



# **The Really Good Stuff**

**Devotions from the Gospel of John**

# **Table of Contents**

- 1. All Truth**
- 2. Let's Get it Straight**
- 3. Gim'me the Good Stuff!**
- 4. The Appeal of Zeal**
- 5. Ready?**
- 6. Look On Him and Live!**
- 7. Happy Hour**
- 8. The Second Sign**
- 9. Splash! Grumble, Grumble**
- 10. Out on a Limb?**
- 11. Open Book**
- 12. All Muddied Up**
- 13. Life and Love**
- 14. What's the 'Diff'?**
- 15. X-treme Faith**
- 16. Death of the Debt Collector**
- 17. Wrong Questions, Right Answer**
- 18. The Pastor Posture**

# *All Truth*

*(See John 1)*

Inch by excruciating inch, he painfully chipped away with his tiny spoon at the solid rock wall. Hour after day after week after month...for eight years, he desperately tunneled his way toward freedom beneath the dungeon chambers of the Chateau d'If fortress only to fail and narrowly evade a disastrous cave-in. However, when his only friend, a priest, dies in the accident, he trades places with the corpse and thus makes an escape from the island prison after he is thrown into the ocean.

If you've seen the movie or read the book, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, you know that although he escaped the bondage of his cell, the Count was still imprisoned with passionate hatred.

And thus is humanity – imprisoned. This planet is a 'Chateau d'If', if you would, amidst the cosmos and here mankind toils, scrapes and chips away at the meagerness of its existence, hoping to find escape. Chipping away at their jobs, scraping at school, scheming for power, position and/or pleasure, hoping for escape from the dungeon of life's vanity, to find answers, to fill a void within – hour after day after week after month...

Festering with suffering, hatred, death and every foul intention imaginable, it's a brutal place, this prison. And what worsens it -- the 'jailer' takes pleasure by inflicting pain on the inmates as well as duping them into endless pointless pursuits. Meanwhile, he assures them there's no escape from this cosmic Alcatraz.

But that's not true.

***For there is a key, an opening of the prison door, a freedom sublime and sure.***

Yet understand, to have it can mean failure, disgrace, suffering, even death (John 16:33, 2 Tim 3:12). It can mean a humiliation which to many is abhorrent (1 Pet 5:5,6; Jam 4:10). To have it means realizing you're "undone" (Isa 6:5), (that's Bible-talk for a real mess, totally un-cool), that you're flat out sinful, destitute of redeeming virtue. It means accepting that you can't dig your own way out to freedom.

"Hold it!" you say. "I'm not that bad." (chip, chip, scrape, scrape)  
"I mean I help people and do good things." (chip, chip) "I go to church and even counsel other people." (scrape, scrape) "Hey, ...are you trying to ruin my self esteem?" (chip, scrape...chip, scrape)

OK, you just keep digging.

But there is a key, an opening of the prison door, a freedom sublime and sure.

As with the Count of Monte Cristo, it involves a death and a trading of places. It involves a baptism, an emersion. Many of you understand Jesus Christ died in your place. And now, if you believe in that and that He rose from the dead, you know that you get to lay your own life down (1 John 3:16), to die daily to your self-interests (1 Cor 15:31) and to be buried with Him in baptism (Col 2:11,12).

Satan says that's fanatical and unnecessary. However, Satan, sin and self are all great deceivers. Jesus said concerning the devil, "He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources for he is a liar and the father of it." (John 8:44) And so, Satan has no key. Though a jailer of sorts, he is the most desperate prisoner of all. His lies, doubts and seducements are all designed to deceive.

But truth is the key. Spoken by God, it is totally pure.

Look around. You'll notice that we live in the age of deceit. People just can't dig out. Paul wrote, "But evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving, and being deceived." (2 Tim 3:13) As you observe today's communication environment, it is steeped in deception.

"Wait a minute, John. That's a bit extreme, don't you think?" you may say. "I mean, I think Wolf Blitzer, Dan Rather, and the 'guys' are quite objective – they even say so themselves." Surely not all we hear from the media is deceptive.

Please understand, I'm not saying that these folks are trying to deceive – rather that their communications are inherently biased and thus they fall short of objective truth. They want you to hear the 'story' the way they understand it and to thus form your perspective. I'm not dissing them -- the issue is that our mutual human condition causes us to nest the 'truth' in subjectivity.

Here are two points to consider concerning deception: first, by definition, deception appears truthful, and second, motive makes a

difference. That is, a true statement made with any motive other than God's is inherently a false witness. You may think those are overly radical statements, but hear me out.

Satan knows that if a lie did not appear truthful, it would fool no one and be useless to the liar. This isn't confined to the used car lot – it's the principle behind modern advertising and media programming – to deceive and manipulate. It is the principle behind politics, the principle behind cults and false religions, and it is even the principle behind way too many interpersonal relationships. What may look true can really be a sham.

Concerning motive, you may recall that when the religious elite of Jesus' day were looking for an excuse to get rid of Him, they found a couple of false witnesses: "...at last two false witnesses came forward and said, "This fellow said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God and to build it in three days.'" And the high priest arose and said to Him, "Do You answer nothing? What is it these men testify against You?"

Now, Jesus had indeed said essentially what these false witnesses reported (see John 2:19-21) so why were they "false witnesses"? Context and Motive. Their motive was to do evil, and what they said was taken out of context.

But by contrast, everything God says is completely true. In fact, here's something God can't do – He can't lie. (Num 23:19) That's not just because He's got all the facts, but also because His character and motive are absolutely pure. If you do a word study in the Old Testament on truth, you'll find that it is strangely linked, when attributed to God, to something else. Between 35 and 40 times truth is partnered with and mentioned subsequent to the Hebrew word – "checed". Now, this word is mostly

translated as “mercy” but is more accurately “**goodness, kindness or faithfulness**”.

That is, God prefaces, if you would, His truth with His goodness, kindness and faithfulness. When truth is given this way, it is “all truth”. (See John 16:13) This is one reason why Jesus could assert that **He was the truth** (see John 14:6)

In fact, the New Testament echoes with the Old on this point when it says that Jesus was “full of grace and truth” (See John 1:14,17). For you see, the Greek word for grace is Charis – which literally means, “**that which affords joy, pleasure, delight; good will, loving-kindness, favour; merciful kindness**”. Jesus was ‘the truth packaged in grace’ so to speak. Like the Father -- perfect, pure motive – always.

Oh, how we need truth! This kind of truth! Not the so-called truth that deceives and then destroys. Not the so-called truth that spews forth from sin-tainted motives. We need Christ’s heavenly truth. It is this truth that sets us free! (John 8:32) It is this truth that sanctifies and sets us apart from the world. (John 17:17,19) It is this truth that purges iniquity. (Pro 16:6) It is this truth that preserves us. (Psa 40:11)

The principle fruit of the Holy Spirit is love (see Gal 5:22) and yet He is repeatedly called by Christ the “Spirit of Truth”. This is why Paul exhorted us to speak the truth in love, in other words, to speak it as God does. (see Eph 4:15) I submit that apart from this, it may not even be truth – at least not from heaven’s perspective.

If we as Christians could just get a handle on this, it would radically change us and the world around us. We are so quick to level people privately and publicly with “truth” and to think we’re justified because

“all I said was the truth...” But if we want to learn the lingo of heaven, we need to understand that Father God’s ‘way’ is goodness, kindness and faithfulness with truth, Christ’s ‘way’ is grace and truth, and the Spirit’s ‘way’ is loving truth. As the psalmist writes, “‘Checed’ and truth are joined together” in God. (Psa 85:10)

Mankind fell through deception, is enslaved and imprisoned by deception and even when saved by grace, can be made ineffective because of deception. Soon, a grand deceiver, the son of perdition, will come on the scene. May we let the Holy Spirit lead us into “all truth” – not just more facts, more data, but into the place where we perceive and speak the truth as God does – with heavenly mindedness.

