fire when he heard of it!! It is as though they were saying of the resurrection, "So what, who cares, who needs it". So he proceeds to give them three reasons why the resurrection is vitally important. If you ever wanted to know what's so important about Easter, or have ever had thoughts about the apparent foolishness of believing that our bodies will rise, or have friends like that, here is your answer:

I. His Resurrection is Vitally Related to Ours (12-13) The whole gist of 1 Cor. 15 can be summed up like this, *"He rose, therefore, we will rise."* The first 11 verses are to prove that He rose. Verses 20 to the end are to show what it means that we will rise. Verses 12-19 are to show that the two are inseparable! Like it or not, the resurrection of Christ and the fact of our own bodily resurrection are woven together so tightly that they cannot separated. Christ was a true man, a complete man; He had a true human body of flesh, just like we do. He experienced all the things we experience, like birth, growth, maturation, hunger, thirst, pain and the culmination of what every man faces, death. To that point, He is like us in every way but, He went a step further to raise His body from the dead and in that, we are going to be like Him. You can't get away from it. 1 Jn. 3:2 says, "we shall be like Him" Phil. 3:20-21 says that we're looking for a Savior who will change our bodies to be like His! Now, these doubters at Corinth were probably trying to say, "Well, He rose, but for us there is only the immortality of soul." Note:

1. if we do not rise, then He did not rise You can't have one without the other; if the dead do not rise bodily, then He did not rise bodily, because He is a true man, in every sense united with us. Check it out; most of those folks around you who believe only that the soul will live on, but that we will never again have a real body, also don't usually believe that Christ rose from the dead in bodily form either! But:

2. if He rose, then we must rise If we preach clearly that Christ rose from the dead (which Paul did and which the Corinthians obviously believed) then, in the same breath, we are saying that we will rise too. We must because He is like us and we will be like Him. Here is a beautiful guarantee for our future. Because Christ rose, I know that my future existence will not be some shadow world of spirits which I can't understand and appreciate; I will have a body, a real, solid, material body and be in a real place with a real Savior. I'm not going to be a ghost, a spirit who just looks like the old body, but at His coming, my spirit will be given a wonderful resurrected body made just like His glorious one! The first answer to "so what" is that the resurrection gives me an understandable eternal hope to look forward to.

II. His Resurrection is the Central Fact of Christianity (14-16) In verses 3-8, Paul declares the Gospel or the message which he preached, the death, burial and resurrection of Christ, and that there are witnesses to it! You can look at practically every sermon preached by Peter, Paul, or anyone in Acts and you will find same message, "God sent Jesus, whom you killed, but God raised Him from the dead and we are witnesses of these things." Paul is saying:

1. without it, Christianity is empty It is useless or vain. The Greek word is *kenos*, which means empty of content. The resurrection is what brought the church into being. The disciples were scared and huddled together in uncertainty, crushed in disbelief, after the cross. If Jesus had not risen and appeared to them, they would soon have scattered and gone back to life as normal. There would have been no church. If you take the resurrection out of the messages of the early church you would have nothing left. "God sent Jesus, but you killed Him and He's gone; we'll never have a Messiah now." What kind of a faith is that? But it's almost exactly what thousands hold today, "Jesus was a great example, a great teacher. He ought to be venerated and imitated; He shows us the love of God". My Bible says He is the Risen Lord and He is alive right now and in control of all! Without it, my faith is empty, but worse:

2. without it, Christianity is deception If Jesus did not rise, then Jesus lied all those times when He told He told His disciples that He would rise on the third day. The Bible lies because it says over and again that He did. Peter and the apostles lied and 500 others along with them, because they said they saw Him, which they couldn't have if He didn't rise. Without the resurrection, Christianity is a hoax and a sham, or at best a delusion, a bunch of people who are sorely mistaken in believing a lie! The second answer to "so what" is that the resurrection is the central fact of all we believe; Christianity IS the Resurrection.

III. His Resurrection is the Guarantee of Our Salvation (17-19) Christ's resurrection is the guarantee that Christ's work on the cross was really finished and accepted by God. Compare Rom. 4:25. He died to pay for our sins, but He rose for our justification, to guarantee to us the fact that God has declared us forgiven, that we can stand before God "just-as-if-I'd never sinned", declared righteous and holy, because of the cross. Without the resurrection, we don't know who won, whether death claimed victory or Christ did. But His resurrection proves Him victor; it shows that all He said was true. It guarantees that we have salvation from our sins in Him. Without it, Paul says in verse 17, our faith is futile, empty of results (Greek *matan*); it can't save us. Our sins sent Christ to the cross, but it was not enough; death will claim us, just like it did Him.

1. without it, the dead have perished Those who have gone peacefully to the grave trusting in the blood of Christ to save them are lost; they have perished. Their faith did them no good. They must stand before a holy God still in sin and there is no hope for them. But even more:

2. without it, the living are pitiable Just look at all the abuse Christians took for their faith in those early days. Look at all the things Paul himself suffered. He was not the only one. Many lost everything and were forced to live in poverty. Some were imprisoned and even tortured and killed. There are Christians around world today suffering these very things. For what? If Christ is not risen, it is a sad waste of life, a pitiable thing. They suffer for a false cause, rest all their hope in a delusion. The third answer to "so what" is that without the resurrection, we are lost! But the good news comes in verse 20; Christ IS risen and because He is, we too shall rise!! This is the message we preach, this is the center of what we believe, this is what we stake our eternal life on!

An agnostic professor once said to a little girl who believed in Jesus, "There have been many who claimed to be Christ. How can you be sure who told the truth? Which one do you believe?" Without hesitation, she replied, "I believe in the One who rose from the dead!" You can throw in your lot with the Epicureans or the Stoics or even the Platonists if you want, but I believe in the One who rose from the dead!!

The Tree Of Life - John 14:18-20

"Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city. - Rev. 22:14

In the garden of Eden there was a special tree. It was called the tree of life. Adam and Eve had the privilege to choose to eat from that tree. Whoever ate the life-giving fruit from that tree, by God's own admission, would live forever. But they chose to eat from another tree, a forbidden tree, and through that sin, mankind was barred forever from access to the tree of life, doomed to face death. Hundreds of years later, in the face of suffering and death in his own life, Job asked the perennial human question, "If a man dies, will he live again?" Is there anywhere a tree of life that man can access, that can give man life, or is death the end. It is the same issue that faced Jesus' disciples that last night in the Upper Room. He was trying to prepare them, to make them ready for what was about to happen. He was going to be taken from them in the cruel death of the cross. He countered that by explaining about life. But they couldn't hear it. They had to see it to believe it. It was only after His resurrection that they remembered and understood the words He had said to them that night. They are words that are few and simple but hold an immense depth of meaning for us**, John 14:18-20**. In these few words we have:

I. The Proof Of Jesus' Eternal Life - *"You will see me"* He plainly declared that He was leaving them. "The world will not see me anymore..." In the rest of this passage, He said the same thing in different ways, "I am going to the Father...", "I am going away..." And because He'd already taught them many, many times that He was going up to Jerusalem to die, for those long sorrowful hours between Friday night and Sunday morning, they thought that His leaving was through dying. They translated that to mean, "He's left us; He's dead. That's it, the end. His life is over." But Jesus, on that night, had made a claim:

1. His claim: *"I will not leave you; I will come to you"* He said, "I won't leave you like orphans, like poor helpless kids with nobody to take care of you. I myself will come to you. You will see me after I die! Death will take me out of sight for the world, but not for you. Be patient. I have something I want to prove to you." What a claim! How preposterous it must have seemed! Dead men don't live again. They don't come to you. You don't see them, except in your dreams and memories. But Jesus said, "I will!" And He did!

2. its fulfillment Listen to what the Scriptures say. Luke wrote in **Acts 1:3**, *After his suffering, he showed himself to these men [the apostles] and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God.* Hear what Paul writes in **1 Cor. 15:3-8**, *For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.* Hundreds of His followers, He came to them and they saw Him. They talked to Him. They touched Him. They ate with Him. Not just once, but repeatedly over 40 days. It proves something! It proves something more than the fact that a dead man could lose life and then get it back. Jesus told us:

3. what it proves: His life is eternal - *"I live"* He didn't say, "Because I am resurrected, you will be resurrected." He said, "I live". It is not that He lost life and then got it back. He never stopped living! He had a kind of life that could not be quenched by bodily death! He had eternal life, life that can never cease, life that has no beginning and has no ending. Jesus is saying, "You'll watch me die and then come back to you and it proves that I live eternally, that my life is stronger than death, that even bodily death has no grip on the real Me. I laid down that body and I took it up again, but I never ceased to exist. I live!" And the disciples came to understand that. Listen to **1 John 1:1-2**, *That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched-- this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us.* We touched Him, we heard Him, we saw Him, but He is life itself, eternal life that was with the Father from all eternity, appeared to us for a season and

returned to the Father. But He is life! And in the seven simple words of verse 19, Jesus made very clear what this means to us. It is:

II. The Promise Of Our Eternal Life - ***"Because I live you also will live" "***My living, my eternal life is the source and the cause of your eternal life. I live therefore you live." What does that mean?

1. we will live *like* He does: eternally He's not just saying that "Some day after you die I'll make you live again." He's saying that, "You will now live like I live. I give you life that is eternal, My life, life that has no beginning and no ending, life that not even bodily death can touch! I am the resurrection *and the life*. Since you trust in Me, you will never die in eternity! Your body will die. But you have life that is eternal." How can we know we have it?

2. we will live *because* He does His life causes our life. It is the source of our life. It is the proof of our life. His resurrection fairly screams out to us, "I have life and because I have life, you have life."

Jesus knew they were not ready to understand it that night, so He said to them in verse 20:

III. The Understanding Of Our Eternal Life - ***"In that day you will realize" "***When I come to you, when My body is resurrected so that you can see I live, then you will comprehend the significance of it." There are three pieces to our understanding of eternal life. Jesus mentioned them. First, we realize, as they came to:

1. the union Jesus has with the Father - ***"I am in my Father"*** How many times did Jesus say, "I and the Father are one", "He that has seen Me has seen the Father", and similar things. Over and over Jesus declared the union he had with the Father. But look particularly at **John 6:57a** *... the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father.* Jesus said, "The Father has eternal life. He is life. And I live because I am in union with the life of the living Father. I am one with Him and so I have His life!" And that is exactly:

2. the union we have with Jesus - ***"you are in Me"*** He said, "I am in complete union with the Father and you are in complete union with Me." Look at the whole of **John 6:57**, *Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me.* The union that Jesus has with the Father, that oneness of being, is the same oneness that we have with Him. And just as the life that the Father has is the life of the Son, so the life that the Son has is our life, because we are one with Him! And how does that union occur?

3. the root: Jesus' presence in us - ***"I am in you"*** Look down to **14:23**. The Father and the Son come to actually live inside us when we believe. Listen to **1 Jn. 5:11-13**, *...God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.* When Jesus comes into you and unites Himself with you, you have His life, the same life He has, eternal life!

Now about that tree in the garden. God took it away with the rest of the garden. He transplanted it to that great heavenly city that He's building, the New Jerusalem. And three times in the last chapter of the Bible we are at last told that when His Kingdom comes, man will again have access to the tree of life. My spiritual grandfather was an old Evangelical United Brethren pastor named Ray Uhrich. He was my pastor's pastor and mentor. I knew him only briefly as an elderly man, but he was a tremendous student of the Scriptures and a Bible expositor. One day he and my pastor were talking about Rev. 22:14, *Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city* and were contemplating the question, "Why do we who are believers need to eat from a physical tree to have life. And old Rev. Uhrich shared one of his gems of wisdom. He said, "For us, Jesus IS the tree of life!" My friend, that physical tree is just a symbol that points us to Jesus, the true Tree of Life. Whoever partakes of Him, the real Tree of Life, partakes of the life that is in the tree, eternal life.

In England there stands a great four-trunked tree that is growing out of a grave. Apparently, the tree has grown right out of the body in the grave. The body is that of Lady Anne Grimston. She was an atheist and did not believe in life after death. In fact, it is recorded that when she was dying, she actually said to a friend, "I shall not live again. It is as unlikely that I shall live again as it is that a tree shall grow from my body." She was buried in a marble tomb, covered by a large marble slab surrounded by an iron railing. Years later, the slab began to move. Then it cracked and through the crack, a small tree grew and grew, tilting the stone and breaking the marble, until it has now surrounded the tomb with roots and torn out the railing with its trunk. God answered her challenge with a living tree coming out of a stone tomb. 2,000 years ago, God gave His once-and-for-all answer to a world that denies that there is a life that death cannot quench. His answer was His Son coming out of a stone tomb, the Tree of Life for all who will unite themselves with Him. Oh my friend, have you united yourself with Him? Have you asked Him to come and live in you and become your Savior? If you haven't, I urge you to do it right now. If you have, rejoice today. You have eaten of the Tree of Life. His life is your life and you will live forever.

THE TWICE-NAMED SON - Gen. 35:16-18

Jacob and his family have moved back from their years in Paddan-Aram. His four wives have borne him 11 sons. The last one was his favorite, because he was the only son of his most beloved wife, Rachel. Rachel named that son with a prayer; Joseph means, "may He add" and she said, "May the Lord add to me another son". Well, in due time that prayer

was answered. They moved back to Canaan and went from place to place. And during this time Rachel became pregnant again. First, it was Shechem, then Bethel, and finally, enroute to Bethlehem, it was time for the child to be born. It was a bittersweet event because the delivery was so difficult that Rachel died. With her dying breath, she named that son, but after her death, her husband Jacob refused to let that name stand and gave him the name we remember him by:

I. Benjamin, the Twice-Named Son He was first named:

1. Ben-oni, which means "son of my trouble or sorrow" That's probably a reference to the great suffering and pain that he caused her in the delivery. But I want you to notice three things about that name:

a. it was his mother's name Certainly his father had great sorrow too, in the loss of Rachel. But ultimately, he had another view of the whole situation. You see, Rachel's view:

b. it was given with a view to the present She, of course, being in great pain and dying, could only see the sorrow of the moment. She could not look beyond and see what this son would become. She could only see the now. And I don't blame her because:

c. it focused on the greatness of the pain Notice these verses say twice that she had "great difficulty". There was extreme suffering, anguish, and pain. But Jacob just couldn't live with a son whose name reminded him of sorrow and loss. He re-named him:

2. Benjamin, which means "son of my right hand" Now, the right hand was a powerful symbol in that culture and time. It was the strong arm for most people and therefore the most important. The right hand was the hand you laid on someone to bless them. The right hand of an important person was the most important place to be. That's where James and John wanted to sit in the Kingdom with Jesus. Now notice some things about this name:

a. it was his father's name His father felt the sorrow overcome by the joy of the birth of a son and as Rachel had been his "right hand wife", so Benjamin, born years after the others, would be the child of his old age, his "right hand son". And:

b. it was given with a view to the future Right now the child was a struggling tiny baby that didn't even have a mother to nurse him, but Jacob looked beyond the sorrow to see what he would be in the years to come. And just as Rachel had great pain, Jacob:

c. it focused on the great comfort in having a son to be at his right hand who would always remind him of his beloved Rachel.