# Let's Get it Straight

(See John 1)

*“...we should admit it: John was weird. Any man who preached like this, lived in the desert, wore funny clothes and lived on grasshoppers and wild honey was just plain weird. Praise God that Jesus didn't have a "slick" advance man with a thousand dollar suit and a two-hundred dollar haircut; praise God that He uses weird people.”* – David Guzik

But can you identify with John? Do you WANT to identify with John?? Admittedly, my own lack of style in fashion and a diabetic diet (are grasshoppers high in carbs?) lead me to identify a little bit with him in the ‘weird’ category. But we should all identify with his mission. You see, John understood that he was preparing the way before his Lord. He understood his need to point others to Him. And he understood his need to decrease as Jesus increased.

This notion of preparing the way is fascinating! That’s because no one prepares the way for someone they don’t absolutely expect to come. John knew the first coming of the Messiah was at hand. He said, *“I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worth to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy spirit and fire.”* (Mat 3:11) Now, he may have suspected that it was Jesus of whom he spoke for when Christ came to be baptized, John told Him, *“I need to be baptized by You...”* (Mat 3:14) but he testified that he only knew for sure when he later saw the heavens opened and the Holy Spirit descending upon Christ. He said, *“I did not*

*know Him, but He who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'Upon whom you see the Spirit descending, and remaining on Him, this is He who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' And I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God.'"* (John 1:33-35)

In like manner, we have been given a sign preceding the second coming of the Messiah (recall, this is not the same thing as the rapture but follows it) – the budding of the “fig tree”. (See Mat 24:32-34) After describing in detail the events of the last days and tribulation period, Jesus told his disciples, *“Now learn this parable from the fig tree: when its branch has already become tender and puts forth leaves, you know that summer is near. So you also, when you see all these things, know that it is near – at the doors! Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place.”* Now the fig tree has been a type and ‘fig’ure of the nation of Israel in scripture and many if not most conservative Bible scholars agree that the rebirth of the nation Israel in 1948 is clearly its re-budding so to speak after a long dormancy. What is not clear is how long a generation is from a prophetic stand-point.

One well known author proposed in the 1970’s that it was possibly 40 years - most likely based upon the fact that it took 40 years for the older generation in the wilderness to pass away before the children of Israel could take the promised land. If the 40 years began in 1948 (and that’s not an insignificant ‘if’) then the conclusion of the period would have been in 1988 – oops. Now, that suggestion was certainly not made to lead anyone astray but in honest expectation. It was also not made as a prediction though some took it as such.

Personally, I'm inclined to believe that the prophetic number for a generation is 70 years based upon Isa 23:15, Psa 90:10 and the first mention of 70 years in Gen 5:12 separating two generations. I cannot be dogmatic on that however. Other Bible teachers are leaning toward other numbers or are simply unsure. Whatever the case, we have been given a sign as well (see 1 Thes 5:1-9) and should be committed to preparing the way before our Lord. That's because, the lack of this expectation can lead to a life-style unworthy of our Savior. Jesus said, *"But if that evil servant says in his heart, 'My master is delaying his coming,' and begins to beat his fellow servants, and to eat and drink with the drunkards, the master of that servant will come on a day when he is not looking for him and at an hour that he is not aware of, and will cut him in two and appoint him his portion with the hypocrites. There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth."* (Mat 24:48-51)

So how do we prepare the way? All four gospels record the answer (Mat 3:3, Mk 1:3, Lk 3:4,5, Jn 1:23) – straightness. In both the Greek and Hebrew, it means making a way that is straight, true, upright and implies a way that is pleasing. John did this by preaching an uncompromising message of repentance. His behavior may have seemed strange but his message was plain and undiluted. What exactly did he say?

*"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!"* (Mat 3:2) He did not toy around with a 'social gospel' or play to the 'seeker' crowd with an entertaining friendly message. The time was at hand. Many today claim that we are too sophisticated for this kind of message – that it is simply a 'turn-off' and will never win souls to the kingdom. They say we need a 'kinder, gentler' gospel to borrow a contemporary phrase. Hey, the gospel

is kind and gentle to the repentant but it is tough on the rebellious and self-satisfied.

To the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism John said, *“Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not think to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”*

I’ll suggest that some teachers are not giving people ‘all the facts’ such as their absolute need to forsake sin and humble themselves before God. It may be because they are more afraid of the reactions of their audience than they are of their Lord. The religious leaders of John’s time tied their righteous standing before God to their association with Abraham. This led to the assumption that the fruit of their lives was immaterial – a delusion John clearly dashed to pieces. Some folks today are using their ‘association’ with Jesus in the same way. Now, those of you who have followed our writings know that we who are saved are unshakably covered in grace by the atoning blood of Christ. That’s not the issue – bearing fruit in keeping with that salvation is the issue. That’s the straightness our King is looking for – the straight path individually within your heart and corporately within the church.

*“A large part of the church at the present day have the same spirit, and every effort to open the eyes of the church, and to make Christians see that they live so low, so worldly, so much like hypocrites, that it is impossible the work of the Lord should go on, only excites ill will and occasions*

*reproach. "O," they say, "what a bad spirit he shows, so censorious, and so unkind, surely that is any thing but the meek, and kind, and loving spirit of the Son of God." They forget how Jesus Christ poured out his anathemas, enough to make the hills of Judea shake, against those that had the reputation of being the most pious people in that day. Just as if Jesus Christ never said any thing severe to any body, but just fawned over them, and soothed them into his kingdom. Who does not know that it was the hypocritical spirit exhibited by professors of religion, that roused his soul and moved his indignation, and called forth his burning torrents of denunciation. He was always complaining of the very people who were set up as patterns of piety, and called them hypocrites, and thundered over their heads the terrible words, 'HOW CAN YE ESCAPE THE DAMNATION OF HELL!'" – Charles Finney*

Whoa! Finney didn't pull any punches, did he? He would add, *"And let me say to the impenitent sinners present--You see what it is to be a Christian. It is to be governed by the authority of God in all things, and not by public sentiment, to live not by hopes and fears, but by supreme consecration of yourself unto God. You see that if you mean to be religious, you must count the cost. I will not flatter you. I will never try to coax you to become religious, by keeping back the truth. If you mean to be Christians, you must give yourselves wholly up to Christ. You cannot float along to heaven on the waves of public sentiment. I will not deceive you on this point."*

Now, we should revel in the awesomeness of grace – the grace poured out upon us who believe by our immeasurably loving Father. But, too many of us today, including yours truly, can subtly slip into the attitude

that since so-and-so has this or that going on in their life and I know they're a sincere Christian, that it must not be so bad that I'm playing with this sin or that lack of devotion.

*Four preachers met for a friendly gathering. During the conversation one preacher said, "Our people come to us and pour out their hearts, confess certain sins and needs. Let's do the same. Confession is good for the soul." In due time all agreed. One confessed he liked to gamble and would sneak off when away from his church. The second confessed his struggle with lust and the third one confessed to materialism. When it came to the fourth one, he wouldn't confess. The others pressed him saying, "Come now, we confessed ours. What is your secret or vice?" Finally he answered, "It is gossiping and I can hardly wait to get out of here."*

Please hear me on this, neither your pastor nor your elder nor your Christian brother are your standard. There is certainly comfort in understanding that we are all prone to human weakness. However, their fruit or the lack of it is NOT your measure or justification. Jesus is our standard – He is the one we are to aspire to follow.

John appreciated that. He knew the standard and reflected it when he said, *"I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."* It was also evident when Christ came to him at the Jordan and he said, *"I need to be baptized by You, and are You coming to me?"* (Mat 3:15)

Do you believe He's coming? Really? If so, you'll be very much in tune with 'preparing His way'. Personally, you'll be concerned that

you're pleasing to Him – like a bride preparing for her bridegroom. One of the greatest thrills in performing weddings is to see up close the bridegroom's amazement as his bride approaches. Do you want to see that look on Christ's face? For the bride, to hear her bridegroom actually utter the words, "I do" makes her heart leap. Do you realize that someday soon He will say that to you? Wow! You know, by dieing on the cross, he said exactly that – "I do!" And in heaven, His "I do!" will fill eternity with bliss. The scripture says, "*And every man that hath this hope in him (of Christ's appearance) purifies himself, even as He is pure.*" (1Jn 3:3) Even as "a friend" of the Bridegroom, John rejoiced to hear His voice. "*He that has the bride is the bridegroom: but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice: this my joy therefore is fulfilled.*" (Jn 3:29)

As a part of the larger body of Christ, 'straightness' means you'll 'behave as you believe', doing what you know to be pleasing to Him – as a servant. With all your heart, you'll live in a way that reflects a compelling desire to hear, "Well, done!" from Him. "*Some think that "readiness" for Jesus' return is a rather mystical thing; it really isn't - it is a matter of being about our business for the Lord ...we must ask ourselves: what have we done with our knowledge? Our time? Our money? Our abilities? The sins of omission often seem to be more damning than the sins of commission.*" – David Guzik

Finally, not only is preparing the way a matter of personal repentance but of accepting others' repentance as well. "*You see, so many have "unpardonable sins" for others. This is usually the result of a person's inability to deal with their own guilt. They develop a certain attitude*

*toward people who have committed "that" sin. Maybe it's adultery, or divorce, or homosexuality. And even though they repent, they are never quite good enough. That sin is always kept over their heads. Perhaps, in their opinion, it's all right for a non-Christian to have fallen; but if a Christian falls, then it's all over. "How could a Christian have done that?" "How could a Christian have fallen into adultery?" "How could a Christian have ever been involved in a divorce?" "How could a Christian have fallen into a homosexual encounter?" Let me answer that. I don't know how. But I do know that some have and some do. And I also know that if they turn to God in sincere faith and repentance, that He forgives them. And I know something else. He restores them. That is the point of the prodigal son. He was restored. God forgives and forgets. And if he forgives, who are you to do any less? You may say, "But God hates that sin." Yes, He does. But does God hate the sinner? You may say, "Well, God may forgive them, but they'll never be the same." No, not if you have anything to say about it, they won't. Don't you see? This is the very place where God desires for us to be like Him. God forgives. Let Him. God forgives. Be like Him. – J. David Hoke*

Oh dear friends in Christ, prepare the way before Him! He's coming. He's coming at last! He's even at the door. Make straight paths for our King!

# *Gim'me the Good Stuff!*

*(see John 2)*

It apparently really bugged John. How could someone follow the Son of Man for as long as Thomas did and still not believe in His resurrection? Why did he arrogantly insist, *“Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it.”*? What an unexpected contrast, for Thomas had earlier opted to endanger his life and potentially die with Jesus by going to Jerusalem where they all knew His enemies were lurking. In fact, he had encouraged the others to do the same (John 11:16).

But at the very time of supreme exhilaration and joy for everyone else – Jesus had risen! – Thomas needed yet another sign. Granted, he wasn't there earlier when the others got to see the risen Lord. Yet, before he could believe, he HAD to touch and feel, to see with his own eyes – or else. Now, John had believed when he saw the empty tomb holding only Christ's burial clothing (John 20:8). Belief came somewhat easier for him apparently. But a week after Thomas' pouty proclamation, Jesus mercifully granted him his sign. The overwhelmed disciple replied, *“My Lord and my God.”*

Christ then said, *“Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”*

Now, John must have pondered this for quite some time. This is evident because decades later he used this incident as the prelude into his rationale for writing his Gospel. He wrote in the verses immediately

following this incident (20:30,31), “*Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.*”

And so, the ‘Beloved Disciple’, very possibly concerned that there would be no more ‘doubting Thomas’’, chose specific signs to form the framework for his divinely inspired account of Christ’s earthly ministry. He knew that none of us would have the luxury of the first few – to touch and feel, to see with iris and cornea, what is more real and substantial than anything we ‘normally’ sense.

So why did he choose the signs he did? I’ll suggest that they were probably the ones which impacted John the most. They were likely the very ones that birthed and nurtured his own faith and led him to his own soul-saving conclusion at the empty tomb. You see, he came to saving faith without seeing the risen Lord and this Gospel is his testimony. That makes it extremely practical for us and supremely evangelistic. That’s why he could attest that, “*these are written that you may believe*” and he may have thought – ‘like I did.’

Thus, we will begin a series to examine each of these signs confident that if we will listen to His Spirit in the process, we will find greater and greater faith in our Lord.

In Chapter Two of John’s Gospel, he recorded an incident in which Jesus turned ordinary water into wine. He concluded with, “*This beginning of signs Jesus did in Cana of Galilee, and manifested His glory; and His disciples believed in Him.*” (v11) So this was the first sign and

John, being one of His disciples says it specifically led him to believe in Jesus. Let's consider why.

*"On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there."* (v1) It appears that this took place on the third day after Christ's baptism. Mary was there. Perhaps the parents of the groom or bride or both were close family friends or even relatives. Mary, as we will see, was a key part of this story. She was clearly involved in a supporting role.

*"Now both Jesus and His disciples were invited to the wedding."* (v2) In the short interval between His public baptism and this event, several devoted men had already begun to follow Him. Some had been disciples of John the Baptist. The fact that Jesus and His disciples were invited means that they weren't 'crashing' the party, they were welcomed. So either they all knew the hosts or the hosts were simply being generous and hospitable.

If the latter was the case, they probably had more guests than they had planned for and thus we read in verse three, *"And when they ran out of wine, the mother of Jesus said to Him, "They have no wine."*

Based upon the comments of the Master of the Feast later, it's clear that Mary had knowledge of the situation that the others who were celebrating did not. Perhaps she was the 'wedding planner'. In any event, she knew Jesus could handle the crisis. Now, for a wedding in these days to fail in providing all the wine necessary would have been a 'black mark' on all the hosts and would certainly show that their generosity was misspent.

*"Jesus said to her, 'Woman, what does your concern have to do with Me? My hour has not yet come.'" (v4) "Some have suggested Mary's*

*concern over the shortage of wine indicates she may have been a hostess at this wedding. The role of hostess at a Jewish wedding [was] usually filled by an aunt of the groom, [thus] this marriage celebration could very well have been that of Mary's nephew — the Apostle John.” – Courson*

If John was the groom, it would explain why he considered this ‘beginning of signs’ as a turning point. John and Andrew were among the first of Jesus’ disciples. You see, John the Baptist had pointed Jesus out to them specifically as the Lamb of God – the Messiah. Therefore, to have Him come to this blessed event was a huge honor. But then, to fail in the wine... with the future King of Israel there... let alone the other guests. This was the ultimate humiliation.

*"None but those who know how sacred in the East is the duty of lavish hospitality, and how passionately the obligation to exercise to the utmost it is felt, can realize the gloom which this incident would have thrown over the occasion, or the misery and mortification it would have caused to the wedded pair. They would have felt it to be, as in the East it is still felt to be, an indelible disgrace."--Farrar*

And Mary, who already lived some 30 years under the cloud of suspicion that Jesus was illegitimate, could herself only suffer more shame.