By this time you have a pretty good idea where we are going with this message. Centuries later, another Son was born. This Son, instead of causing his mother to die young, died young Himself at the age of 33. And Benjamin the twice-named son forms for us a beautiful picture of:

II. Jesus the Two-Fold Son Just as Rachel and Jacob viewed the birth of their child in two ways, we can view the cross of Christ from two sides and the Christ who hung on it in two ways. First:

1. He was the son of His mother's sorrow Long before, at His birth, Simeon had warned her of suffering in Lk. 2:34-35. That sword that would pierce her was not to be a literal sword, but the sword of anguish and sorrow. John records, "Now there stood by the cross of Jesus His mother". Can you imagine the agony that that moment brought her? Her Son hung there between earth and sky, giving His life in agony and pain. He was the miracle child, the virgin-born Son, the Son who was to be the Savior of the World. Imagine her lack of understanding as she sees Him die, not knowing the rest of God's plan. Truly He is the Son of Sorrow, even for us. Look at Is. 53:3-4. In a very real sense, He is the Son of OUR sorrow, because He, the man of sorrows, suffered on Calvary, not for His sorrows, but ours. Those who stood by thought Him stricken by God and afflicted, but we know He was wounded for OUR transgressions, He was bruised for OUR iniquities. And so, Calvary is a place of sadness to us. We sorrow that our sins nailed Him there, that He had to endure such agony for us. But that is only the immediate picture. Jesus is not just the Son or our sorrow but:

2. He was the son of His Father's right hand It is amazing when you begin to look how many times the Scripture describes the place which Jesus occupies as the right hand of the Father. The suffering of the cross was not an end in itself; we do not despair with Rachel. We look ahead with Jacob and see the Son of God, who now, through the cross, is seated in that special place at the Father's right hand. Just what does that mean?

a. it is a place of victory - Acts 2:34-5 Jesus did not lose on the cross; He won! And He is seated in heaven, sharing the Father's position as King and Lord, waiting for the day when He will subdue all His enemies and set up His kingdom.

b. it is a place of glory - 7:55-56 Stephen looked up and saw the glory of God and Jesus risen up from His seat and standing in the glory. The cross is a place of shame and disgrace, but it led to glory! He shares all the glory of the Father, just as He did before the world began.

c. it is a place of intercession - Rom. 8:34 The right hand is a place of close communication. Just like John at the last supper was next to Jesus and could lean back and whisper, "Which one of us will betray you?" So the Son is at the right hand of the Father to share intimate communication and therefore, when He prays for us and works in our behalf, He whispers it right in the Father's ear, as it were.

d. it is a place of authority - Eph. 1:20 The Son at the right hand shares the very authority of the Father. 1 Pet. 3:22 says that at the right hand, all angels, authorities, and powers are in submission to Him. From that right hand He controls all that happens in the world and in your life.

e. it is a place of purity - Col. 3:1 It is a place removed from all sin, from all the defilement of earth, a place full of the nature of the Father. It is a fit place for a Son who was sinless, but yet made to be sin for us, now having paid for it and left it all behind!

f. it is a place of completion - Heb. 1:3, 10:12 The fact that He is seated there says that His sacrifice and His work was complete and sufficient. There is no more to do; no more sacrifice for sins is needed. Jesus paid it all.

g. it is a place of triumph over suffering - Heb. 12:2 His path to the right hand was by way of the cross. He endured the suffering, despised the shame, and then sat down at the right hand. First came the suffering, then the glory. He emerged victorious over the worst that Satan could hand Him! And so can you.

Friends, the cross is an awful tragedy, the saddest moment of history, the ultimate travesty of justice. Man crucifying his own Creator and Redeemer. Ah, but listen, it is also the greatest act of history, whereby Jesus triumphed over sin and death and rose victorious and became our living Savior who is seated in heaven waiting for us. Our sorrow can give way to joy! Jesus is our Ben-oni, but also our Benjamin, who has declared that we are also to be sons of the Father's right hand and seated with Him one day. The same victory, glory, authority, and purity will be ours. His suffering made possible our glory.

The Unbelievable Thing We Believe - Acts 26:8

As I've thought about what to share with you this morning, the phrase that has kept coming to my mind is a short verse from Acts, chapter 26. Paul had already been in jail for two years at Caesarea for his faith when he was given the opportunity to "present his case" before the Roman governor Festus and King Agrippa and his wife Bernice. Festus had told Agrippa that Paul was in jail because the Jews had some points of dispute with him ...*about a dead man named Jesus who Paul claimed was alive.* Well, the next day he presented his case in a couple of sentences and went straight to the core of the message that he wanted to declare to them. Look with me at Acts 26:8. He says, *Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?* That's a question that I'd like us to ponder together this morning. *Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?* It dawned on me that from the perspective of any of the ordinary people around us:

I. We Believe An Incredible Thing. We are sitting here this morning and singing our hearts out because we believe that a dead man came back to life. Our core belief as Christians is that **God Raised Christ From The Dead**. And that is truly an incredible thing to believe. Now pause a second to realize:

1. what incredible literally means In English, *credible* means *believable.* A credible statement is one that you can believe, one you can safely assume is factual. So, in-credible, in both English and Greek, literally means **not believable**. It means, "it's far-fetched; it's beyond the bounds of reason. **It can't possibly be true**!" I know we use it in slang to mean something like, "cool!" or "awesome!", but what Paul means is more like "impossible!" If I told you that Joe died last week and I was at his burial but then yesterday he walked into my office and said "Hello", THAT would be incredible, something not believable, something that can't possibly be true. Yet that's exactly what we say we believe about Jesus. People saw Him die on Friday; the powers that be, who had lots of experience, declared him dead and people watched Him be buried. They rolled a stone against the tomb. But on Sunday, all His followers started seeing Him walking around alive; they talked to Him and touched Him and He ate with them! Can you see:

2. why people consider the Resurrection an unbelievable thing? In the first place:

a. it violates the natural order: things that are truly dead cannot live. That's what dead means; we all know the phrase "Dead is dead." It means "not alive!" When a squirrel is lying dead on the road, having been run over by multiple cars, you KNOW it isn't going to get up and scamper off. If it did, the first thing we'd say was, "Well, then it wasn't REALLY dead!" We see it all around us in the natural world; when something or someone is dead, they can't live again. It's impossible. Death is a permanent thing; it's just the way the world works. To ask someone to believe that Jesus died and then rose again is to ask them to believe in something that is against nature, that is truly SUPERnatural! Further:

b. it defies their personal and collective experience They've never seen or experienced something dead coming to life, nor has anyone they know. Neither they nor their parents nor anybody else they have interacted with has ever been to a funeral and seen the person in the casket get up, step out and greet the guests. It is too much to ask them to accept. But when the director of a Missions Association in India was with us a few years ago, he shared that in 2009 in India there were seven confirmed cases of people who had been raised from the dead in answer to prayer. They were confirmed dead by physicians, but he had met each one of them personally and verified their stories! So maybe if we lived in India, raising the dead wouldn't seem quite so unbelievable, would it? Many of you have read Don Piper's testimony in the little book 90 Minutes In Heaven. In 1989 his car was crushed by a semi. He was declared dead at the scene by medical personnel; three ambulances came and two had already gone home. One stayed behind to transport the body when they could get it out of the car. Don's lifeless body lay inside the wreckage with a tarp over it for an hour and a half while he experienced the glories of heaven. Then Dick Onerecker, a Baptist preacher, arrived on the scene and was impressed by God to pray for him to come back to life, so while the EMTs and police scoffed, he crawled into the car and kept on praying and singing and praying and singing and all of a sudden Don was singing with him! He scrambled out of the car, ran to the nearest EMT shouting, *"That man's alive! He's not dead! He's alive!" The EMT stared. "Oh really?", a paramedic asked. "I'm serious, this man's alive." "We're medical professionals. We know a dead guy when we see him. That guy is dead." "I'm telling you, that man just sang with me. He's alive." The man turned away and refused to go over to the car. So he walked up to the driver of the remaining ambulance and said, "That man is alive. Go look at him." "Please, we know our business. That man is dead." "Listen to me! I'm going to lie down on this bridge and if you don't come over here, you're going to have to run over me." "He's dead!" "Then humor me. Just feel his pulse." "Okay, we'll check on him for you," the man said, mumbling something under his breath. He walked over to the car, raised the tarp, reached inside, found my right arm and felt my pulse. Everyone leaped into action! [P. 45-46].* Their collective experience changed! I wonder if it no longer seemed so incredible to them that God raises the dead? Jesus Himself did it several times while He was on earth. He ruined a perfectly good funeral on their way to the cemetery by touching the pyre and the dead son sat up, remember? I bet the village of Nain was never the same! Poor Lazarus had lain in the tomb so long they didn't want to open the door for fear of the stench, but when Jesus yelled, "Come out!" he walked out of the tomb, still wrapped in graveclothes! I bet that changed the collective experience of the people in Bethany! Listen, just because you haven't experienced something doesn't mean it can't happen! But you know how people are; when you talk about a dead guy rising:

c. they identify it with other things not based on reality. They think it's some sort of fairy tale like the princess who kisses the frog and he turns into a handsome prince. So, if you believe it, they look at you like you're some kind of nut who believes in aliens from outer space or has sighted sasquatch or predicts that the world will end on May 21. But Paul got it right:

d. the bottom line is that they don't believe in a God who can do such things! They have, not simply a faith problem, but a god problem. They don't believe that there is a God out there to meet; they think that when you quit breathing, that's the end of it. You cease to exist, period. Or if they do believe there's a God, they have imagined Him to be a kind of benevolent being who gently moves the world toward good somehow, but would never interrupt it. He is not the kind of God who walks on water and talks to storms and heals blind and paralyzed people and lepers with a word and certainly, He is not powerful enough to raise the dead! Their "god" is too small, too limited, or too far away for such things. What is your god like? You see, if He exists and He really is God, then to Him NOTHING is impossible! Nothing God has done should be regarded as incredible, that is, unbelievable! And yet that's:

3. how people react to hearing unbelievable things Let's turn back to an earlier occasion when Paul had talked about Christ rising from the dead in front of the philosophers over in Athens in **Acts 17:32-34**. Like the medical folks at the accident scene:

a. many react with mockery believing they know better By the way, you might expect that. If you go around very much sharing that you believe that Jesus died for your sins and that He rose to life again the third day, a good percentage of people will make fun of you or dismiss you as being in the category of an uninformed person still clinging to belief in a well-known ancient tale and who should know better. Of course:

b. some are nicer and **withhold judgment thinking more information is needed**. "We'll talk again about this later. We need time to process it." What they really mean is either, "We really don't want to hear it, but we're too polite to tell you so", or if they're genuine, "We don't have the whole picture. We know the Nile turned blood red because a red clay cliff collapsed into the river upstream. And there must have been flat stones just under the surface of the water where Jesus was walking. And maybe the cool of the tomb simply revived Lazarus who wasn't fully dead and he was waiting for someone to move the stone. If we just knew the whole story, we'd surely see that it all makes logical sense somehow." So they put you off, but, just as in Paul's case:

c. a precious few choose to believe the unbelievable! Dionysius and Damaris and a bunch of others said, "I don't care what everybody else thinks; I choose to believe this unbelievable thing! I choose to believe that God

raised Jesus from the dead!" That's what WE did, isn't it? You know **Rom. 10:9-10**, *...if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved*. That's the deal. In order to be saved, in order to be accepted by God and forgiven for all your sins, you have to do this one thing. You have to believe the unbelievable, not just by saying the words *Jesus is Lord*, but by believing in your very heart, in the core of your being, that God raised Him from the dead and He is alive right now and that's what makes Him Lord! That's what a Christian is. A Christian is not a person who goes to church and carries a Bible and keeps a bunch of commandments and wears a cross. A Christian is one who believes in his heart that God raised Jesus from the dead, not as a doctrinal statement, but genuinely believing that Jesus lives!

Now let's think about:

II. Why We Choose To Believe This Incredible Thing If you take the time to actually read it, you'll discover that:

1. the God of the Bible has always done incredible things and still does Noah's ark, the tower of Babel, the plagues of Egypt, the wall of Jericho, fire from heaven on Mt. Carmel, these are not the ancient myths of a past civilization. They are real events, experienced by real people, that actually happened. The miracles of Jesus were never disputed or discredited, not even by His own worst enemies. They confessed, "We cannot deny this thing!", so they plotted to kill Him instead! To raise Jesus from the dead is not a fluke; it is just the kind of thing the God of the Bible would do! There's nothing strange about it! Hezekiah prayed one night during a siege and the next morning 185,000 enemy soldiers lay dead in their sleep! If we really believe in the God that the Bible tells us about, we have no trouble believing He raised Jesus from the dead! But even more directly:

2. we believe the testimony of Paul and others who saw Him alive Look back to **Acts 26:9-15**. Paul said, "I used to think like you do! I used to think Jesus was just some dead impostor and his followers were charlatans. But then I met Him that day on the road! He called my name and it transformed my life!" It happened to so many. Look at **1 Cor. 15:3-8**. "We all saw Him! Hundreds of us and we're still alive - you can ask us about it! You can check our story! We're all different now; we believe!" And we choose to believe they were telling the truth, that they DID see Him, that He IS alive! The fact that He showed Himself alive to them and convinced them by many infallible proofs convinces us; we believe their word because we see how their lives became dedicated to telling His story all over the world! But the most convincing thing of all is that:

3. we experience His living Presence personally when we believe *We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.* ***- 1 Jn. 4:13***. We've watched this same repeated miracle over and over again in the lives of others and then when we cried out to Jesus, it happened to us. Whenever a person believes, the Holy Spirit comes to live in us and when He does, we know it. ... *you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. -* ***Rom. 8:15-16***. We have an internal witness. We are no longer afraid of God; we know that we belong to Him now. We instinctively cry out to Him, "Daddy", "Father", just the way Jesus did! And that makes us know that it's all real, that it's all true, that Jesus is alive and now He's living in ME! I'm different! I'm not the same anymore; it's like I've been born all over again! As the song says, *You ask me how I know He lives; He lives within my heart!* I believe the unbelievable because when I chose to believe it, I experienced it! HE came into ME! He's alive! Now let me just mention one last truth:

III. This Incredible Thing We Believe Guarantees Another Incredible Thing: We Will Rise Too We are just crazy enough to believe that when we die, we are going to rise from the dead! We're just as crazy as Jesus was! Turn over to **1 Cor. 15**. Look at verses **(12-13)**.

1. Christ's resurrection removes all doubt that God raises the dead It is the demonstration, the proof positive, that God indeed DOES raise the dead! And therefore:

2. Christ's resurrection is the proof of our own resurrection (20) The first grain to ripen in the field is the proof, the guarantee, that the whole crop will ripen, that there will be a full harvest of the whole field. And look at this in **(21-22)**:

3. just as we are guaranteed to die because we are descended from Adam (we're part of the human race)**, we are guaranteed to live because we belong to Christ** *...if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you*. - Rom. 8:11. Listen, if you believe this incredible thing, your own body will rise after you die! It will lie dead one day. It will be buried or cremated and probably dissolved to nothing like millions before it, yet God will raise it up and glorify it just like Jesus' glorified body. "Incredible! Not believable!" Yet we believe it, because this same incredible thing happened to Christ our Savior! Of course:

4. the resurrection of our bodies must await His coming (23) He's going to raise our bodies all at once when He comes. But that does not mean that our soul sleeps somehow until that time and we wake up. The same Paul who wrote this about our bodies also taught clearly that death sends our souls immediately into Christ's presence. He said, ...*I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far* - Phil. 1:23, and, *to be absent from the body is to be*

present with the Lord - 2 Cor. 5:8. We'll be with Him immediately, but on that glorious day when He comes, the trumpet call of God will sound and the archangel will shout and *the dead in Christ shall rise!* We'll get new resurrection bodies and meet Him in the air. "A fairy tale! Unbelievable! Not credible! An ancient myth!" So the world would say! But we believe it because we believe this unbelievable thing: God raised Christ from the dead!

In central Michigan there is a cemetery that borders the freeway which has an unusual name. Instead of being called "Memorial Park" or "Fairview Gardens," or something similar, the large white letters on the sign say "RESURRECTION CEMETERY." You might be interested to know that our word cemetery comes originally from the Greek word koimeterion which means literally "a sleeping place or dormitory"; it was even used of "an army barracks". It was a place where soldiers or whoever retired to sleep until they were roused in the morning. Early Christians were the first to take that word and apply it to a burial plot for their dead. Resurrection Cemetery is literally a sleeping place for the bodies of believers until the Resurrection. And on that glorious morning at His coming, all "who sleep in Jesus" He will bring with Him; their bodies will come forth and be reunited with their souls, and they will be with Him forever! It truly is incredible, unbelievable, isn't it? But I believe it and I hope that you do too!

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GOOD FRIDAY

THE SEVEN WORDS FROM THE CROSS

Lk. 23:34 The Word of Forgiveness

"Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing."

This word is found in Luke 23:33-36. Many of you have seen Mel Gibson's film, *The Passion Of The Christ*, which followed quite graphically the last hours of the Savior's life from Gethsemane to the end. I don't know how it impacted you, but when I saw it, it seemed to me as though the scenes of the flogging and the procession through the streets of Jerusalem would never end. I couldn't wait for that part to be over with; it seemed to last forever. But in reality, the time in which we watched it was much shorter than the actual time during which Jesus endured it. How long it must have seemed to Him! Somehow I had always thought of the Cross as being the most painful thing that He endured, but when you see that scourging He received so realistically portrayed and watch Him struggle out of the city carrying His cross on that torn back, you realize that a tremendous amount of His suffering occurred even before the nails were driven through His hands and feet. And it was done by almost unbelievably awful people. The twisted leaders of the Jews, lying and scheming, shouting for His blood, yet parading piously in their religious garb. The cruel soldiers, mocking and making sport of His mortal pain, delighting in torturing Him to death for a laugh. And all of them continuing in these things even as He hung there dying. It is so absurd that one can hardly make sense of it. It smacks of the worst of man's inhumanity to man, like the awful genocide in Rwanda we've seen portrayed on the screen or scenes from Schindler's List or other Holocaust movies. It is the deliberate torture and execution of an undeserving, innocent man, being treated as though it were entertainment or sport! Therefore, it should be an absolute shock to us that as they hoist Him up into the air on the cross, the very first words from His lips are "Father, forgive them; they know not what they do". His first words are not a cry of pain, nor a cry for revenge; they are:

I. The Cry of Forgiveness Does it not strike you that:

1. it is totally unnatural What do men tortured and hung on crosses say naturally? Likely, they scream in pain, they whine and beg for mercy from the bystanders, they curse God and shout about the injustice of it. But most especially, I'm sure, they curse the villains who put them there! They probably call them names; they probably call down curses of all types on those who tried them, those who sentenced them and those who nailed them! Neither the soldiers nor the crowd had ever seen a man die like this Man, with a prayer of forgiveness on His lips! And if my guess is right, it is not how you naturally react when someone hurts you either. How many of the families who lost their child in the most recent school shooting would say, "God, forgive him; he didn't know what he was doing!" Would you if it was your child? This cry is contradictory to all of human nature and experience. So where does it come from?

2. it comes out of the very nature of Jesus Do you remember what Jesus had taught His followers on this very subject? He said in His most famous sermon in Mt. 5:44, 6:14, *Love your enemies; pray for those who despitefully use you!... If you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.* Those were not just high-sounding religious words; they were not merely some lofty ideal to strive toward in life. He meant for us to actually DO them and here He we see Him practicing them. On the cross, He was doing the very thing He had told us to do; He prayed for the forgiveness of the very people who were hurting and torturing Him. The Lord Jesus was consistent; He not only taught truth, but He lived it out. He did what He said. Do you and I do what He said? Not very often in this matter, I'm afraid. How many hurts and wounds do we have buried deep within us, things people have done to us, situations where we were victimized, and we say, "Surely not this thing, Lord! Surely not this person. You see what they did! You see how they hurt me. They DID know what they were doing! Surely you don't mean this! I can't!" And sometimes it even becomes as brazen as, "No, Lord, I won't! I refuse! I will do anything else You tell me to, but not that. I refuse to forgive that!" Some of you know what I'm talking about. It doesn't take much for the Spirit of God to touch that place in you, even though you may have buried it pretty deep, even though you may have tried to convince yourself that you've already forgiven, maybe because you've said the words, you've gone through the motions. But still, somewhere deep inside there remains hatred and bitterness; to pray Jesus' prayer with their name in it would be a major effort and it would probably not be genuine.

Forgiveness is not in human nature; it is not in our flesh. But it IS in Jesus' nature. It is at the very core of why He came to earth and why He went to the cross. So, let's try to understand more deeply:

II. The Meaning of Forgiveness The very heart and substance of this cry is the word *forgive*. Of course, we should look at:

1. the meaning of the word itself The Greek word literally means *to send away, to release*. Remember the scapegoat in the Old Testament and how on the Day of Atonement the priest would lay hands on this goat and confess the sins of the people? Then the goat would be led far away out into the wilderness and released, let go, sent away, never

to be seen again. Symbolically their sins were literally, “sent away!” Forgiveness is a complete release, a full disconnection, the absolute removal of sins. For Christ’s prayer to be answered, somehow these enemies of His have to be separated from their sins and have their sins sent away from them! But:

2. how is that possible? Understand, Jesus is not praying for God to overlook their sins, to just pretend somehow that they had not done what they did. Forgiveness does not say that scourging and torture are OK and they can be overlooked, that they are not so bad. These soldiers, these Jewish leaders around the cross, are absolutely guilty. They deserve the worst punishment that could be dished out. How then can their sins be sent away? The answer is in Heb. 9:26 which says, *He put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself*. Here is the greatest irony of all the ages. Here is Christ dying on a cross to pay the penalty for the very sin of those crucifying Him! Christ had every right to pray that they would be forgiven, only because He was, at that very moment, paying the price of their sin and ours! The penalty of their sin was being born by another, by a substitute, by Jesus Himself. Jesus had to die for His enemies to have forgiveness! By the way, that was US too, and yet we take it so lightly. We come and ask God to forgive us, as though our sin were a trifle or an oversight, a mere mistake, nothing too serious, as though we’re asking Him to simply forget about it. But He cannot; not even the smallest sin can simply be overlooked. Forgiveness requires the death of an innocent substitute. God can only send your sin away from you and release you because Jesus endured all that suffering which you deserved for what you’ve done! Put simply, He paid for what you did and that’s why you get to be free of it! And, of course, that’s the only basis on which you can forgive others also! Forgiveness does not mean you simply forget what they did, that you overlook it as though it were nothing. It does not mean that person “gets away with it”. Forgiveness means that you see that Jesus paid the price for their sin too, just as He did yours. He took the penalty upon Himself for them, just as He did for you. It is already paid for, so there remains no payment that needs to be made to you, no justice that needs to be done. It was all heaped upon Him. Justice has already been done - to Jesus! That’s why you can let them go, release them, send their sins away. Now don’t miss:

3. how important this is If you were being hung on a cross to die, what would you pray for first? No doubt, for the thing that is most important to you! So, notice that Jesus did not pray for the protection of the disciples He’d left scattered in the night. He did not pray for the continuation of His work and the building of His church, as important as that was. He did not even pray for grace for Himself to endure the pain. The thing that was uppermost in the mind of Jesus, even as they were killing Him, was the forgiveness of His assailants! That is the greatest need of man. It is not food nor healing. It is not education, nor opportunity. It is forgiveness! This is what human beings all around us need, both those who love us and those who hate us and those we don’t even know. They need forgiveness; they need to have their sins sent away by God through faith in Jesus Christ! It is the greatest need of every human being. And it is the greatest need of the very people who have hurt you in your life too. It may be the last thing on your mind, but it is the first thing on His! Jesus has a heart of forgiveness; He longs to see human beings forgiven! And just look at who Jesus is praying for! Look at:

III. The Subjects of Forgiveness in His prayer! Verses 34-36 show us:

1. there was forgiveness for those who crucified Him Around the cross stood a Roman captain and several soldiers. At that moment they were occupied in parting His garments among themselves by casting lots. Oh, that their Roman minds had known the Jewish Scriptures and seen how they were fulfilling Psalm 22, where that very act of gambling was predicted. These men had committed the worst imaginable crime ever. Pilate had passed the sentence and the Pharisees had plotted and schemed for His death and stirred up the crowd, but these men scourged the Son of God. These men tore the very flesh off His back. These men drove the cruel nails! And then they mocked Him on top of it in verse 36! And yet, Jesus prays forgiveness for them! Also around the cross, there was a mocking crowd of Jewish leaders and people laughing and saying things like, “If you’re the Christ, come down; look, He saved others but He can’t save Himself!” (verse 35). Mocking an innocent man and plotting His death was not enough; now they torment Him with jeers and laughter as He dies! Still, Jesus prays forgiveness for them! What’s my point? Well, one is that if there is forgiveness for them:

2. there is forgiveness for us If they could be forgiven, then you can be. It doesn’t matter how vile the sin you’ve committed; it is no worse than theirs. There is no sin so black that the blood of Jesus cannot wash it whiter than snow! Have you murdered someone? Committed adultery? Have you lied, cheated, stolen? Have you been an abuser? Have you hurt innocent people? Ruined your family? This cry says there is forgiveness for you, no matter what you’ve done. You see, the prayer to forgive "them" is ultimately for the whole human race, for you and I, for all whose sins caused Jesus to yield Himself to that tree. Jesus, in His Deity, could look down through centuries of time and see with pity a wretched man named John (or George or Susan, fill in your own name) committing horrible things from which we needed to be set free; He included all of us in that beautiful cry, “Father, forgive them!” But if there is forgiveness for them and also for us, then:

3. there is forgiveness for those who hurt you, no matter what they have done to you. They can be forgiven too. Jesus’ heart is for them to be released, set free. It’s why He died; it’s what He wants for them! And yet, it doesn’t quite

make sense. Why would God want that? Why would He want to let even the worst of us go free? Jesus finished His cry by stating:

IV. The Reason for Forgiveness "*they know not what they do*" Oh, but they did know, didn't they! They knew they were killing a man! They even knew they were killing an innocent man! Yet Jesus says clearly that:

1. they really didn't know what they were doing In Peter's sermon in Acts 3:17 he says, *Now brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders*. The Greek for *ignorance* is *agnoia* which means *not knowing*, that is, not knowing that He was God their Savior, that He was the Messiah appointed for them, that He was their only hope of forgiveness and eternal life. 1 Cor. 2:8 says, *None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory*. None of the rulers, Roman or Jewish, knew that they were nailing the Lord of Glory, God the Son, to a cross. Man did not know; He came to His own creation and His own nation, and His own received Him not. Why? Because human beings are blind; they cannot see and know God. They are dead in trespasses and sins. They daily trample on the precious blood of Christ, not knowing it was shed for them. Day by day people pass by, giving themselves to money and pleasure and the gods of this world. Your heart cries out "Why?" They are spiritually blind! They do not realize they stand condemned by a holy God and are dangling by a thread over the pit of eternal punishment. YOU didn't know! Once, YOU were blind, but now you see! The ones who hurt you were blind too. They knew what they were doing, but they DIDN'T know what they were really doing. They didn't know the awful gravity of their sin and the peril of their immortal soul that lies before them! But Jesus' prayer opened the door of forgiveness so that we who were blind could be made to see. Jesus is telling us that He is willing to not hold our sins against us, to release us and set us free; God Himself is willing to release us and set us free. However:

2. we have to choose to be forgiven by repentance Acts 3:17-20 says, *Now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders. But this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Christ would suffer. Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that he may send the Christ, who has been appointed for you--even Jesus.* The soldiers, the Jews, and even you, could not actually be forgiven until you had a change of mind and heart about the Savior.

Have you responded to that cry? Have you come to Jesus, confessed your sin and found forgiveness personally? And if you have, are you willing to extend that word of forgiveness to others, to the very people who've hurt you? They don't know what they're doing. But Jesus stands willing to forgive them and He calls you to do the same, even before they repent or if they never do. Will you pray for them as He did?

THE SEVEN WORDS FROM THE CROSS

LK. 23:39-43 The Word of Salvation

"Today you shall be with Me in paradise."

These eight simple words made all the difference in the world in the life of a desperate man 2,000 years ago. These eight simple words make all the difference in the world in my life today. Yet they were spoken to, of all people, not a religious man who prayed faithfully and attended synagogue and brought offerings to the Temple, not to a good man who worked hard and took care of his family and contributed to his community, but to a criminal hanging on a cross, being executed for his crimes. To paint a picture of him, let me read you an article from the New York Times: *Edward Norton, the most noted criminal in the state of New Jersey and whose name was for years the terror of Trenton and the surrounding country has just been pardoned... At 20 he was the most noted and hardened criminal in the state. At 24 he was found guilty by 14 juries on as many indictments, without a single recommendation of mercy and the extent of his sentence, had it been given, would have been imprisonment for 130 years The court at the time of his trial dealt leniently with him and though he was sentenced to 30 years imprisonment, on hearing his sentence he arose to his feet and brought down such imprecations upon his judge as made every person in the courtroom shudder. For 5 years this man was the terror of his keepers... Scarcely had he been confined when he succeeded in escaping from his cell and, seizing a large knife, forced an entrance into the front corridor where he prepared to fight his way out. He was deliberately shot down by a deputy who aimed a rifle through the iron bars. He was then placed in close confinement; a ball and chain were attached to his legs and he was closely guarded. Yet he twice escaped and, returning to his old haunts, spread fear throughout the city... Ten years ago, this man came under the influence of religion and whether his motives in changing were good or not, the change has been a genuine one. His conduct won for him the confidence of his keepers... There is little doubt but that Norton, who is not yet forty years of age, is reformed. The influence of the prison authorities was used to secure his freedom and there is scarcely a citizen of Trenton that is not glad of his release. [New York Times, Jan. 21, 1871]*

Jesus is still in the business of saving criminals and always has been! Of course, that criminal on the cross didn't have opportunity to display how his life was changed when Jesus spoke to him, but the kind of man he was is the kind of man Edward Norton was, a hardened criminal. Jesus' words gave a guarantee of heaven to a criminal in the process of dying who knew he was bound for hell. *Today you will be with Me in paradise.* Oh, what those eight little words must have meant to that man! Oh, the rest, the peace, the assurance, they must have brought him as that word of salvation came into his life. As I think about that scene and those words, three things occur to me. The first is simply this:

1. We're all criminals We all have a criminal record. The word is literally, “bad-doers”, “evil-doers”. Matthew calls them thieves, but in Greek there are two words for thief. The one is a thief who steals secretly; we might say a burglar. But Matthew uses the word for a thief who steals boldly, like an armed robber, the guy who walks up, points his gun at your head and says, “Give me your money!” That’s the kind of criminals we were, bold ones who defied God’s law, every one of us. Yes, criminals! I'm sorry if I've offended you, but it really is the truth. If you don’t believe me, just picture a prison, the place where we put criminals. Who’s in there? Well, there are certainly some thieves who stole things. But wait a minute; I stole things. I stole money from my dad when I was young; I stole something off a neighbor’s porch. I guess I’m a thief. Are you? Now who else is in there? Well, maybe some liars, people who forged checks, people who worked scams on innocent people and defrauded them. But wait, I lied to my parents to get myself out of trouble. I guess I’m a liar; are you? Who else is in there? Well, I’m sure they’ve got some prostitutes in there and maybe some of their customers. Immoral people. But wait a minute, how many times when I was a teen did I fantasize about having sex with this woman or that woman and I have no doubt that I would have done it, if I had found one that would have agreed. But I did it in my mind and Jesus said that’s the same thing! So I’ve got immorality on my record. Have you? Well, who else? Sure, there’s murderers in there, people who kill others. But wait, Jesus said that when I hate someone in my heart and speak evil about him, I murder him with my tongue. I’ve done that; I’m guilty. Are you? Listen, I’m a criminal; I had a rap sheet in those books God keeps in heaven that was a mile long. And so did you. We’re all criminals. The Bible says, *There is not one righteous among us, not even one! There is no one who understands, no one who seeks God... there is no one who does good, not even one!* So don’t look down on this man in the story; join him! Put yourself in the place of that dying repentant criminal and realize that in these words, Jesus has good news for all of us criminals:

2. We get to be with Jesus in heaven What? Criminals in heaven? We get to go there? How can it be! Well, don't you get it? That's why Jesus is hanging over there on that other cross. He's dying in my place. He's dying for me. He's taken all my evil deeds upon Him in His own body on that tree. He's dying my death for me, taking my punishment. Why? So when He goes to Heaven today, He can take me with Him! Listen, *Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.* – 1 Cor. 6:9-11. That’s what I was; that’s what we all were, but now we are washed, pardoned and made fully as holy as if we had never sinned. So we get to enter the Kingdom! Just the night before, Jesus was praying to His father in John 17. And when He prayed, He prayed for that criminal and He prayed for me. John 17:24, *Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory*. That's why He died for me, even though I was a criminal! He wanted me to be in Heaven with Him forever, to see His glory and to share His glory with Him! Oh, do you see the joy of it? The prison of hell, over which I was dangling by a thread, is now closed and sealed. I am not going there! I cannot go there! I MUST be with Him. He wants it, He has decreed it and He has purchased it! I WILL BE in heaven with Him. And Jesus Himself calls it a paradise! That word only occurs three times in the Bible, so it's rare. Its root means a walled garden and its origin refers back to the garden of Eden that the Lord planted in the beginning. In Rev. 2:7, Jesus says to us, *To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God*. Today the paradise of God isn't a luxurious garden on earth, but a great shining city in heaven, where the streets are gold and the gates are pearl and there's a river of life flowing, but most importantly, where Jesus the Lamb and our Father are in the midst of it, lighting the whole thing with their glory! He is our God and we are His people. We shall be with Him in glory. That's where I'm going the instant I die. I step directly from whatever cross I'm dying on in this world into the glory of His eternal presence, not years later, not centuries from now, not even tomorrow, but <u>today</u>! The very moment I die, I, the worst of criminals, go straight to heaven, because I have a Savior! And that brings me to my third thought:

3. For every one of us there will be a "today" when it matters This day, it may seem far off. It may seem almost irrelevant. But there will be for me and for you, "a day that is called Today" when it matters. Let me close by telling you the story of a sweet girl named Linda. Linda was only 15 when the doctors discovered that a small lump in her neck was cancerous. For the next year and a half, her world was transformed from the busy world of a high school student into a blurry maze of hospitals and doctors and procedures for months on end. Her cancer was an aggressive type and every brief season of hope was followed shortly by a relapse. People prayed and prayed for Linda. The community rallied around her and her family. She only grew worse. A month after her 17th birthday, she slipped out of this life on a September afternoon in 2006. Her parents had cared for her so well and loved her so much. That night, her mother couldn’t sleep and remembered somehow that Linda had left a letter for them to open when she was gone. She ran upstairs and found it and read these precious words, *Dear Mommy and Daddy, This is Linda and if you’re reading this, I have passed away and am in heaven. I just want you to know how much I love you. There’s no words to describe it. I’ve been battling this cancer for over 1½ years now and you both know I couldn’t have fought any harder than I did. I have no clue what I would have done if you weren’t with me by my side the entire time... All I want is for you to be happy and still live a great life. I’ll always be watching out for you in Heaven. Please don’t be sad and depressed that I’m gone, but instead be happy I’m done suffering and finally get to meet Jesus Christ. He has a better plan for me here and that’s why I know he brought me... I just really want you to know how much I love you and this is not goodbye forever. It’s see you later. I love you so much. Linda.* What a gift that letter was to their broken hearts! It was like a letter from beyond the grave. But do you see, that is the

difference those eight simple words make, *TODAY you will be with me in paradise!* That Friday was Linda's "Today". It was as though Jesus was saying, *Today is your day, Linda. Today, you will die. But rejoice. Today you will be with me in paradise.* And she did rejoice and wrote about it in advance. One day soon, it will be my "Today" and one day it will be your "Today"; those words will hold an all new meaning for you. It will be that glorious day when your suffering in this world is over and you step out of this old worn body and leave it all behind for paradise, the very presence of Jesus. One day, this will become VERY real to you. And I trust that on that day, Jesus will whisper these words once more, to you, in your spirit, that you will hear Him say, *Today you will be with Me in paradise.* And you'll go home to Him with joy.

THE SEVEN WORDS FROM THE CROSS

Jn. 19:25-27 The Word of Affection

He said to his mother, "Woman, behold, your son!" Then he said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother!"

None of the other gospels record the fact that Jesus' own mother stood by the cross; only John does, and that rightly so, because from that day on, he became her son and provider. I wonder how many times they must have re-lived the horror of that morning together in the days that followed, as the two people who loved Him the most. As they stood watching and weeping that morning, Jesus gathered breath enough to utter two short phrases to these two beloved ones that are ripe with meaning for us. In fact, there are three phrases in the text that we must consider. In the first phrase we see:

I. The Caring of a Parent (25) *"There stood by the cross His mother"* Mary had not been in the picture much since His ministry began, nevertheless there she stood by the cross! We don't know much about her life; we usually think of her as that young woman of the first Christmas, but by now she is nearly 50 years old and she has cared for Him all the way! Every earthly friend forsook Him and fled, but she was there; painful as it was, she stood by Him to the very end! Surely, we can learn some things from her example. First:

1. we parents need to stand by our children Mary didn't always agree with Jesus and may have doubted Him at times, but could never desert Him. Oh, stand by your children; be there when they need you. Don't give up on them and don't quit. Now, I don't mean to indulge their sin; when they sin, you have to clearly let them experience any necessary discipline God may send for their own good. But still be there when they disappoint you and don't measure up, for God Himself is your Father and that's how He treats you! But more importantly:

2. we parents need to surrender our children You know, your children can bring you great sorrow, not just by doing wrong, but by obeying God. They may go to the mission field or move away, when you want them here. You may agonize over the struggles God brings into their path of life. But see what God is doing. The very thing bringing Mary's sorrow is fulfilling God's plan, bringing salvation for the world and in the years to come, as she saw the birth of the church of Jesus Christ, what joy must have been hers to see her part in it. Her part was surrendering, letting go, enduring the agony, letting God have His way with her son. Surrender. Let go of your children! Let God have His way with them and learn to see from His perspective and your sorrow will be turned into joy! Now Jesus uttered a second phrase that John records and in it, we see:

II. The Caring of a Son (26) *"Woman behold thy son"* Jesus' cry arises out of love for such a steadfast mother and also out of responsibility. The Scripture says He fulfilled the Law and in that Law, stood Ex. 20:12, "Honor thy father and mother." The Hebrew word for *honor* is literally "to make heavy", that is, important. It means to love, respect, and provide for them if necessary. See how this Son cared for His mother:

1. the Son provided for His mother The basic effect of what He is doing is placing her care in the hands of a trustee who can make sure she is provided for in His absence. Earlier in His ministry, Jesus had condemned the hypocritical Pharisees who had invented a "spiritual" rule that if they promised their goods to the Temple, they didn't have to use them to help their parents! He showed then by teaching, and now at the cross by example, that caring for parents is a spiritual thing! Here's the lesson: take care of your parents! I know they don't understand sometimes and it takes a lot of time and effort. When they're old, you may have to feed and clothe them, literally, and take lots of time to visit and be with them. But remember how they cared for you! There is nothing sadder than an aged parent who says, "my kids have no time for me..." Then notice also that:

2. the Son put His mother first Here is Jesus in the midst of the most important work of His life, indeed of the universe, dying for the salvation of mankind. Yet first He had to provide for His mother's security. Family is the #2 priority in life after your relationship with God. Lots of folks think they are super spiritual and fill up their lives with all kinds of Christian activities and service, but if you neglect your family through it, whether parents or wife and kids, your priorities are wrong! "Honor your father and mother..." was the fifth commandment and the first commandment about others. Even there, it was God first, family second and then others! What are your priorities? How important is it to you to care for your parents? Lastly, in the third phrase John records, we see:

III. The Caring of a Disciple (27) *"Behold thy mother"* One disciple did make it to the cross, even though all the rest fled and he also stood nearby. He was the "one Jesus loved", John, the one who had been special to Jesus all along. In this cry, Jesus commissioned John to care for Mary as his own mother. 18:15-17 tells us John and Peter followed after the

crowd to the high priest's house and it was John who was known there and got himself and Peter inside. John's initial failure of fleeing in the garden was soon past and he followed Jesus to trial and then to the cross. His love for the Savior was so strong that he could not long deny it. And because He loved Jesus, he readily undertook his responsibility to love Mary and care for her. You see, Jesus chose John because his love for Mary was not mere earthly caring, but a caring that arose out of a personal love for Christ, which is far stronger! In short, *phileo* or "family love" is not enough; *agape*, the deep sacrificial love of God, is what makes a person usable to Christ. But now:

1. consider the demand Jesus makes on us Jesus is actually commanding his beloved follower to care for Mary with His love. But do you remember the time when his mother and brothers came to see Him and He said in Mark 3:35, *Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother.*? All the saved are as dear and precious to Jesus as His own mother. And here He tells a disciple to take His love and show it to another dear one. I am reminded of what Jesus said the night before in 13:34-35, *Love one another as I have loved you*. Jesus makes the same demand on all of us, that if we love Him, then we have to love our brothers and sisters in Christ with His love! It is as though Jesus points with an all-encompassing sweep of his hand to the church and says, "Behold your family, your mothers and fathers, your brothers and sisters. Love them for Me. Love them as I have loved you!" We often say that so lightly, but:

2. consider what loving others means John was to provide for Mary's physical needs and that same John in chapter 3 of his first letter tells us that we must care for the physical needs of our brothers and sisters. You can't just sit by and watch in plenty while your brother's children go hungry! If you take that seriously, it will change your lifestyle. But John also was to provide for Mary's spiritual needs and to be a comfort and a son to lean on for strength in the hard days to follow. Our love for our brothers and sisters must go beyond our pocketbooks. It means that we will give of our time and energy. We will be there to bear one another's burdens and build each other up in the most holy faith! Caring for our spiritual family will become a primary part of our lives. Let me ask you:

Are you living up to the responsibilities Christ has given you from the cross? Parent, are you caring for your children with the love of Christ? Child, are you caring for your parents with that love? And Christian, are you caring for your brothers and sisters in Christ? Jesus loved enough to go to Calvary; how much do you love?

THE SEVEN WORDS FROM THE CROSS

Mt. 27:45-46 The Word of Anguish

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Jesus was nailed to cross about 9 AM. His first three "words" were uttered sometime over next three hours. At noon, the sky was darkened, the sun blotted out. I don't think this means a cloud passed and the day turned dreary. It was the darkness of night, a supernatural darkness like the thick darkness visited upon Egypt. Spurgeon called it "midnight at midday". The hymnwriter said, "Well might the sun in darkness hide and shut his glories in, when Christ the Mighty Maker died for man the creature's sin!" It is as though the universe itself is in sympathy with the intense suffering our Lord endures now. The hours pass in silence. Then at 3:00, the Savior utters four cries in quick succession and dies. The first was a cry of anguish, a cry born out of the most intense, agonizing, emotional and mental pain. And that pain came from this: during those hours, particularly from 12 to 3 as darkness covered the earth to symbolize what was happening, the Heavenly Father, for the first time in all eternity, abandoned His Son. He walked away, turned His back, use whatever metaphor you wish. He forsook Him, left Him there to experience the weight of the sin of the world being laid upon His own person, left Him there to experience the fullness of God's own horrible wrath against sin as it fell upon Him, left Him there - alone. The depth of His anguish was expressed in that simple, gnawing question, the one that always torments us, the one we always ask, "Why?" "My God, You are MY God, MY Father! We have been together from all eternity. We are One, You in me and I in You. Why have you left me?" It was:

I. The Cry Of Abandonment and as we consider it carefully, there are several things we can see in it. First of all:

1. this cry shows us the awfulness of being abandoned He didn't scream, "This hurts!", though the pain of crucifixion was intense beyond imagination. It was not ultimately about the physical pain. Nor was His cry, "This isn't fair!" It was not ultimately about the injustice. The deepest hurt was that of being forsaken. Utterly abandoned. Left helpless and hopeless by One you trusted and counted on. Surely that must be one of the most horrible experiences a human being can endure. Some years ago, a middle-aged person was sharing with me a traumatic experience that happened in childhood. The parents were in the early stages of divorce. The angry mother had thrown the dad out and he had taken the four little kids with him in the car and they were driving away. He was taking them with him; they would be safe with him. But suddenly, he stopped the car in the middle of the street, pulled over and made them get out. He said, "I can't do this; I can't take you with me." And he left them there to go back home. The memory was vivid. Tears were streaming down the person's cheeks as the cry of anguish came out, "Why did he do that? He had us with him. He could have done something, but he didn't! He abandoned us!" That kind of anguish is not something you forget, even after 30 years. To have a friend walk away and turn their back on you in your hour of need. To have a spouse abandon you and the kids and walk out of your life, leaving you to somehow care for the whole mess. To have a parent leave you or tell you to go away and step out of your life forever. To be left alone, all alone to suffer whatever awful

thing is happening to you, by someone you love, is one of the most painful of all human experiences. For you who have experienced the anguish of being abandoned:

2. this cry assures us that Christ understands our abandonment It says that Jesus knows what you're going through; He's been there. He was touched with the feeling of your infirmity. He knows how to comfort your heart. But it was not the abandonment of earthly friends or loved ones Jesus was feeling. He cries, "My God"; to be abandoned by God is the worst pain of all! The most horrible feeling in all the world is not physical pain; it is not dying. It is being abandoned by the very Creator, by God Himself; it is to watch God walk away and leave you without hope. You know, what Jesus experienced on that cross will be the eternal anguish of every person who dies without Christ. It is not the flames of hell which torment the soul. It is being forsaken by God, having no hope, being abandoned by all who love and care, crying out in anguish with no one to hear. Oh, if we really understood the anguish in this cry, what a compassion it would give us for those without Christ and what a deep passion we would have to see them come to Him. And yet, if we look still deeper at this cry:

3. this cry reveals the very love of God for us The answer to the question is found in a phrase Paul uses in Rom. 11:22, *Behold then the kindness and severity of God...* In this cry, love and holiness walk hand in hand. Our God is a holy God and is completely pure and separate from sin. He has no fellowship with darkness; He is light and in Him is no darkness at all! The Father had to separate Himself from His own Son and abandon Him when He took the sin of the world on Himself at the cross. It is there that we see just how holy God is! And if you will not let Him separate you from your sin by trusting in Christ, then He has no choice but to eventually separate Himself from you, to abandon you eternally. In Psalm 22:1-3 we have revealed the very thoughts of Christ, *My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me? Far from my deliverance are the words of my groaning. O my God, I cry by day, but Thou dost not answer; And by night, but I have no rest. Yet Thou art holy, O Thou who art enthroned upon the praises of Israel.* "I'm in anguish because I'm forsaken, but Thou art Holy!" God's holiness is absolute and yet at the same time, this cry shows the great love of Christ. Not just that He would endure pain for us or even give His life for us; many noble men have done that. But to be forsaken by God for us, to endure the most horrible experience in all of the universe for us, that's how far He had to go to save us; that is love! And yet don't be tempted to think it was only the Son who loved you! Think of the Father. *Pastor David Lattimer had a grown daughter Debi who was involved in an auto accident and suffered severe internal injuries and brain damage that left her partially paralyzed. His testimony is that, in the middle of his life's greatest tragedy, a friend called on the phone to comfort him: "He asked me who suffered the most at the cross. My immediate response was, `Jesus, of course.' He then asked me which would be easier, to watch Debi lie there in that intensive care ward, unable to respond or to die. Immediately I said, `I would rather die than watch her suffer.' He then asked again, `Who suffered the most at the cross, the Son who died or the loving Father who sent Him to the cross and allowed Him to die?' Surely it was easier for Jesus to die than for our loving Heavenly Father to watch Him suffer and die. How could God do that to save sinners? I cannot fathom love like that. My conclusion is that God loves this lost world much more than I ever imagined." [Evangelical Advocate, Jun 1996. Page 12.]* Behold what manner of love the Father has given unto us! He abandoned His beloved Son to the cross that you and I might be saved, because it was the only way!