Have you ever been at a point in your life when after much personal tribulation, after having those around you put you ‘at a distance’, after submitting to the Lord’s guidance and yet suffering the ravages of a rumor mill as a result... you just want the Lord to set things right?? Surely Mary was in that place. She would have loved some measure of vindication.

Perhaps, her Son would now show some masterful gift of leadership, perhaps it was time for Him to show Himself.

Jesus replied tenderly yet firmly. Some have attested that the word He used for ‘woman’ was a loving term. Others think that is not the case. We cannot hear the tone in His voice and that would be the determinant here. However, what He said after this and what He did spoke volumes. Jesus knew her concern – it wasn’t just the wine. She knew who He was and she wanted the world to know as well. Ever tried to nudge God’s hand when the time isn’t right? Jesus said, ‘It’s not time yet. It’s not My hour.’ She sought His glory and possibly her vindication. However, she didn’t realize His road to glory led through Calvary.

*“His mother said to the servants, ‘Whatever He says to you, do it.’”* (v5) Now, Jewish moms can be persistent – just ask my kids – ha! But don’t you just love the beautiful expectancy Mary had? She was definitely a woman of faith. ‘Whatever’, in the Greek, means, ‘Whatever’. She didn’t know what He would do, but she was confident that He’d do something. This is where many of us stumble in faith. If God doesn’t do it our way or on our timeline, we simply give up. We need to keep a ‘whatever’ attitude. No, not like the current trendy, “Oh, WHATEVER!” but the meditation of a submitted, hopeful heart – “Whatever, Lord.”

*“Now there were set there six waterpots of stone, according to the manner of purification of the Jews, containing twenty or thirty gallons apiece.”* (v6) These water-pots were to supply water for the washings usual at feasts (see Mark 7:4). The Jews were regarded ceremonially *unclean* if they did not wash both before and after eating. This was done in a formal manner, and was, as with the washing of cups, pots and brass

vessels, a ritual observance on which the Pharisees laid great stress. We have an idiom today – I think you’ve been drinking your bath water! This is kind of what these guests were about to do. However, in figure or type, Jesus was about to turn that which was a part of a dead ritualism into that which gave joy and gladness.

*“Jesus said to them, “Fill the waterpots with water.” And they filled them up to the brim. And He said to them, “Draw some out now, and take it to the master of the feast.” And they took it.”*(v7,8) Now if I were one of these servants, my knees would have been knockin’. Jesus didn’t tell them what he was doing so for all they knew, they were serving up ritual wash water to the head honcho of the feast. You just don’t expect good tips when you do that sort of thing.

But they did it! And how many of Christ’s servants need to do the same – no questions, no doubts – just do it. That blessed ‘whatever’ attitude. That’s often when miracles happen.

*“When the master of the feast had tasted the water that was made wine, and did not know where it came from (but the servants who had drawn the water knew), the master of the feast called the bridegroom. And he said to him, ‘Every man at the beginning sets out the good wine, and when the guests have well drunk, then the inferior. You have kept the good wine until now!’”* (v9,10) Many, many otherwise excellent teachers launch from this passage into the allowance for or the condemnation of drinking wine. Frankly, that misses the point. John presented this sign to promote belief in Jesus as the Christ, not as the basis for a moral posture.

Whether you believe the wine was fermented or not, the fact is that the Master of the Feast immediately recognized it as “the good wine”. Jesus

didn't just supply wine but "the good wine" and this fellow recognized it immediately. It was distinctively better – the good stuff. This is a principle with all that God does – it's the 'good stuff'. It's perfect. It's a 'mind-blower'. The lame man jumped and danced; the blind man beheld the Son of God; the demon possessed became a disciple. It is simply the way He does what He does. When He made the world, the scripture says, "*Then God saw everything that He had made, and indeed it was very good.*" (Gen 1:31) Now, this is really thrilling when you consider the resurrection and our heavenly home!

Thus, "*This beginning of signs Jesus did in Cana of Galilee, and manifested His glory; and His disciples believed in Him.*" (v11) Here's the point of the story – they believed. When John says, "His disciples" he's specifically including himself. And I'll submit that it wasn't simply the fact of the miraculous transformation but the message, the picture if you would, that it portrayed.

You see, John was a fiery idealist. He had evidently been well acquainted with the religious power brokers of the day. When Christ was arrested and taken from the garden of Gethsemane, it was John who got Peter in to the place of inquisition because he "*was known to the high priest, and went with Jesus into the courtyard of the high priest.*" (John 18:15) Yet, having an 'in' with the highest religious authorities also seems to have led him to a disdain for the deadness of their traditions and their hypocrisies.

Instead of following their teachings or aspiring to climb their religious ladder of success, he ended up following John the Baptist who labeled these guys as poisonous snakes. (Mat 3:7)

So there at the wedding feast were these ceremonial purification jugs – six big ones. Six is the number of man in the Bible and that’s appropriate for this whole deal of ceremonial washing was basically an invention of man – a sanctimonious ‘enhancement’ to the notion of being clean. The Torah contains many references to washing but this ritualistic washing that was in vogue was purely tradition just like the Urchatz and the Rachtzah of the modern Seder (Passover celebration). Jesus and His disciples didn’t support it. In fact, the Word says they were accosted by the scribes and Pharisees who said, “*Why do Your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread.*” (Mat 15:2)

So the message John saw in the miracle was Jesus taking that which was representative of a dead religious system of man-made traditions and replacing it with that which represents joy.

Ceremonial wash water became “the good wine”. To John and to all of us who have been fed up with the deadness of religiosity, whether Jewish or ‘Christian’, this speaks loudly of Messiah. And the message wasn’t lost on John; it resonated in his heart and you can almost sense him dancing in the background – thrilled inwardly. ‘Yes! Jesus is the Messiah! His ways are not man’s ways. He’s not into this religious mumbo jumbo. He’s radical! He’s real! He can even turn deadness to joy! Wow! If He can do that to water – He can do it to me!!’

And that’s exactly what belief in Jesus Christ does – when He becomes your Lord and Savior, He takes the deadness of a vain life and transforms it into ‘the good stuff’ of love, joy, peace and their companions. It’s the ‘good wine’ of God’s Spirit and only Christ can make it. Jesus isn’t

asking us to believe in a religious system of traditions. He wants you to believe in Him. There are those who may think ‘you’ve been drinking your bath water’ – ha! But you can just tell them it’s the new wine of His Spirit.

# The Appeal of Zeal

(see John 2)

Upon entering the temple, He came to a boil, and it may have freaked out His disciples. At least it stuck in their memory. Looking around, He saw the vendors of ‘sanctified goods’ and proceeded to whip them out. Such behavior in this holy place was not at all the norm. In fact, the ‘head hogs at the trough’ so to speak were certainly going to come down on this with a heavy hand. Jesus was behaving as an ‘extremist’; John writes, *“And his disciples remembered that it was written, The zeal of Your house has eaten me up.” (John 2:17)*

In contrast, listen to the message that is being given to us today – “extremists are to blame for the bloodshed and terror around the world.” Islamic extremists are murdering Jews and Christians by the 1000s. Christian extremists are supposedly stirring up hatred against Muslims. The president and his cabinet members are chastising the ‘religious right’ and appealing to the ‘moderate Islamic’ community. The whole force of governmental, media and even religious voices are cautioning everyone to avoid the zealous, to embrace the mainstream, to be sane and restrained if you would.

Now, while the logic of this message appeals to our common sense, it also poses the greatest danger the church has seen in centuries. By lumping the ‘extreme’ elements of all endeavors into one pot, Satan seeks to neutralize the message of the only one that really matters – the church’s. Jesus himself said, *“I came not to bring peace but a sword.” (Mat 10:34)*

Now lest you misunderstand, He was NOT advocating what Islam has done historically – i.e. converting by the sword. He was not saying that we are to slay the infidels – on the contrary, we are to love the infidels. However, He was making clear that the message of the gospel is radical, and those who will truly live it out are likewise radical – they are zealous for God. But, much of the church today is sadly ‘room temperature’.