So, it was not without meaning; it was not without purpose. But there is another thing going on here which is easy to miss. The Jews did; they heard *Eli, Eli*, and with Christ's labored breathing, thought he was calling Elijah. But Jesus chose His words very carefully, even in His anguish. Let's ponder:

II. The Message In This Abandonment Jesus is actually quoting the Scriptures:

1. the quote in the cry - Ps. 22:1 It is an exact quotation and Jesus said this for a reason; the Jews should have recognized it. By His cry, Jesus is saying, "Psalm 22, remember it! That is Me; I am the One predicted there!". If you turn there and read verse1 and then verses 14-18, it is plainly obvious. The words of the Psalm were being enacted before their very eyes. Jesus is telling them to remember and to see that the Messiah would be crucified. He's declaring, "I am the Messiah!," but look further and you'll see:

2. the answer to the cry - Ps. 22:24 Jesus expected them to know the ending of the Psalm too. It begins with crucifixion, but it ends with resurrection. It begins with a question, but it ends with a certainty. The Father did not forsake the Son forever, but when He cried, He heard. At this cry, the Father's presence was restored, so that Jesus could die saying, "Father, into Your hands I commit my spirit!" Ultimately, God did answer His cry, and the proof of that is the Resurrection! He wanted them to know that it was not over yet, that God would vindicate Him and raise Him from the dead! But sadly, their eyes were blind and their ears couldn't hear with understanding and they missed it. However, for us there is a message we can't miss:

III. The Results of This Abandonment There are two of them. The first is this:

1. We will never suffer the anguish of being eternally abandoned by God for our sins Let's use a different image. Ps. 75:8 says, *In the hand of the LORD is a cup full of foaming wine mixed with spices; he pours it out, and all the wicked of the earth drink it down to its very dregs.* It is the cup of His wrath against sin and because of our sin, ultimately we would have to drink it and be separated from Him forever. But Is. 51:22 encourages us, *This is what your*

Sovereign LORD says,..."See, I have taken out of your hand the cup that made you stagger; from that cup, the goblet of my wrath, you will never drink again. That is exactly what Jesus did for us; He took the cup of wrath out of our hand and drank it Himself, allowing Himself to experience the anguish of eternal abandonment by God so we will never have to drink it again! Our sins and their penalty are totally removed and gone; we need never experience or even fear the anguish of being separated from God! 2 Cor 5:21, *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.* John 5:24, *I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.* His abandonment is our assurance of eternal life! But it is even more than that; His abandonment assures us that:

2. We never experience one moment of separation from God in all the circumstances of life Oh, Satan will try to put it over on you. He will try to make you feel like Job did, like the world has ended, like God has gone on vacation and left you in the lurch to face your problems and suffering by yourself. He will do his best to make you believe God has forsaken you. But it's a lie! Because of Jesus' anguish at the cross, we have this promise in Heb. 13:5, *God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."* Paul put our assurance like this in Rom. 8:35-39, *Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ...No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.* Nothing in all the universe can separate us from Him. Christ was separated from the Father so we'll never be!

And that can sustain us through any circumstance that might come our way in life. *When David Livingstone appeared at the University of Glasgow to receive the honorary doctor of law degree, he was received with silent respect. He was gaunt and weary from 16 years of exposure to Africa's hardships. One arm hung useless at his side because of an attack by a lion. Livingstone asked, "Shall I tell you what supported me through all those years of exile among a people whose language I could not understand and whose attitude toward me was always uncertain and often hostile? It was this, "Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world."* Whenever you are tempted to think that God has abandoned you, remember these words from the prophet Isaiah which are now just as true of us as of Israel, Is. 49:15-16, *Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands.*

THE SEVEN WORDS FROM THE CROSS

Jn. 19:28-29 The Word of Suffering

I Thirst

It is now 3 PM and the Savior has only a few more minutes to live. He has just suffered three hours of intense separation from God. Only seconds before, He cried, "My God, why have You forsaken me?" And now in the same breath, He adds, "I thirst". Has it ever struck you as odd that in six hours hanging on the cross, Jesus has not said a word to indicate His pain. It seems almost trite to remind ourselves that crucifixion really hurts! I heard Chuck Swindoll say that he'd read in the paper about a man in the Philippines who had arranged for himself to be crucified every year for five years, to literally be nailed to a cross and then have the nails pulled out. Little wonder that this year he says he isn't going to do that anymore! Most of us scream and yell ouch when we simply hit our thumb with a hammer; imagine being crucified! Yet from Jesus we hear no screams, no moans, no exclamations of agony. The words "I thirst!" are the first time Jesus has said a word about His physical suffering and it seems almost too little. But if you read the text carefully, there is a lot more to these simple words than physical thirst. The first thing John mentions is that this cry shows:

I. The Savior's Knowledge (28a) You know, it's amazing that after six hours of intense agony, He retained the absolute right use of His mind. Jesus was able, not only to think and remember clearly, but to apply what He knew to His situation. But what did He know? The Holy Spirit makes an important comment:

1. He knew all things He knew all the things that would happen to Him, all the things predicted about Him in the Old Testament. There are 37 major verses of prophecy predicting specific details of His earthly life and dozens more allusions to it! He knew everything that had to happen in His life to fulfill the Scriptures, that every detail had to be right. And so, at that moment:

2. He knew all things were now completed Every one of the prophecies about His life had been fulfilled, every one except one. One thing remained, one little detail. **Ps. 69:21**, *They put gall in my food and gave me vinegar for my thirst.* Psalm 69 pictures the suffering Savior's thirst quenched with vinegar and that had not happened yet, so in order that the Scripture might be perfectly fulfilled, He cried "I thirst". What knowledge the Savior had! Want to know a scary but precious secret? He has same kind of knowledge about your life as His own, every detail! That can be a fearful thing to contemplate if your heart isn't set on seeking Him, but oh, how precious that is if you love Him with all your heart. He knows all the things you suffer too! All the things ordained for you were written in His book before one of them came to be! He knows! But further, in this cry we can learn something else. John would have us see something about:

II. The Savior's Book The soldiers would likely not have given Jesus anything to drink at this point. His words precipitated their actions which fulfilled the Scripture. Surely, we have to notice something about the Scripture here. First:

1. it is predictive Consider Ps. 69:21 which we just read, *They put gall in my food and gave me vinegar for my thirst.* Critics would read this Psalm and say it is only the story of a man in deep distress and trouble, forced to eat gall (bitter herbs) and drink vinegar instead of good wine. But the New Testament declares that this Psalm is a vivid picture of the suffering of the Savior on the cross 800 years later! This book is a predictive Book; it makes tremendous statements about events hundreds and even thousands of years yet future and speaks of them as already accomplished facts, because they will come to pass. And then notice that:

2. it is accurate Most of the predictions this Book makes are not general, but very specific. Let's see just how accurate this prediction was:

a. Mt. 27:34 says that when they arrived at Calvary, *...they offered Jesus wine to drink, mixed with gall; but after tasting it, he refused to drink it.* Ps. 69:21 had predicted they would feed Jesus gall (bitter herbs) and just before they nailed Him to the cross they tried! Gall mixed with wine was used as a stupefying drink, a pain-killer, a last act of mercy, to crucifixion victims to help them escape the pain. Jesus indeed tasted it, but wouldn't take it. He wanted to feel the pain! But then we read in:

b. Mt. 27:48 that six hours later, at the end of His time on the cross, just after His fourth cry, *...Immediately one of them ran and got a sponge. He filled it with wine vinegar, put it on a stick, and offered it to Jesus to drink.* Ps. 69 had said they would give Him vinegar to drink and our text in Jn. 19:29 says after He cried out, they took wine vinegar and put it on a sponge and lifted it to His lips! See how accurate the Scripture is, two halves of a verse fulfilled specifically, but hours apart. Jesus could not leave even half a verse go unfulfilled! And all the rest of it is just as accurate; when it talks about your life and who you are and what your future holds, it is just as accurate as this predictive prophecy. It is trustworthy; you can count on it! The Scripture will always be fulfilled; Jesus will see to it! Well, we've yet to look at the most important thing:

III. The Savior's Thirst After all, that is what the cry is all about! First of all:

1. it was a physical thirst I mean, that it was real; I don't think Jesus was simply saying it to manipulate the soldiers into fulfilling the Scriptures in some mechanical way. He was really thirsty. After all, He probably had nothing to drink since supper the night before and in between had been beaten severely, made to carry cross, and now hung, at least the first three hours, in the Palestine sun, struggling and pulling Himself up to breathe. Ps. 22 predicts how dry He was, that His tongue was sticking to the roof of His mouth. He was thirsty! What does this show? It showed Jesus' true humanity. He was not just putting on an act on the cross, exercising Divine power not to feel the pain. He suffered as a real man suffers; the physical agony of the cross was real suffering. You who are suffering physical agony, let me comfort you with this fact: Jesus understands! He felt the sting of the whip, the pain of the nails, the misery of the body! He is no stranger to the pain you bear and His heart is touched by your suffering! But I think it was more than a physical thirst:

2. it was a spiritual thirst Remember that Jesus has just been enduring three hours of separation from the Father and it has not ended yet, note says in 19:30, "It is finished!". He was enduring our eternal punishment, so literally:

a. it was the thirst of hell Jesus endured our hell on the cross, but not by going to the actual place. Think about it, the darkness, the pain, the separation from God. Remember Lazarus and the rich man over in hell in awful torment and what did he cry out for? Just one drop of water to cool his tongue, because he was tormented in the flames. See it again here. Jesus endured the thirst of our hell so we'll never have to! It was part of the eternal punishment He bore for us on the cross. But it was more than a physical thirst:

b. it was a thirst for God If you compare Mt. 27:46-50 with Jn. 19:28-30, you'll find that Jesus must have cried, "My God, why have you forsaken Me?" and "I thirst" in same breath! This is a spiritual thirst, as well as a physical one! Listen to Ps. 42:1-3, *As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God? My tears have been my food day and night, while men say to me all day long, "Where is your God?"* It's a picture of a man who is God-forsaken and taunted by His enemies. This is another prediction of Jesus on the cross! He was thirsting for the presence of God, longing for the fellowship with the Father that had always been His. Oh, this is far worse than physical thirst, but remember, He bore it so you will never have to! You will never ever be in a place or condition from which God has withdrawn His presence. Wherever you are, you can know and experience Him there! Now before I quit, let me hasten to point out that the Savior's thirst:

3. it was quenched His cry did not go unheeded:

a. physically, verse 29 says they gave Him a sponge full of vinegar, which was a common drink. But much more importantly, it was quenched:

b. spiritually God heard the cry, as Ps. 22 says, *He did not despise nor abhor the affliction of the afflicted one but when He cried unto Him, He heard.* How do we know? Jesus' last words are, "Father, into Thy hands...". The suffering was ended, fellowship was restored, the thirst was quenched.

Is yours? The invitation now stands and is repeated throughout the Book, *Ho everyone that thirsteth, come to the waters..., Let Him that is athirst come..., He who believes in Me shall never thirst..., whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life!*

THE SEVEN WORDS FROM THE CROSS

John 19:30 The Word of Victory

It is finished!

We are now in the very last seconds of Jesus' life. His thirst has been quenched and the prophecy of it fulfilled; it is now time to die. So, Jesus shouts a cry of victory. It is actually one word in Greek, *tetelestai*, in English, *Finished!* That Greek word has an ocean of meaning in it; it comes from *telos*, which means *end*, but it can mean a number of things, such as *finished*, *accomplished*, *ended*, *completed*, and even, *paid*. So what does Jesus mean here? What is finished?

I. His Sufferings Were Ended The most obvious meaning is, "I am done suffering". I need hardly mention again the intensity of His sufferings. Words can't convey it; even film can't portray it. But note this:

1. His death was the end of His sufferings, not just in the immediate sense, but in the sense of 1 Pet. 3:18. He suffered and died once, and only once. His death was the crowning act of His suffering; it will never be repeated. When He cried "Finished!", that was it. He doesn't suffer any more; no more will man appear to triumph and mock and crucify the Savior. He's in glory now and when He returns, it will not be as Victim, but as Victor, not to suffer, but to conquer!

2. His death was victory over suffering - Mt. 27:50 His last words were preceded by a loud cry; John tells us what the cry was. Jesus didn't whisper, "It is finished" in defeat; He shouted it in triumph!! To this point we have been considering the Tragedy of the Cross; now we see the Triumph of the Cross. Jesus died a Victor; He entered death as the One who holds the keys to it, the Lord of it. They did not take His life from Him; the cross did not drain it away. He laid it down. Death did not seize Him; He entered it on His own. How do I know? Because three days later He climbed back into His Body, transformed it and walked out of the tomb alive!

3. Jesus changed the nature of death He took the sting out of it, the way Novocain takes all the pain out of your dental work. You go through the same experience, but the penalty is removed and only the benefit remains! Look at **1 Cor. 15:55-57**. The thing that was awful about death was sin; sin led to eternal death. But Jesus died and took care of sin, so death is no longer a defeat and loss, but a glorious victory for the believer, an open door that leads us to the presence of Christ. Jesus' cry, "It is finished!" tells us that we can die as victors like Him, that all our suffering is past and behind us. D. L. Moody said on his deathbed, "This is my triumph. This is my coronation day..." Secondly, Jesus meant that:

II. The Prophecies Were Fulfilled Look carefully at verse 30. It was when He had received the vinegar that He said, "It is finished". Now, notice back in verse 28, the words *completed* and *fulfilled* are both forms of *tetelestai* (finished), the same as in verse 30. So, in reading it all you have, *Jesus knowing all the things that had to be fulfilled said "I thirst" so that the Scripture would be fulfilled and when He drank the vinegar He said, "It is fulfilled"*. Every prophecy about His life and ministry and suffering was completely fulfilled; not one was left undone or forgotten. I defy anyone to find one that wasn't. And I would remind you that there is a whole second set of prophecies about His second coming and they will be fulfilled just as literally and exactly as the first set was! Now, building on these thoughts, Jesus meant that:

III. God's Plan Was Completed We see here that history is not just a series of disconnected events controlled by chance. God had a great and glorious master plan and it culminated in the cross:

1. the general plan was completed - 1 Pet. 1:19-20 The death of Christ was settled before the foundation of the world, before creation. Before man ever sinned, God had a plan to redeem him. God the Son would become a man and go to a cross and die for sinners. God planted the hope of the fulfillment of that plan in the hearts of His Old Testament people. The prophecies of old looked for a Messiah, a Savior. The Tabernacle and the Temple and all the sacrifices pointed ahead to the Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world. Generations of devout Jews had waited and prayed and watched for God to bring His plan to completion. Then one day, John the Baptist cried out, “Behold the Lamb of God! The Lamb has come! He's arrived!” And now, on the cross, the Lamb counted slain from the foundation of the world is actually slain! This moment is the culmination of centuries of God's working. But further:

2. the plan for Jesus' own life was completed Jesus had often declared the purpose for His coming into the world, "The Son is come to seek and to save the lost." He didn't come to be a carpenter, a healer, a teacher, a prophet, or a reformer to oppose the Pharisees and clean up the religious institutions. He came for this moment, to die for sinners.