Ministries depend on budgets; callings are just jobs; sermons are designed to entertain. There’s no room for zeal – from the pulpit, it scares the flock; from the flock, it scares the pulpit. And so we’ve nurtured environments that won’t offend in the course of either worship or witness. Consequently, we’re not changing the world around us to the extent we could – more and more, it’s changing us.

You may say, “Speak for yourself, John.” Trust me, I do! But to do justice to the issue, let me explain what zeal is, why the Lord desires it and its fruit.

In the Old Testament, zeal is literally the attitude and action spurred by jealousy. This is fascinating because it implies by definition an intimate relationship. A man or woman can be jealous over their spouse, and it results in perhaps the most intense responses we are capable of as people.

The New Testament word for zeal means to be brought to a boil, to be very hot, and of course, this compliments the OT concept. God desires us to have zeal for Him because frankly it indicates a powerful, passionate relationship with Him. The Laodicean church of Revelation chapter three which to many typifies the church of the last days is rebuked for being neither hot nor cold. That is, there was no zeal or enmity, only a toned down, affluent body of people who had learned to fit in.

God is zealous (see Isaiah 9:7, 37:32; Ez 5:13). Jesus is zealous (see John 2:17). The early church was zealous (see 2 Cor 7:11, 9:2). And Christ tells the Laodiceans to “be zealous therefore, and repent” (see Rev 3:19). So, what intense response are we to have to our God? Does He want us to nuke Mecca or to wear ‘angry Christian’ T-shirts?? NO!

Paul wrote, “*But [it is] good to be **zealously** affected always in [a] good [thing]...*” (Gal 4:18) and that Christ “*gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto Himself a peculiar people, **zealous of good works.**” (Tit 2:14) He also spoke of the Jews that “*...they have a **zeal** of God, but not according to knowledge.*” (Rom 10:2) and of himself that “*...concerning **zeal**, [before his conversion he was] persecuting the church...*” (Phil 3:6) So clearly, zeal can be right or wrong in its motive and outcome.*

The zeal God wants is rooted in a passionate love for Him and in the knowledge of the gospel of Christ. Apart from this, zeal is misdirected and tragic. But without zeal, Christianity is dead, dead at room temperature. God asks us, “How zealously do you love Me and your family in Christ? How zealous are you to do good even when good is reviled and you are persecuted for it? How zealously forgiving are you knowing that you are forgiven much more? How zealous are you to give what you cannot keep to gain what you cannot lose? How zealously trusting are you of God in the midst of hot times?”

You see, God makes His “*ministers a flame of fire*” (Psa 104:4). They are red hot, jealous of their relationship with Him. Christ was as zealous on the cross when He cried out, “*Father forgive them for they know not what they do*” as He was when He drove the merchants out of the temple.

He was zealous when He said, “*come unto Me all you who are weary and heavy laden,*” as well as when He said, “*whosoever among you who forsakes not all that he has cannot be my disciple.*”

The zealotry God looks for in our lives is not wide-eyed, out of control fanaticism fueled by unrighteous indignation. His zeal is the ‘real deal’ (pardon the play on words). And it is blatantly obvious to the world around. To the rebellious, it’s frightening; to the child of God (both lost or found) it’s awesomely appealing.

It’s not ‘worked up’ by some ‘holy cheerleader’; it’s manifested by a heart that’s entirely wrapped up in God.

I’m reminded of a man who knocked on my front door one morning. Upon answering it, we found him meekly poised, asking to come in and to speak with us. At first, I didn’t recognize him, but he quickly explained that he resided just a few doors down the street.

“Oh, of course. Come in.” I replied.

“You know, I should have been here sooner, but... well, let me explain.”

His demeanor made it clear that whatever he had to say was terribly important. As a consequence, we listened somewhat apprehensive.

“You see, about nine months ago, we moved in down the street. I’d gotten a great job with the [sporting goods company] and my wife and two daughters were excited about being here.”

“But after only a few months, we found out that [his wife] was terminally ill with cancer. In only a couple of months, she died.”

“As you can imagine, I was devastated, but even more so were my daughters. The older one became so bitter and rebellious that she got involved with a gang and started using drugs and... well...”

“Anyway, the younger one just recoiled. She isolated herself and became the brunt of every cruel joke at school. She seemed to hate herself more and more and ...”

“I retreated to my work. It became my hiding place from grief. I had no faith to speak of but only a broken... no, a shattered heart that I felt I had to protect.”

“Well, I didn’t see it coming. One day, I came home and found my older daughter with a man much older than her. When I surprised them at my entry, she just erupted at me and they left the house in haste. Later she called and said that she was going to marry this guy whether I liked it or not and ... well, goodbye.”

“I freaked. She was so young and was making a huge mistake. I knew she had been distraught, but I never expected this.”

“A few days later, she went to the police and claimed that I had sexually abused her. Of course, this was completely unfounded and I later found out that her new acquaintance had put her up to it.”

“Anyway, the authorities believed her and took away my other little girl to ‘protect her’. Shortly afterward, the [local newspaper] printed the story such that I looked very guilty.”

“I remember that!” I said. “That was you?”

“Yes. But it didn’t stop there. In a couple of days, I was let go from my job because the company didn’t want the bad publicity. Then, after I spent all I had in a legal dispute over the girls, I fell behind on the mortgage and the bank gave notice of foreclosure.”

“Wow. Just snow-balled, huh?”

“Yeah. But then, this guy who had taken my older daughter came back to the house while I was out. He must have had her key. Well, I came in and found him literally destroying the place with a pick axe. He’d chopped up the furniture, the walls, the TV, even the last pictures I had of [his wife and kids]. I honestly couldn’t believe my eyes.”

“He threatened me with the ax and laughed hideously. He mocked that my daughter was his now and that if I knew what was good for her, I’d vacate the house immediately. I later found out he wanted to use it as a place to make and sell drugs. Then he left, breaking several more windows on the way.”

My mouth was agape listening to this incredible tale.

“So...I’d lost it all. My dear wife, my daughters, my job, my house, even the last mementos of happier times. I was broke and really broken. I had nowhere to turn, no friends, no family. So I pawned some stuff and bought a pistol.”

“I drove out of town headed north and pulled over on the side of the road to just end it. I took the gun and pointed it at my head. It was shaking so hard... “

“But then, the most miraculous thing happened. In the deepest part of this pit, this dark, dark hole I was in,...for some reason, I saw this picture,... this picture that was so vivid. I couldn’t shake it. And that’s why I’m here.”

“All I could see was the joyful countenance of your little girl. (She was 12 then.) You see, she and [his younger daughter] played together a lot and she was always sharing with her about Jesus. I mean it was natural, so

natural. And she was obviously so in love with Christ. She just wanted to help my little one and she really did.”

“But I’d rejected it. At least, I thought so. I was too strong and ‘sane’ for that nonsense – or so I thought. But there in my car, with this gun to my head, I realized I was wrong. Her shining face seemed to say, ‘Come home. God loves you and He will help.’”

“So I put the gun down and drove back into town. I saw [the church on the north side of town] and pulled in. To my relief, the pastor was there and I sat down and talked with him for a long time.”

“There and then, I gave my heart to Jesus Christ and was born again. And I just can’t tell you how that changed me!”

“And the next day, the next day, the authorities contacted me and said that [his older daughter] confessed that her accusation was a lie and that they were returning her as well as my younger girl into my care. Shortly afterward, the paper printed a great article. Then, I even got my job back with a raise. My house is still mine and it’s fixed back up.”

“And we’re totally in love with Jesus! He’s given us new hope and a real faith, more real than anything I see with my eyes! Your little girl’s faith...how thankful I am for that now.”

Yes, zealous Christians are the only ones who make a difference in this world. They are the real salt and light Jesus spoke of. They bear the fruit of the Spirit in abundance. May we all forsake the rags of timidity, the lies of worldly conformity and a spiritually tepid lifestyle.

While the world is vilifying ‘religious extremism’ let us not confuse this with the passionate zeal we need to have for our God. We must be extreme! -- extreme in love, extreme in forgiveness, extreme in sharing

and sacrifice, extreme in faith and trust, extreme in the pursuit of our Father's desire!

It's this kind of extreme Christianity that's alive – it's not just room temperature. It's truly appealing to God for He is Himself a consuming fire! (Heb 12:29)

# Ready?

*(see John 2)*

Fiery idealist that he was, John jumped immediately from the first sign of the wedding wine to a dramatic encounter at the temple in Jerusalem between Jesus and the religious robbers.

*“Now the Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. And He found in the temple those who sold oxen and sheep and doves, and the money changers doing business.” (v13, 14)*

The system allowed for the sale of these religious items as part of the officially sanctioned worship. It all started off probably quite innocently but by this time, the pilgrims were pretty much being pillaged by these pious pirates. On top of that, it was the religious officialdom that ultimately benefited from these sales and exchanges of coin.

But it's not too different today. No, I'm not referring to the Christian Booksellers or recording artists et al (though you could really get me going on that point). Rather, we find far too many ministers who are simply employed – doing what they do because they like 'Christian employment' rather than obeying a calling from God. Thank the Lord for the many who are genuine in their service!!

*“When He had made a whip of cords, He drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and the oxen, and poured out the changers' money and overturned the tables. And He said to those who sold doves, ‘Take these things away! Do not make My Father's house a house of merchandise!’” (v15, 16)*

Jesus wasn't perturbed at the sale so much as the locale – His Father's house. On a second round a few years later, He did the same thing and said, *"It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer,' but you have made it a 'den of thieves.'"* (Mat 21:15)

This radical cleansing impressed John as well as the other Gospel writers. It seems he was ready for a 'fire-brand' Messiah. He was a 'son of thunder' (Mark 3:17) and he was ready for a religious storm. John was zealous for the things of God or so he thought. He was ready for some zeal. Holy scriptures pertaining to such passion were easy for him to recall and believe.

*"Then His disciples remembered that it was written, 'Zeal for Your house has eaten Me up.'"* (v 17) Christ's holy attitude struck a cord with John. It was the kind of thing that the Baptist would have done. But something was about to transpire that he wasn't ready for.

*"So the Jews answered and said to Him, 'What sign do You show to us, since You do these things?'"* (v 18) 'Oh boy, another sign!', John may have been thinking.

*"Jesus answered and said to them, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.'"*

*"Then the Jews said, 'It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three days?'"* (v 19, 20)

John wasn't ready for this. What was Jesus saying? This conundrum stuck in his mind for years and it may even have been a 'hard saying' for him. The water into wine sign led him to believe in Jesus as the Messiah, but he may have really struggled with this one. He wasn't ready for it.

And it is the same for us today. I submit that most of us come to faith in Christ not being ready for all He has to say. There are verses in the Bible which pose contradictions to our desires or experience or rationale. Consequently, we try to interpret them to fit our vision or we simply put them in the ‘not sure about this one’ bucket. Many times it’s not because we don’t want to believe it; we’re just not ready to believe.

Jesus never explained this saying to his disciples privately like He did the parables though He did tell them later that He had to die and be resurrected. But even then, they didn’t get it. It may have been just too big a pill to swallow.

*“But He was speaking of the temple of His body.” (v 21)*

This was the revelation that explained it all. Keep in mind, John wrote this retrospectively. At the time, he was as clueless or faithless as everyone else. He had to go through some things first before he could understand and/or believe this saying.

*“Therefore, when He had risen from the dead, His disciples remembered that He had said this to them; and they believed the Scripture and the word which Jesus had said.” (v 22)*

Remember, the Gospel of John is one large lesson on believing. In this segment between signs, he is teaching us that it is critical to believe not only in Jesus as Christ but to believe all that He has said for the two beliefs are usually segregated in the minds of believers. Additionally, he is teaching us that we are sometimes not ready to believe all that He’s said and this can create a dilemma. It wasn’t until after the resurrection that John believed the scripture and the saying of Jesus. In like manner, many of us struggle with portions of the Bible – we shouldn’t, but we do. For

example, there are some who will not believe in the literal second coming of Christ until after the fact.

Now, a 'ready mind' is one that is taught of the Holy Spirit and knows that the Word of God is true whether or not it compliments our understanding. Such a mind is willing to believe. You see, there are some things that He has said that we're often just not ready to 'digest'. But we should never abandon what we do know and believe for what we don't understand or struggle with. We must remain willing to believe, for in due season, when we are ready to believe and/or understand, like John, we will look back and say, "Wow, now I get it!"

At the foot of the cross, John still didn't get it and it was a dark, dark day. But in the empty tomb only a few days later, it all became much clearer.

You can believe ALL that Jesus said, ALL the scriptures, with absolute confidence. If some things are still a mystery or 'rub' you or humble you or are contrary to your natural thinking – hold on. Remain a ready (willing to believe) mind. You won't be disappointed. The Holy Spirit never said, "Oops". You can trust Him. You can believe ALL that He's said.

# Look On Him and Live!

(see John 3)

The confusion was driving him nuts. His whole life had been spent pursuing the wisdom of the elders and the knowledge of the scriptures. He knew the traditions better than most Pharisees. In fact, he was known as the teacher of Israel. And for most of his life, he'd been quite confident about his knowledge.

But then came this itinerant rabbi doing these truly amazing signs. He gave sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, new limbs to the lame. Demons even fled at his word. Yet it was his word that troubled Nicodemus. His teachings confused him for though the signs were undoubtedly from God, his words didn't seem to jive with the traditions of the elders.

And so, here he was, approaching the 'light' under cover of darkness. As he neared, he came to Jesus with sincere desire and doubt.

*"Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him."*

But Jesus knew immediately the source of Nic's dilemma. And John presented it in his gospel because the poor Pharisee is not alone. We can all wear his sandals so to speak. Most of us at some time or another get caught in the same mess.

*Jesus answered and said to him, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."*

Jesus is the fullness of the expression of God's Kingdom for He is the King and all the promises of God in Him are yes and amen. To see Jesus

for who He is, is to see the Kingdom. However, Nic was more confused than ever. He said, *"How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?"*

*Jesus answered, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'"*

Now, to 'marvel' comes from the word meaning to look at. Jesus was telling Nicodemus that he was caught up in a skewed analysis – looking at the wrong thing. Consequently, his carnal or logical mind was befuddled.

Jesus continued, *"The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit."*

He was saying, 'You hear the sound of my words but you don't know 'where I'm coming from' or 'where I'm going with this.' I am of the Spirit and what I'm saying is of the Spirit. If you're going to 'get it' you'll have to be radically changed – born again spiritually. And for that to happen, you'll have to look at the right thing.'

*Nicodemus answered and said to Him, "How can these things be?"*

He was still tunneled into the 'how' and not the 'Who'. *Jesus answered and said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things? Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?"*

Now, Christ was leading him along the path of discovery. When He said, “We speak what We know...” it is more appropriately translated, “We speak of what We see with awareness and consider.” And when He followed with, “...and testify what We have seen” it means, “and bear witness to what We’ve stared at and discerned clearly, what we’ve experienced as a consequence.”