He referred to it throughout His ministry as "the hour", saying, *My hour is not yet come*. The goal of His earthly life, the completion of the eternal task, had been accomplished and He cries, *It is finished*. Ps. 22:31 ends the prophecy of His death and resurrection this way, *For He has done it [finished it]!* Now He was ready to move to phase 2 of the eternal plan, to rise, return to heaven and come again to reign!

But there is still one more meaning to this cry:

IV. Our Salvation Was Paid in Full - Mt. 17:24 The Greek verb *teleo* can be translated *to pay*, or more accurately, to finish paying, or to pay in full, to the end, to completion, to pay all that is owed. What a beautiful thought that Jesus cries from the cross, "It is paid in full!" What does He mean?

1. the sin debt of the race is now paid Jesus taught His disciples to pray, "Forgive us our debts" in Matthew 6, but interpreted it by saying, "If you don't forgive others who sin against you, your Father won't forgive your sins." He was saying that sin is a moral debt. Sinning is like borrowing money; it creates an obligation. If we expect to be able to have a relationship with our creditor, the debt has to be paid or he will be justly forced to take appropriate action against us. When we sin against God, it must be atoned for, canceled out somehow, so that we can have a relationship with our Creator and Supplier. From Adam and Eve, right on through to us, the human race has been running up a sin debt that makes the USA national debt look puny! Mankind has sinned against God, broken His laws, betrayed His love, and abused His blessings. Every one of us is guilty of it; look at Rom. 3:10. The worst part is we have nothing with which to pay, so just punishment must fall! Jesus is crying, "It is paid; I've paid it in full! The atonement for your sins has been accomplished!" What a tremendous shout of victory for us, because it means:

2. we can do nothing to add to it This has two applications:

a. for the unsaved person The human race has always been and still is preoccupied with saving themselves, with finding ways to pay for their sins. They try religious things, like helpful deeds, church attendance, taking the sacraments, or giving money, all in the vain hope that they are canceling out some of their sin debt. Some have practiced self-denial and lived out lives in desolate monasteries; others have given huge sums to charity, confident that God will accept these things in payment for sins. Jesus said, "It is finished!" To depend on works is to sin yet further against the Master who has already done it all!

b. for the saved person What joy is in this cry! My salvation is paid for and complete. If you owed a million dollars and it was due and you were going to jail for 30 years because of it and someone came and paid it for you and handed you the receipt, "Paid in full", how would you feel? Compare Is. 53:6; because our iniquity was laid on Him, it will never be laid on us; so now, if I trust in His blood, I can have a relationship with God that I never could before! It is secure because my account in the ledger of His Word is marked, "Paid in full"!

Upon a Life I did not live,
Upon a Death I did not die,
Another's death - Another's life,
I cast my soul eternally.
Bold I shall stand in that great day,
For who, aught to my charge can lay?
Fully absolved by Christ I am,
From sin's tremendous curse and blame.
"It Is Finished."

Many years ago, a Christian farmer was deeply concerned over an unsaved carpenter and had been trying to explain that Christ's death was a finished work and was sufficient for his salvation. He kept insisting that he had to do something himself. One day the farmer asked the carpenter to make him a gate and then asked the carpenter to come the next morning to see the gate as it hung in the field. When the carpenter arrived, he was surprised to see the farmer with a sharp axe in hand. "What's that for?" he asked. "I am going to add a few cuts and strokes to your work," came the response. "But there is no need for it; it is alright as it is," said the carpenter. But the farmer took no notice and slashed and hacked at the gate until it was completely ruined. "Look what you have done; you have ruined my work!" cried the carpenter. "Yes, and that is exactly what you are trying to do, to ruin the finished work of Christ by your miserable additions to it!" The carpenter soon knelt and trusted in the finished work of Christ!

THE SEVEN WORDS FROM THE CROSS

Lk. 23:46 The Word of Commitment

Father, into Thy hands I commit my Spirit!

Now we come to the last words of Jesus. There is nothing left to do. All is “finished” or completed, as we’ve heard. So Jesus immediately closes His earthly life in a simple prayer, *Father, into Thy hands I commit my Spirit.* Then He exhales and is dead. I want to talk with you today about dying. We don’t like to talk about that much. We don’t like to see it. I would venture to guess that few of us have ever literally been with someone and watched them breathe out their last breath and

die. To be honest, we are scared of it. Mankind has an innate fear of death and Hebrews says that Satan uses that fear of death to control human beings and make them his slaves. Nevertheless, it is appointed to man once to die. We will all die. I will die; you will die. Jesus was a human being and Jesus died. He went through the very process that we will each go through. He was our forerunner in this; He went first! So, if we look at His dying and at His words as He died, I believe we can find great comfort that will give rest to our souls. First, let's think about:

I. What Happened To Jesus When He Died Look carefully at His words. Has it ever struck you as strange that even though Jesus had full knowledge of His impending death and spoke of it repeatedly to His disciples, He never said one word about His body. He never made any arrangements for His own burial. Over the last six hours, He has been very much aware of His body, yet in this His dying moment, it is not His body that concerns Him, but His spirit. Why? Because:

1. our bodies are only temporary Paul said that they are like a house or a tent in which our spirit dwells, the way we live inside our house or camp inside a tent. But at death, our spirit leaves the body. Just the way our last breath is exhaled, so our spirit leaves and goes forth and immediately the body ceases to be alive and the process of decay and decomposition sets in instantly. It becomes dead, lifeless matter. No matter how we try to preserve it or protect it with a casket or a vault or a tomb or pyramid, it will return to dust. In that sense, it really doesn't matter much what they do with it; it is temporary and the moment it does not have ME living in it, it has no further purpose. But it's clear from Jesus' words that He was convinced that:

2. our spirits are eternal The spirit of a person, the real core of their being, continues on after death and it lasts forever. Look back to verse 43. Jesus planned on being in Paradise that very day; He said, *You'll be with Me; "Me" is going to be in Paradise - TODAY!* Well, you know as well as I do that His body was in the tomb that night, not in Paradise. He's not talking about His body there, is He? He's talking about His Spirit. When I die, I do not fall asleep. I do not lose consciousness. Everything does not go all black and I cease to exist. When I die, my spirit leaves my body and it instantly goes somewhere else, just like Jesus' did. The second that His Spirit left His body, even though it was hanging there limp and dead, HE was already where He said He was going to be that day, in Paradise with the Father! If we're believers, that's exactly what will happen to us too. To be absent from this body is to be present with the Lord; the minute our spirit is "breathed forth" or "given up", we're in heaven in the blink of an eye! Friend, that is not wishful thinking. That is not religious conjecture; that is reality. That's what happens. But unfortunately, you and I can't see what happens. Unless God gives us a special vision like He did Stephen, where he saw Jesus waiting at the moment of his death, all we see is the physical; we see a body go limp and lifeless. In our view someone is GONE; we can't see that, in reality, someone just ARRIVED at their final destination! On this side of death, we have to take that by faith, not sight. And that's where Jesus' prayer comes in. Now think about:

II. What Jesus Prayed Before He Died Jesus talked to His Father and He said, *Father, I place My spirit into Your hands.* That phrase, *the hand of God,* is found repeatedly throughout Scripture. Does God have literal hands? Well, even though it seems that He chooses to appear in various visions to people in the Bible in a human-like form, I think the real meaning of the term *the hand of God* is the controlling power of God! The hand and the arm have always been symbolic of power and still are; we still flex arm muscles to show strength. When the Bible says God brought Israel out of Egypt "with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm," it means He did it "with His irresistible power", doesn't it? So the first thing that prayer tells us is:

1. whose hands Jesus was really in Mt. 17:22-23 says, *When they came together in Galilee, he said to them, "The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised to life."* This is where Jesus was during the cross experience; He was in the hands of men. That is, His body was in the control and the power of men and they treated Him as they wished. They crucified Him. But now at the end, what is He telling us? His spirit is in the hands of God! What a wonderful truth that is! Your body may be in the hands of men; they may do with you as they please, but as a believer, your spirit is in the hands of God! It is absolutely in the control of His irresistible power. That's why Jesus said, *"I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. - Luke 12:4.* Do you understand that no matter what happens to you in this life, that as a believer your spirit is in God's hands and here is what's really true John 10:27-29, *My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand*. Brothers and sisters, your spirit is in the hands of God, whether you live or whether you die, and nothing in this world, not Satan, not sins, not circumstances, not death itself, nothing and no one, can take you OUT OF His hands! But secondly, let's go back to the Old Testament for a moment to see:

2. whose prayer Jesus was really praying - Ps. 31:5 Psalm 31 is David's plea for God's protection in a time of distress in his life and in verse 5 he prays, *Into your hands I commit my spirit*... Jesus is quoting David as He prays; that means that this Psalm was a picture of Jesus written hundreds of years ahead of time. It means that God knew and planned the details of the cross and even the words Jesus would say, caused them to be written down and then brought them to pass. But David's point is in verse 15 where he says, *My times are in your hands...* All the events of our lives are under His power and control; nothing takes Him by surprise. He knows and controls absolutely everything that happens to us and works through it, according to Rom. 8:28, for good! His hands always work for good! We can

trust His hands! Jesus knew that; He knew that everything happening to Him was happening within the Father's will and was subject to His power and control. He did not doubt that. He already knew that His Spirit was in God's hands. So lastly, let's think about:

III. Why Jesus Prayed This Before He Died He said, *Into Your hands I COMMIT my spirit.* The Greek word for *commit* is *paratithemi*, which means *to place with* or *deposit*. We take our money to the bank to deposit it for safe-keeping. We entrust it to the bank. Jesus is speaking of depositing His spirit in the hands of the Father in that same sense. And I love how it looks in the Greek, *Father, into the hands of You, I am entrusting the spirit of me!* And in that split second, his spirit left his body. He is not praying this as some fresh or renewed act of commitment. He is simply stating a fact that was already true. His spirit was already in the Father's hands and in the act of dying, He was acknowledging that was true in the moment of His death. In fact, it is more than a statement. It is a bold announcement. Notice in Lk. 23:46 that He called it out with a loud voice. Like this, *It is Finished! Father, into the hands of You I am entrusting the spirit of me!* It was a proclamation! He wanted all to know that God's redemption plan was finished. He wanted all to know that His spirit was in the hands of God and that God would vindicate Him by raising Him from the dead. When Jesus said this, He died instantly; He wanted them to know that He chose the moment of His death, that no man took His life from Him, but He laid it down voluntarily. Matthew says He "dismissed" His spirit to go and be with the Father.

Now you and I are not like Him; we can't control the moment of our death. We can't simply dismiss our spirit and leave our body. But we CAN die the way Jesus died! In fact, Jesus said this to show us how to die. We can rest in an absolute assurance in God's powerful hands now, so that when that moment of death comes, we enter it without fear and with certain assurance that in the second we are absent from this body, we will be present with the Lord. One of the first funerals I ever had as a young 20 year old pastor was for an elderly member of my church by the name of Bud Ream. Bud was dying by inches; I don't remember what disease he had, but it was clear that he was growing worse and worse and that there would be no recovery. And one day in the hospital, I asked Bud if he had any fear about dying. His reply was, "No; I've placed it all in His hands." That's what Jesus is declaring here. When you accepted Christ as your Savior, you entrusted your spirit to Him eternally. You put the real you, the eternal you, in His hands. The way you die will be the test of whether you really believe the reality of what you did. Jesus boldly declared, "Father, I die trusting You; I have deposited My Spirit in your hands and I die in absolute confidence that I will be with You today!" For us, the fact of our deposit was already established the moment we trusted Christ; what may be lacking is the faith to rest absolutely in it. It may help us to declare that we are depositing our spirit in the Father's hands for eternal safekeeping. We can pray, we can proclaim before we die, even right now, "You are My Father and into the hands of You, I am completely and absolutely entrusting the spirit of me! No matter what comes, I am resting in Your hands!"

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FOUR INDIVIDUAL GOOD FRIDAY MESSAGES

Here Is Love - Rom. 5:8

One of the core messages of the Bible is that God loves us! Ever since we were little children, we have sung it, *Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so!* God has shown us that love in so many ways. We can see evidence of His love all around us. Every good and perfect thing that we enjoy in life is a gift from His hand. The beauty of the creation that He prepared for us to inhabit, the satisfaction we feel as we eat our daily bread which He provided, the warmth and peace that comes to us through relationships with friends and family, the joy of being loved by another in marriage and by children or parents, all these things are reflections of His love to us. But if we had to pick one place that most clearly demonstrates how great God's love for us is, one thing that would say, "HERE is love!", we would have to point to Calvary. We have also repeated that since we were children, *For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.* God gave His only Son for us; that's how much He loves us! Jesus gave His very life for us; that's how much He loves us! There is no greater love than to die for someone, right? And yet the world is full of stories of real people who love someone enough to die for them, who sacrifice their lives so that others may live. *In Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania, you can find the grave of a celebrated soldier. The stone bears these words: "Abraham Lincoln's substitute." Amidst the anguish of the conflict of America's Civil War, the President had chosen to honor this man as his personal representative or substitute, making him a symbol of the fact that those who perished in the battle were dying that others might live!* This very day there are American soldiers who are willing to die for me. We honor that. We understand that. Paul put it like this in Rom. 5:7, *Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die.* Sure, most people would rather save their own necks, but there are those occasions when people will die for others they love. Why? Because they are good or they are innocent or they mean something to us. Dying for someone else is surely a great show of love, but it is not THE ULTIMATE demonstration of love.

Turn with me to **Romans 5:8**. Of all the verses in the Bible that describe or extol or command us to love, there is one verse in the Bible where God spells out the ultimate degree of love, one verse where God says, "HERE is love!"

God demonstrates his own love for us in <u>this</u> *[in this particular specific thing],* ***<u>While we were still sinners</u>, Christ died for us***. The defining factor in the great love of God is that this tremendous ultimate sacrifice of His Son was made for those who absolutely did not deserve it! The biggest reason we often fail to appreciate the depth of God's love is that we don't truly realize who we used to be. Three times, Paul explains himself in these verses; in the end of verse 6 he says:

1. Christ died for the ungodly Now what does ungodly mean? Ungodly means *destitute of any reverential awe toward God*. No reverence for Him; no fear of Him. No desire to please Him and no care whether they please Him or not. No regard for Him. That's what ungodly is! And WHO are the ungodly? Read the first half of verse 6, *When <u>we</u> were still powerless*... WE were! WE came into this world without any reverential awe toward God, without any regard for Him. And any little bit of that which we did get, we got from our parents or somebody else drilling it into us; we weren't born that way! We were born spiritually dead, with a nature, a spirit, that was utterly separated from God, not inclined toward Him, but inclined away from Him. Left to ourselves, we were completely helpless; there was no power in us to do anything about it. We would have wound up as utterly separated from God as you can get. Then Paul goes on to say in verse 8:

2. Christ died for sinners What are sinners? They are not poor, unfortunate people who make mistakes; they are not people who try hard to hit the mark, but fail and fall short; they are people who aim at the wrong target! They are criminals, lawbreakers, persons who deliberately violate God's standard of perfect holiness and deserve to be punished eternally for it! And WHO are these sinners? Verse 8 says, *WE WERE still sinners*! We're not anymore; we are saints now, because the Holy Spirit came in and gave us a new spirit when we believed and made us holy. But we were! We stood convicted felons on death row, as it were, in violation of God's holy and pure law. It does not matter that we did not do things that in our eyes were as bad as those someone else has done. Evil is evil and out of our evil hearts, we did evil things, things that violated the very nature of God. In fact, the third thing Paul goes on to say in verse 10 is:

3. Christ died for God's enemies You know what enemies are. People who are against you, who hate you and oppose you and want to do you harm. God has enemies, people who are against Him and want to overthrow Him, rebels who say in their hearts, "He shall not reign over us!" And WHO are these enemies? Verse 10 says, *when WE WERE God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son*. We're not anymore; we are now His friends. We are even His children. But we were! We were traitors to our very Creator. We were rebels going our own way and doing what we wanted, resisting any hint of Him ruling our lives.

Friends, HERE IS LOVE! While we were ungodly, while we were enemies of God, while we were still convicted sinners, while there was not one shred of anything in us that would deserve it, Christ DIED for us anyway and then He rose again to give us His own eternal life! In Ephesians 2, Paul says it like this, *As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions--it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.* In other words, one day God is going to hold us up before a watching universe and say, "HERE is love; look how I LOVED <u>THESE</u>!"

There is an old gospel song written by a preacher and songwriter named Scott Lawrence. As a young man Lawrence fell more and more deeply into addiction and eventually became a skid-row derelict. A Christian worker who was full of love tried to deal with him, even though he was in a complete stupor because of drugs and alcohol. Just before he gave up his effort to explain the gospel to him, the man bent over and whispered directly into his ear, "Jesus who died upon the cross loves you and wants you to be saved!" The Holy Spirit began to work in Lawrence's heart, and when he finally came out of his drunken condition, that word of hope remained indelibly impressed upon his mind. Eventually, he gave his life to Jesus Christ and he wrote a song to tell the story. It was called, "Somebody Whispered That Jesus Loves Me." And the words go like this: "One day in sin I was told of a love, Coming from One who is reigning above, Gladly I listened, 'twas music to me, To know, though a sinner, that I could be free. Somebody whispered that Jesus loves me, Jesus who died upon Calvary's tree, Said He would save me, from sin set me free, Somebody whispered that Jesus loves me." Beloved, we were ALL "Scott Lawrences". We were on greased skids sliding toward hell. But HERE IS LOVE Jesus died and rose again to save US. And when somebody whispered that message to us one day, we came out of our blind stupor, received His love and were made the very children of God.

Lessons From A Dying Thief – LK. 23:39-43

I don't think there's anything that can move our emotions and help us really feel in our hearts the meaning of things we know in our heads quite like music. The second stanza of William Cowper's beautiful hymn about the death of Christ, "There is a Fountain Filled With Blood", says this, "The dying thief rejoiced to see that fountain in his day, and there may I, though vile as he, wash all my sins away." There was a man who died on a cross beside Jesus. Matthew calls him a thief. Luke calls him a criminal, literally "a doer of evil", one who was being executed for his crimes. And this vile man received

eternal life from Jesus. What I want to say to you is that his story is our story too. It's found in Lk. 23:39-43. And because his story is our story, there are three lessons this dying thief can remind us of. First:

I. He acknowledged his own sin He admitted that he deserved to die, that he deserved to be punished for his sins. Good Friday is a time to remind ourselves of what the hymn puts so simply, "There may I though vile as he". It's so very easy as we look around us to compare ourselves to others and feel pretty good about ourselves and forget why Jesus died for us. The Bible reminds us clearly that:

1. we were sinners - Rom. 5:8, *While we were still SINNERS Christ died for us.* The Greek word used is *hamartia* which means they missed God's mark; our deeds failed to meet the standards of God. This man was a thief. He deliberately violated the standards of God and broke the commands of God. And we have done the same. Time after time we have done that which God said not to do. We have hated and lied and lusted and stolen and hurt people, every one of us.

2. we were unrighteous - 1 Pet. 3:18 tells us that, *Christ died for the UNRIGHTEOUS.* The Greek word is *adikos* which means unjust; our character was opposite of the character of God. This thief was not a good man who simply did bad things sometimes. He was a bad man who perhaps did good things sometimes! We were not good people, not people who were basically right! We are people with sin bound up in our hearts and nothing in all this world can drive it from us.

3. we were ungodly - Rom. 5:6 tells us, *Christ died for the ungodly*. The Greek word is *asebia* which means without worship; we did not love the person of God. This thief was not a bad man who simply couldn't help himself, who really underneath it all loved God, but was simply driven by his sin nature to be evil. The fact is that we don't love God on our own. Unless He does something in our hearts, we don't care about Him, don't worship Him and yield ourselves to Him. We are His enemies; we are apart from Him! The miracle of the cross is that Christ didn't die for us because we deserved it, because there was something in us worth saving, because we were poor innocent victims of our human circumstances. The hymn says, "Guilty, vile, and helpless we...Hallelujah, what a Savior!" Good Friday is a time when we need, like the thief, to acknowledge that. The second lesson from the thief is that:

II. He acknowledged Jesus' innocence He said that Jesus had done nothing wrong, nothing to deserve the punishment He was getting. Everything we weren't, He was. The Bible tells us that when He died:

1. He was without sin - 2 Cor. 5:21, *God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us.* Not once in 33 years did He miss God's standard of behavior. Not one evil thought, not one careless word. He was totally and completely innocent. They could find no fault in Him, no witness to accuse Him of anything but speaking the truth.

2. He was righteous There was no sin nature in Him. His character was fully that of God. 1 Pet. 3:18 says He died, *the Righteous for the unrighteous.* He was good, He was just, He was pure, He was holy. He was God!

3. He was godly He loved the Father; He always sought and obeyed the Father's will. In fact, He was one with the Father in everything He did. You see, the death He died, He died for us! It was not His death; it was our death! It was not His cross; it was my cross. "Guilty, vile and helpless we, spotless Lamb of God was He, Hallelujah what a Savior!" And here's the best lesson we learn from that thief:

III. He received eternal life A thief, a no-good criminal, was granted entrance to the presence of God. Look at the great exchange that took place for us the moment we did what the thief did by receiving Jesus. First:

1. we die to sin - 1 Pet. 2:24, *He bore our sins so that we might die TO sin and live for righteousness*. He put a power in us, His power, a power that is so strong that it can keep us from sinning. The hold, the grip that sin had over our deeds, is broken. Now we can do the things God wants us to do! Then:

2. we receive His righteousness - 2 Cor. 5:21, *God made Him to be sin for us so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.* God declares us righteous, pure, holy, because He sees us as being in Jesus Christ. We are counted before God as being Christ Himself, righteous and good and acceptable, though in ourselves we are not. And then:

3. we are brought to God - 1 Pet. 3:18, *Christ died for sins...to bring you to God!* The wall is gone. It's broken down. You are no longer God's enemy; you are His child. There is nothing between. You who were once far off have now been brought near by the blood of Christ and have full access into His presence.

Yes, for us it is "Good Friday". "The dying thief rejoiced to see that fountain in his day". Oh, the great joy that must have been his when Jesus said, *Today you'll be with me in paradise! Charlotte Elliot came to Caesar Milan and asked how she could become a Christian. The old man replied, "My dear, it is very simple, you have only to come to Jesus." She said "But I am a very great sinner; will He take me just as I am?" He replied "Yes, He will take you just as you are and no other way." She said, "If He will take me just as I am, then I will come" and she went home and sat down at her desk and wrote*

the beautiful words to the hymn, "Just as I am, without one plea, O Lamb of God, I come!" Like her and like the thief, what joy we have, because we know that Jesus died for us and we have been accepted by God just as we are and have eternal life.

The Centrality Of The Cross

If I were to ask you what the most universal symbol or emblem of Christianity is, you would all immediately say, *the cross*. We wear crosses around our necks and on our earrings. We hang them in our churches. We Protestants composed so many hymns about the cross, while Catholics trace the sign of the sign of the cross over their own bodies whenever they come into a sanctuary. The symbol and the mention of the cross has become so ordinary to us that we forget that it was not always so. The early Christians regarded the cross as an instrument of terror and death. Thousands of believers died on crosses under the brutal hand of Rome. It was the common means of public execution for criminals, so in those days one would no more think about a cross as a positive symbol than we would of an electric chair or a hangman's noose now. It was only after the conversion of the Roman Emperor Constantine in 313 AD that the cross first came into use as an emblem of Christianity. On the eve of a critical battle in which victory would declare him the sole Emperor of the Republic and defeat would mean death, he was praying for Divine help and though he himself had been an idolater, he decided to reach out to the God of his father, who evidently was a believer. *He said that about noon, when the day was already beginning to decline, he saw with his own eyes the sign of a cross of light in the heavens, above the sun, and bearing the Latin inscription* "*In hoc signo vinces", "By this symbol you will conquer." He was struck with amazement by the sight, and his whole army witnessed the miracle. [Eusebieus, 28]* That very night, he claimed that Christ himself appeared and ordered him to take for his standard the sign of this cross. And so, a new standard or flag incorporating the cross, called the Labarum, was made, and borne by the Roman armies till the downfall of the Western empire. By that experience the symbol of the cross became the central emblem of Christianity for all time. God transformed that horrible symbol of pain and suffering into the most precious symbol we have of our faith, because the death of Jesus Christ, which it represents, is central to all of human history, it is central to our salvation as followers of Christ and it is central to our personal lives. Without the Cross of Jesus, there is no Christianity, there is no salvation and there is no purpose for our lives. So today we're going to examine what the Bible has to say about the cross and the first thing it declares is that:

I. The Cross Is Central To The Plan And Purpose Of God From God's perspective, all of history from the very beginning looked forward to the Cross. Everything anticipated and led up to it. All of the law prepared people for it, all the sacrifices pointed forward to it, and the whole of the prophets looked forward to it. On the other hand, all of history since that time looks back to the Cross. The mission of the Church is rooted in the Cross and the Kingdom will ultimately come because of it. The Bible mentions three things that declare just how vital the cross is to the plan and purpose of God in history. First:

1. God reconciled everything to Himself through the Cross - Col. 1:19-20, *For God in all his fullness was pleased to live in Christ, and through him God reconciled everything to himself. He made peace with everything in heaven and on earth by means of Christ's blood on the cross.* When sin came into the world through Adam and Eve, the entire world and everything in it was affected at its very core. It was thrown into disharmony and felt the effects of the curse. The ground brought forth thorns and thistles and only by the sweat of his brow, by hard labor, could man get it to produce the wonderful good things that it did in the Garden so easily. The animals who once were docile and let Adam name them now bite and devour one another with tooth and claw, so that only the fittest survive. Human beings, originally pure and sinless, now come into the world, every last one, as sinners, with a nature inside that is bent on sin and self. How could you possibly fix all of that? How could you restore it to harmony and put it back into the relationship that God created it to have with Himself and within its own self? Well, I saw a poster once that said, "Some people use duct tape to fix everything; God used nails!" God used the Cross! The death of His Son on the Cross reconciled all things to Himself. It is because of the Cross, that one day the desert will blossom like a rose. Because of the Cross, the lion will lie down with the lamb and the little child will play on the serpent's den. Because of the Cross, mankind one day will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruninghooks and never learn war anymore. And keep reading in verses **21-22**, *This includes you who were once far away from God. You were his enemies, separated from him by your evil thoughts and actions. Yet now he has reconciled you to himself through the death of Christ in his physical body. As a result, he has brought you into his own presence, and you are holy and blameless as you stand before him without a single fault.* Because of the Cross, we who were alienated from God through sin have been reconciled to Him and made holy and brought into His very presence, without blemish or accusation. And Romans 8 says the whole of creation is groaning in labor and waiting with anticipation for the day when God displays us in His glory, so it too can be set free. We will see in the end of history all things restored, because they were reconciled at the Cross! Second:

2. God destroyed the barriers which separate people through the Cross - Eph. 2:14-16, *For Christ himself has brought peace to us. He united Jews and Gentiles into one people when, in his own body on the cross, he broke down the wall of hostility that separated us. He did this by ending the system of law with its commandments and regulations. He made peace between Jews and Gentiles by creating in himself one new people from the two groups. Together as one body, Christ reconciled both groups to God by means of his death on the cross, and our hostility toward each other was put to death.* Did you see that? He put hostility to death through the cross. One of the effects of sin has

always been hostility and division between people. Ever since Abraham, the division had been between Jew and Gentile, but instead of the Jews, who had knowledge of the true God, reaching out and including the Gentiles and drawing them to Him as He intended, they built an attitude of superiority and a dividing wall of hostility against them. They hated and despised the Gentiles and that attitude was pretty much returned in kind! But, surprise! When Jew OR Gentile came to the Cross, what did they find? The hostility is all gone and now Gal. 3:28 says, *There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.* Through the cross, all the hostilities and differences between us melt away and we find ourselves one with people of every nation. And when you read in the end of the book and you see around the throne of God people from every tribe, tongue and nation, all worshipping and singing as one in complete harmony, what caused that? The Cross! All our hostility was nailed to it! Third:

3. God publicly defeated all the hosts of evil through the Cross - Col. 2:15, *In this way, he disarmed the spiritual rulers and authorities. He shamed them publicly by his victory over them on the cross.* From before creation God has had a deadly enemy. His chief angel, Lucifer, mounted a rebellion against him that enveloped a third of the heavenly host. And from the moment God created this world and called it good, Satan and his demons have entered it to spoil it. He entered the garden to entice man to sin against God and brought death upon the human race. Through this initial fall, he worked hard to build a world system that insulates human beings from the knowledge of God and enslaves them to worship him through their fear of death. From the moment Jesus entered the world at Bethlehem, the Enemy tried to destroy him through the slaughter of the infants. He tempted him with all the powers at his disposal in the desert and tempted Him to choose His own will in the Garden, but Jesus would not sin. So, Satan moved the Jews and Romans alike to arrest Him and at last, to condemn Him to die a horrible death, even death on a cross! But what Satan didn't realize was that as they drove those nails into His hands and feet and hung Him up to die, that through that very death He would, ...*destroy him who holds the power of death--that is, the devil-- and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. - Heb. 2:14-15.* The cross destroyed Satan's plan and sealed his doom. It stripped him of all his power to claim the victims of humanity. The agony of the cross was infinite and the three hours of darkness in the land bore testimony to it, but when Jesus lifted His head and cried out with a loud voice, "It is FINISHED!" it meant something Satan never figured on. "SATAN, YOU ARE FINISHED! YOU ARE VANQUISHED! I HAVE WON! The sins of men are paid for, they are redeemed, they are mine! And you can guard the tomb with a whole battalion of Roman soldiers if you want, but when you look in, I won't be there, because death can't hold Me. I WIN! Now I have the Keys of Hell and Death!" On the cross, Jesus stripped his ancient adversary of all his power and made it a public spectacle for all the world to see His triumph. And to this day, we look at the cross and know Who has won! Hallelujah!