He said, ‘What I’ve told you is earthly and you don’t believe. How are you going to receive the heavenly?’ For example, “*No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven.*” Now, some commentators proposed that this is a retrospective insert by the Apostle. I don’t buy that. It’s a statement that is completely in the flow if you would of His instruction. Heaven, is a totally different dimension. Time is quite different there. Past, present and future are wrapped in the eternal now. Surely, this was a mind bender for Nicodemus. It is for me.

But graciously, Jesus gave him more to consider – something, he should have been able to relate to a little better. “*And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.*”

To track with Jesus (and Nic), we must turn to the Old Testament book of Numbers. In chapter 21, it was near the conclusion of their wilderness wanderings but the Hebrew people were quite down. Miriam had died; Aaron died, they’d been ‘molested’ on one side by a small army of Canaanites and the Edomites on the other side refused to grant them passage to their destination on the Kings Highway. It probably seemed like the whole world was against them.

And even though God had given them manna to eat, fresh water from the Rock to drink and their sandals had never worn out – miraculous provision – nevertheless, they were really bummed! As they journeyed around Edom, *“the soul of the people became very discouraged.”* (or literally, cut down like grass).

*“And the people spoke against God and against Moses: “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and our soul loathes this worthless bread.”* (Num 21:5)

You might say they’d been outcasts from the ‘world community’ their whole lives. After wandering in the wilderness for so long, they even came to disdain the miraculous manna. It was the ‘time of the end’ – the end of their wanderings, but they didn’t know it. They’d seen God’s hand at work in the defeat of the Canaanites, but their hearts were hardened. They complained that there was no food or water which was a blatant misrepresentation. They were simply ignoring the truth of God’s gracious protection and provision. They’d even driven Moses to strike the Rock (rather than speak to it) in anger and frustration... There’s only one way to deal with hard, contentious hearts...

*“So the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and many of the people of Israel died.”* (v6) Now, the word serpent in this verse is implied. The actual Hebrew term is ‘seraph’ which simply means fiery and thus leads most to conclude that these creatures inflicted a burning poison with their bite. This word seraph though is also used in Isaiah chapter six to describe heavenly beings about the throne of God. Again, the emphasis is upon their fiery appearance or nature.

You see, this passage in Numbers 21 is both practical and prophetic concerning belief in Christ and fire sent from heaven is the key in each case. Practically, the Jews had become so hard hearted to the Lord that they needed a fiery affliction to break through their dullness and cynicism. More than judgment, this was a merciful ‘wake-up call’ from God. In their deplorable spiritual condition, there was no way for them to enter the promised land yet they were on the threshold, approaching the fulfillment of the inheritance.

The bites of these fiery serpents were a physical manifestation of Israel’s spiritual environment and condition. Now, interestingly enough, this word for bite also means to onerously oppress with a debt and this is picture perfect. You see, in a similar fashion sin has bitten us all. It has poisoned all mankind with an unholy flame. As a consequence, we are also overwhelmingly in debt – obligated to it and to Satan, utterly oppressed.

*“Therefore the people came to Moses, and said, "We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD that He take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people.”*

(v7) It is fundamental that if we are to be born again, the fiery bite of sin must be recognized and dealt with. We must understand that we’ve been ‘bitten’ and without a remedy, we will indeed die.

*“Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and it shall be that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live.’ So Moses made a bronze serpent, and put it on a pole; and so it was, if a serpent had bitten anyone, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived.” (v8,9)* Contrary to the people’s petition, God did not remove the fiery beasts but instead provided a cure. Neither, has He removed sin

from our existence, but He has provided the perfect prescription – the pole.

God told Moses to make an image of the fiery creatures and set it on a pole. This is a terrible/wonderful picture of our Lord Jesus Christ. He was likewise placed upon a pole – the cross of Calvary. And as Moses made the serpent out of bronze – the metal of judgment – so God laid on Christ the judgment for all our sins, all our poison, all our fiery bites.

2 Corinthians 5:21 says, “*For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.*” That is, Jesus became the bronze serpent upon the pole if you would – not a sinner but rather sin. He carried the entire debt for us all.

And the people were healed by looking at the image on the pole. This verb in the Hebrew does not mean a passing glance but instead to *approve, consider, discern, enjoy, have experience, take heed, respect, regard with pleasure, look intently*. (Strong’s) That means you won’t see what Christ did for you unless you really look at Him and His sacrifice in this fashion. It needs to sink in. That’s where the healing is found.

John recorded this teaching early in his gospel because if we are to believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior, we must come to the cross and FIX our gaze on the One who is upon it – to ponder, discern, recognize and appreciate. We can’t stamp out the serpents. If we pretend they don’t exist or call them by another name, we’ll die from their bite. We can’t always avoid them, but we can come to the pole – to the cross.

Prophetically, this passage speaks of and to the Jewish people. Spiritually, they have wandered in a dry and desolate wilderness for nearly two millennia. They have suffered great persecution, but God has

provided for them in just amazing ways. Nevertheless, they have as a whole come to disdain their God. Some research indicates that up to 90% of the Jews in Israel itself are either agnostics or atheists. Consequently, those in the religious minority are considered extremists.

And as with the story in Numbers, they are approaching the end, the end of the age. Once again, fire is in their future. To them, the Word says,

*“See, the LORD is coming with fire, and his chariots are like a whirlwind; he will bring down his anger with fury, and his rebuke with flames of fire.”* (Isa 66:15)

*“In the whole land,” declares the LORD, “two-thirds (of the Jewish people) will be struck down and perish; yet one-third will be left in it. This third I will bring into the fire; I will refine them like silver and test them like gold. They will call on my name and I will answer them; I will say, ‘They are my people,’ and they will say, ‘The LORD is our God.’”* (Zech 13:8-10)

*“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned, nor shall the flame scorch you.”* (Isa 43:2)

The soon coming time of tribulation will be filled with fire, and as with Moses, the Jews who would be saved out this great trial will have to **look** upon the One whom they ‘pierced’ – the One upon the cross. As the scripture records, *“And I will pour on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem the Spirit of grace and supplication; then they will **look on** Me whom they pierced. Yes, they will mourn for Him as one mourns for his only son, and grieve for Him as one grieves for a*

*firstborn.*” (Zech 12:10) So shall the remnant of Israel be healed from sin, saved by grace.

Friend, like Nicodemas and me, you’ve been bitten. What will you do about it? Do nothing and you will die. There’s only one cure. Consider Jesus Christ. Look on Him and live!

# *Happy Hour*

*(See John 4)*

It's a strange name for a town – Drunken. But, this is the place Christ came to get a drink. The story is found in John chapter four.

You may have heard great sermons on witnessing or the compassion of Jesus or perhaps on the acceptance of cultural differences coming from this passage of scripture but we will consider it in the light of John's stated desire to help us believe in Christ (John 20:31). And first, we need a little geographical background.

At the time, Israel was divided into three regions. In the north was Galilee; in the south was Judea and sandwiched between them was the 'defiled' land of Samaria. However, when a conservative Jew wished to pass from the north area to the south or vice versa, he would not travel through Samaria. In fact, he would cross the Jordan river and make a large detour to the east through the region of Perea. You see, the Jews and Samaritans held a lot of ill will for each other. In fact, "Samaritan" was a curse word for the Jew.