Now not only is the cross central to the plan and purpose of God in history:

II. The Cross Is Central To Our Salvation - 1 Cor. 1:18 says, *The message of the cross is foolish to those who are headed for destruction! But we who are being saved know it is the very power of God.* The story of the Cross is ridiculous to the world. It makes no sense. They laugh at how the death of a man on a cross 2,000 years ago could possibly mean anything for us today. Yet we realize that it is through the Cross and the Cross alone that our entire salvation was procured:

1. we were redeemed from the penalty of the law through the Cross - Col. 2:14, *He canceled the record of the charges against us and took it away by nailing it to the cross.* The law of God can be summed up in what God told Adam, "If you eat it you will die!" God repeated it twice through Ezekiel, "The soul that sins; it shall die!" Romans tells us that death passed upon all men because all sinned. The justice of God demands the punishment of sin. The law stood against us; it accused us. It said, "Death! Eternal death." But Jesus fixed that; He nailed it to the cross. **Gal. 3:13**, B*ut Christ has rescued us from the curse pronounced by the law. When he was hung on the cross, he took upon himself the curse for our wrongdoing. For it is written in the Scriptures, "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree."* He redeemed us from the curse and penalty of the law by taking it upon Himself for us at the Cross. *Jim Hislop tells about one day when he awoke earlier than usual and with a heavy heart. He decided to write in his journal, so he turned on his laptop computer. It had been so long since he'd written in his journal that he had forgotten the password to get into that file. He tried everything he could think of, but nothing worked. He finally decided to just create a new file. That seemed appropriate--he felt like he needed a fresh start. As he started writing, he was surprised by what came out. He just poured out his heart--all his frustrations about recent failures, inconsistency in personal disciplines, his problem with anger, pain in certain relationships, unkept promises, and unfulfilled obligations. In no time he had filled a couple of pages. All of a sudden, the computer locked up. He could see what was on the screen, but he could do nothing with it. (You've been there, right?) The only solution was to turn off the computer and reboot. When he did it opened up the file he had been working in, but the screen was blank. Everything he had written was gone. Yet instead of being angry or heartbroken,* like I am when that happens to me*, in that moment he felt the burden of his heart lift. He saw the forgiving grace of God in a new light. "I realized that God's computer screen of my life showed only the blood-stained cross--the cross to which all of my failures, all of my inconsistencies, all of my inappropriate anger were nailed." [News of Interest, Oct 1996. Page 1.]* The penalty for everything we've ever done was nailed to that cross in Him. It's taken away and our slate is clean. Amen? Then:

2. we were delivered from the power of sin and given a new way to live through the cross - 1 Pet. 2:24, *He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.* The purpose of Him bearing our sins on the Cross is to produce in us His righteousness! Now, how is that going to happen. Even if all my sins to this minute are forgiven and cleared away and I start out with a fresh resolve not to sin, I still will. Something has to be done, not just about the penalty of sin but about its power, so that I will live for righteousness. And it was! **Rom. 6:6**, *For we know that our old self was crucified with Him in order that sin's dominion over the body may be abolished, so that we may no longer be enslaved to sin*. Oh, listen to it. On that cross another great transaction took place. When He was nailed to that cross, so was I. It was made true of me the moment I believed. I was placed into Him by the Spirit of God and His life became my life, so that what happened to Him happened to me. I was crucified with Him. What part of me? The old part, the old self, the sinful part, the sin nature, call it what you want, but that old self that was saturated and enslaved to the power of the force of sin died with Him on the cross and a new self was created in me, so that now I am free! I no longer have to be a slave to sin. I can choose to if I want, but there is no power on earth that can make me sin, because the old me was crucified there! I'm a brand-new person because of the cross. And so:

3. we were given a new way to live through the Cross - Gal. 2:20, *My old self has been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. So I live in this earthly body by trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.* Because the old me was nailed to the cross and now Christ is in me, I have a new way to live. It is not me, but Him that lives the life out through me, as long as I trust Him to do it! As long as I cry out, "Jesus, love that person through me! Jesus, strengthen me to do this difficult thing! Jesus, help me bear this sorrow!", the power of Jesus who is living in me will do it! The cross made a whole new way of living possible for me, a Christ-life instead of a self-life, a crucified life, a "yet not I, but Christ" life of victory and holiness and purity!

So, our salvation in all its fullness was accomplished from first to last through the cross. Therefore, it almost goes without saying that:

III. The Cross Should Impact Our Daily Lives It should be in our minds and before our eyes constantly. The Scripture says that:

1. our sole purpose should be to share the message of the Cross - 1 Cor. 2:1-2, *When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.* Paul told the Corinthians, "When I got to Corinth, I didn't come with some fancy philosophy and elegant pulpit rhetoric. I didn't come waving impressive credentials and using high-sounding words. My life is not about that. I made up my mind before I ever got there that I would just do one simple thing: I would tell you about the Cross and the One who died on it!" If the cross is the power of God that saves everyone who believes, then sharing it with others should be our sole purpose! If the cross is the center of God's plan and purpose for all history and if it's the act on which our whole salvation centers, then it would seem to me that we have only one purpose in life, to point people to the cross, to tell them how they can come to the cross and find Jesus and find forgiveness and find a new power to live! Because of the cross, we have a purpose in life, a purpose that makes a difference, a purpose that matters, that changes the eternal destiny of people! And finally:

2. the Cross is the only thing in which we should glory - Gal. 6:14, *As for me, may I never boast about anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. Because of that cross, my interest in this world has been crucified, and the world's interest in me has also died.* God forbid that anything else should matter that deeply to my heart, once I know what's been done for me on the cross! God forbid that I should run after all the things that this world has to offer and pursue selfish pleasure and pride and success and money and all the things everybody else in the culture around me runs after. The cross makes me dead to the lure of the world; having come to the Cross and knowing Jesus, all of that no longer appeals to me; it has nothing in which I could boast or glory. I glory in the cross and the cross alone!

I was watching a church program on TV and during his message, the pastor showed a clip of a man named Evel Knievel giving a public testimony. For those of you who are too young to remember him, Evel Knievel was America's daredevil motorcycle jumper. From 1965 to 1980 he made more than 75 ramp to ramp motorcycle jumps over things like 12 cars, then 16 cars and eventually 18 cars, the fountains at Caesar's Palace, 13 Pepsi trucks, 13 single decker buses, 50 piled cars, and ultimately, the Snake River Canyon in Idaho. He had a lot of crashes and a lot of broken bones, but ultimately his fame made him a lot of money. But in April of 2007 he appeared as a guest on the Hour of Power program and here's a summary of what I heard him say in this clip I saw: *I don't know how it happened, I can't explain it, but the Presence of God came all over me and I believed in God and in Jesus Christ. It was a miracle. I was changed. I went out on the balcony of my hotel room and I told the devil, "Devil, you so and so [he actually cursed at the devil], get out of my life! And I took my two arms and symbolically threw him off the balcony and down to the beach! I got a Bible, one of those ones with words underneath to help explain it. Listen, I was a sinner and I mean a sinner, not like you folks, but a REAL sinner. I had it all, money, women, whatever. I had five Rolls Royces and five Ferraris. I had two private jet planes. I flew them side by side at 30,000 feet so I could see my name on the side of the other one! I had everything in this world, but I want to tell you today that if you don't have Jesus Christ, you don't have anything! And I want to tell you this, if you don't believe in Jesus Christ as your Savior, you will die in your sins! That's for sure! [Hour of Power broadcast 3/21/21].* Eight months later, Evel Knievel died with a worn out, abused body, but with a transformed spirit and life. Of all the fame and wealth that

meant so much to him before, the only thing that mattered any longer was Jesus. The Cross changed his life. The Cross changed my life. Hopefully the Cross has changed your life. Make sharing it the purpose of your life and be sure to glory in nothing else but the Cross.

They Flogged Him - John 19:1

One of the reasons that I believe we have Good Friday services is that we are all subject to what I would call "desensitization". When we see something often enough, or hear it or read it often enough, we gradually become desensitized to it emotionally. It doesn't impact us anymore the way that it did at first. I'm sure that we have all read and heard the story of the crucifixion of our Savior literally hundreds, if not thousands, of times. The grave danger is that the depth of the suffering that Jesus endured becomes lost on us; we hear the words, but they no longer touch our hearts deeply. They are old news. So, on Good Friday we do our best to re-focus our hearts and minds on the true meaning of the horrific things that happened on that awful day, so that we might love our Savior more deeply as our hearts are more deeply touched by the enormity of His immense love for us. Today I'd like us to focus on just one small aspect of that day which is passed over so quickly with a simple word in John 19:1, *Then Pilate took Jesus and flogged him.* "They flogged Him". Another word that means the same thing is, "They scourged Him." It is so simple to say, yet it has so little meaning to us. It seems almost innocuous. We have never experienced the horror of watching someone be flogged and we certainly haven't ever been flogged or flogged someone else. So let me just share with you three things about it. First of all:

I. Flogging is a public punishment The public whipping of criminals who had violated the law has been practiced in most of the societies of the world from ancient Egypt down to England in the 1800's and it is still practiced in countries under Islamic law today. It was done publicly because it was a means of shaming the violator; it humiliated him and exposed him to public scorn for his behavior, as the onlookers watched approvingly. The humiliation was made even deeper because the victim was usually stripped of his clothing, with the exception of something to cover his loins, so that the whip strokes fell upon his bare back. Further, his hands were always tied to a post so that he was bent over, or to a pole so that he was stretched out for the lash and thus, he was reduced to helplessness. He couldn't move to avoid the stripes and there was nothing he could do to defend himself against them. He was no longer a man who could fight in his own defense; he was essentially reduced to being a faceless object upon whom others were venting the wrath of the society and even taking pleasure in it. The Jews realized the dehumanizing nature of this punishment; God had limited it in Deuteronomy 40:3, saying, *Forty stripes may be given him, but not more, lest, if one should go on to beat him with more stripes than these, your brother be degraded in your sight.* So, being careful not to violate the law, by Jesus' day the Jewish leaders had limited flogging to 39 lashes and the Apostle Paul reports, *Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one.* But the Romans had no such limit of compassion. Even though Roman citizens were not to be flogged, they often beat criminals mercilessly, over and over, until they grew tired of it. Do you understand that when they flogged Him, Jesus endured great humiliation for you? He was whipped as a criminal and a lawbreaker, stripped naked and beaten as an object of scorn? Is. 53:3-4 prophetically details the reaction of those who watched Him as He suffered, *He was despised and rejected— a man of sorrows, acquainted with deepest grief. We turned our backs on him and looked the other way. He was despised, and we did not care... we thought his troubles were a punishment from God, a punishment for his own sins*! And even though Jesus was holy and even though He was mighty, He chose to endure that awful humiliation to save you and I. Secondly, flogging is not only a public punishment:

II. Flogging is a painful punishment While beating with rods was common for lesser offenses, the Romans typically used a *flagellum*. It was a leather whip composed of at least three strands, each several feet long, to which were tied pieces of bone or metal. It was not designed to leave welts on the back; it was designed to lacerate, to tear flesh. As the two *lictors* stood on either side and levied their strokes in turn, the skin of the back and loins was torn off bit by bit and then the flesh. In severe cases, this sometimes continued until bones and blood vessels and even internal organs were exposed to view. I would suppose that it would be normal for victims to scream in agony and to eventually lose consciousness, especially because of the huge loss of blood. I remember going a few years ago to see the movie, *The Passion of the Christ*, when it first came out. The central focal point of that whole film seemed to me to be the flogging of Jesus. And it seemed to bring home to many in the theater, for the first time, what a painful punishment Christ endured. At the end of the movie, there was no applause or even talking; everyone left in silence and many heads were lowered. No wonder Isaiah says, *...many were amazed when they saw him. His face was so disfigured he seemed hardly human, and from his appearance, one would scarcely know he was a man... But he was pierced for our rebellion, crushed for our sins. He was beaten so we could be whole. He was whipped so we could be healed. - Is. 52:14, 53:5*. Do you understand that Jesus endured excruciating pain, pain beyond our wildest comprehension, in His physical body, all because of your sins and mine so that we might be redeemed? But not only is flogging a public punishment and a painful punishment:

III. Flogging is the prelude to capital punishment The Romans had three levels of punishment by whipping. The lightest was called *fustigatio*, a beating for ordinary crimes. The next was called *flagellatio*, a flogging for more serious crimes. But the third, *verberatio*, which means a severe flogging or scourging such as Jesus received, was actually a part of the sentence of capital punishment, a preliminary portion of the death sentence, and intended as a prelude to crucifixion. The centurion would only stop the *lictors* when the victim was near death, so on numerous occasions, the victim would actually

die on the post or before they got to the crucifixion, even though it was not supposed to be that way. Scourging was often referred to as “the half death”, the first half of the process of dying. According to John, Pilate had Jesus flogged after his first interaction with the crowd where they cried for His blood, and then brought Him out to them again, thinking that seeing Him humiliated in a purple robe and crowned with thorns, standing there half dead and covered with blood, would satisfy their anger and allow him to release Jesus. But it did not. They cried out for the process to be finished and so the second half of His death began as He marched out of the city to Golgotha, carrying His cross on the open wounds of His back, to suffer still more and die at last. My point is that when we talk about the crucifixion of Jesus or Jesus enduring the cross for us, we are not merely talking about the piece of wood to which He was nailed, nor merely about the six hours He spent hanging there; we are talking about the whole experience of His dying which began when they flogged Him and ended when He bowed His head and gave up His Spirit at last. A few years ago, a Wycliffe Bible Translators team in Papua New Guinea was working on the translation of the New Testament into the Folopa language, together with their native language helpers. They report, *...one day, we became mired down in a passage in Mark 10 where Jesus predicted what was about to happen to Him. "...the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise." (Mark 10:33-34). We were stuck. I didn't have a word for "flog." "What do you call it," I asked, "if someone hits another, say an enemy, with something like a rope?" That drew a blank. Apparently hitting someone with a rope was nothing that sounded familiar to them. But it was about to happen to Jesus and it was part of the passage, so I cast about for other ways to describe it. My eyes fell on a piece of rattan vine left over from tying the thatch on the roof. It was lying on the old woodstove. The vine was about three feet long and as thick as my little finger. I picked it up, and instructed the men to imagine the vine was a piece of rope and the woodstove was the back of Jesus. Then with all my might I started beating the iron stovetop. Immediately, Owarape Ali--his eyes wild and his nostrils flaring--shouted out: "That's not hitting with a rope, that's fokoso sirapo!" He was indignant, staring up at me from his place on the floor. Fokoso sirapo. I wrote the words down. "Tell me more about it," I said. But when I looked up, they were all just staring at me. It was as if it had taken them right back to the old days of revenge and bloodshed in their culture. "Wait a minute," someone said. "Do you mean they did that to Jesus? But here He just said they were going to do it. Did they really do it to Him?" Quiet fell on the room as I answered, "Yes." Finally, Eleke Whi Ali said, "We used to do that. But we only did it to our enemies, and then just before we were going to kill them." "Yes," I said, "that is coming, too." They hung their heads. In the corners, the large shell earrings of the old men swung back and forth in stunned sadness. The memory of fokoso sirapo "floggings" was too fresh in their minds. They were seeing a deeper vision of the awful cruelty--the enormity of it all--than I had ever understood. And that this would happen to Jesus, someone they had grown to respect and like. He was a Man who would put little children on His lap, who would reach out and heal those in need. These men knew what torturing and flogging were all about. That this Jesus would come to suffer like this was too much to take in. We had to stop work for the morning. They couldn't go on. [The Lamb of God - Wycliffe Bible Translators – Feb. 2007].*

That’s what’s supposed to happen today. On Good Friday, we’re supposed to recapture a deeper vision of the awful cruelty that Jesus endured for us, that Jesus, the perfect, sinless, loving, healing, compassionate, Son of God would be humiliated as a criminal, beaten painfully until He was nearly dead, and led off to be nailed to a cross. That Jesus came to suffer like this is too much to take in; it should fill us with sadness, but also with tremendous love and gratitude, so much so that we cannot just go on about our lives as normal. We have to pause, to let ourselves feel it and come humbly before Him with a renewed sense of awe and love. Beloved, they flogged Him - for us! Let us love Him with all our hearts and lay down our lives to follow Him.

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