It was back in the year 722 BC that the Assyrians invaded and crushed the northern kingdom of Israel and took the ten tribes living there into foreign captivity. It was a monstrous act really. The Assyrians literally put fish hooks in their captives' mouths, stripped them naked, tied them together and dragged them back to their homeland where they were kept hostage. After this, they sent some of their own people into Israel to colonize it. As a consequence, they intermarried with the Jews there who

hadn't been taken away and 'la voila' – you have Samaritans. They were mongrels, half-breeds and thus disgusting in the eyes of the Jews. They were banned from the temple in Jerusalem and so they erected their own temple on Mt. Gerazim. Now, even though they revered the Torah – the books of Moses – they altered the stories such that Mt. Gerazim became the location of the Garden of Eden, the resting place for Noah's ark and the site where Abraham offered up Isaac. ('Rewriting scripture' a la Mormonism and other cults is not new!)

In John chapter four, Jesus was on His way north to Galilee from Judea. "He left Judea, because he was likely to be persecuted there even to the death; such was the rage of the Pharisees against him." (Matthew Henry) And the scripture says, "*But He needed to go through Samaria.*" This is wonderfully prophetic. You see, Jesus left Judea to spend time in Samaria, a gentile-ish land, and as we will see, He then afterward returned to a Jewish region. This is pictorially reminiscent of the two comings of our Lord to Israel – in the first, He was 'unwelcomed' and in the second He will be lauded and desired. And between these two He's been ministering to non-Jews in what we call the Church Age. It aligns perfectly with our study chapter here in John.

*"So He came to a city of Samaria which is called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob gave to his son Joseph."* There was a good deal of heritage in this place named 'Drunken'. Abimelech was made king here; it was Jeroboam's royal seat; the Valley of Achor called the door of hope in Hosea 2:15 ran along by this city and to top it off, Joseph's bones were buried there. (Gen 48:22, Jos 24:32). Yes, it had a strong Jewish heritage yet the Samaritan zealots claimed 'God was through with the Jew' so to

speak. Whoa! That's sounds like today's false doctrines of substitution, doesn't it?

*"Now Jacob's well was there."* You know, this well is still there. It's about 150 feet deep and one of the few authentic sites you can visit in Israel. However, assuming the water level was about the same as it is now, can you imagine hauling buckets or jars of water up 150 feet? That's a lot of work. If you weren't thirsty to begin with, you certainly would be.

But it wasn't always that way or so it would seem for the word used for well here means a fount or flowing spring whereas later, as it is spoken of, the term used for well means a deep cistern. It appears that Jacob's well may have changed from one that flowed like a fountain to one that was just a plain lot of work to get anything out of.

*"Jesus therefore, being wearied from His journey, sat thus by the well. It was about the sixth hour (noon). A woman of Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, 'Give Me a drink.' For His disciples had gone away into the city to buy food."* Now, as you've likely been taught, this was indeed radical. Ordinarily, a rabbi of that time would not even acknowledge his wife if he saw her on the street. But here, Jesus began to minister to the lowest social outcast. Outcast? Yes. You see, the women typically went for water in the morning or evening but this lady was there at noon. Once you hear her story, you'll understand that she probably had few female friends.

But that's where the gospel finds 'paydirt'. The 'together elite' don't usually respond to its call. It is the sinner that can be saved if you know what I mean. Unfortunately, the church corporately spends far too much time and resource trying to impress the unimpressable.

Anyway, the dialog began as, “...*the woman of Samaria said to Him, ‘How is it that You, being a Jew, ask a drink from me, a Samaritan woman?’ For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.*”

*“Jesus answered and said to her, ‘If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, “Give Me a drink,” you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water.’”*

Keeping our focus on coming to faith in Christ, let’s consider this woman’s heart. To begin with, she’s bluntly honest and this is always the starting point on the road to salvation. Those who try to play an insincere or dishonest game of verbal dodge-ball with God find Him silent. But Jesus gave this woman a response that engaged her beautifully. When He said, “living water”, the original language is water ‘having vital power within itself, the power to enjoy real life – fresh, strong and powerful’. Now, that’s no belly-wash!

*“The woman said to Him, ‘Sir, You have nothing to draw with, and the well is deep. Where then do You get that living water? Are You greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well, and drank from it himself, as well as his sons and his livestock?’”*

Note that her first inclination was to think that Jesus would draw this ‘living water’ from Jacob’s well. Her question was sincere and like most all of us who believe, her initial understanding of Christ’s words was foggy at best. She challenged Him based upon her limited tradition and a supposed link to the patriarch. It is much like those today who suppose that their salvation is somehow enabled by a loose relationship they share with someone ‘religious’. This is often because they think they have to be good to go to heaven, that salvation has to be earned, and they know

they're not 'good enough' so riding on someone else's coattails so to speak is the only alternative.

*“ Jesus answered and said to her, ‘Whoever drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life.’ ”*

What the world offers, like Jacob's well did originally, can come easy and initially be a temporary thirst satisfier. But over time, it takes more and more effort. It gets tougher and tougher to slake that dryness in your soul. Finally, you can wonder if it is even worth all the effort for the momentary satisfaction. In contrast, Jesus spoke of a source that billows eternally with life – a fountain that springs up or literally leaps. It's the same descriptive word used when Peter and John saw the lame man healed outside the temple in Acts 3:8 who, after being healed, “...*entered with them into the temple, walking, and leaping, and praising God.*”

*“The woman said to Him, ‘Sir, give me this water, that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw.’ ”* As yet, she still didn't understand but she recognized that this was what she wanted. Salvation has never been understood. If you're like me, there are fewer and fewer brain cells 'upstairs' and I'm grateful that understanding everything is not the key to eternal life. This woman only recognized that what Christ offered was WAY better than what she had.

*“Jesus said to her, ‘Go, call your husband, and come here.’ ”*

*“The woman answered and said, ‘I have no husband.’ ”*

*“ Jesus said to her, ‘You have well said, “I have no husband,” for you have had five husbands, and the one whom you now have is not your husband; in that you spoke truly.’ ”*

There is no other way; there is no real conversion without conviction. Salvation is not an intellectual discovery. It is the humbling confrontation with your sin before a merciful and gracious Creator. That’s why Jesus presented it to her. Now, I submit that this woman is not just an example of a sad story – someone who for whatever reason went through five or six men. Rather, she typifies us all. Now, you may think, ‘I’m not that bad!’ But, actually, you are. So am I. Even if your grandparents and parents were missionaries and you’ve worked with Billy Graham for decades, the truth is that we are all as deeply in need of salvation as the dear woman in this story. The great apostle Paul concluded, “...*that Christ Jesus came into the world to save **sinners**; of whom I am **chief**.*” (1 Tim 1:15)

“Notice also Jesus didn't say, ‘You've had five husbands. Let's talk about Husband #1: Sam. Then, we'll talk about why you left George in Session 2. Come next week, and in the third session, we'll talk about Pete. In Session 4, we'll discuss Harry.’ No, it didn't take Jesus five sessions to discuss the five husbands. He didn't delve into co-dependency, or into the woman's past iniquities. Yes, Jesus revealed her sin — but He didn't revel in it. Big difference. I think it is dangerous for people who mean well to start reveling in the past sin of another — talking about it, exploring it, pursuing it. Jesus does not model this for any minister of the Gospel, or for any servant of the Kingdom. He says, ‘I know you're a sinner. You know you're a sinner. Now, let's go on from there.’” (Jon Courson)

*“The woman said to Him, ‘Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, and you Jews say that in Jerusalem is the place where one ought to worship.’”* Her perception of Christ was changing. We commonly think of a prophet as one who predicts the future accurately but most literally a prophet is one who speaks the truth. Now, this truth wasn’t particularly secret. There were many who undoubtedly knew it but how surprising it is sometimes for us to learn that God already knows our whole story. He knows it all and yet He comes to us.

Some say that her comment here was a theological dodge of sorts like when you are sharing with someone about Christ and they say, “Well, who did Cain marry??” or. “Can God make a rock so big He can’t move it?” but I don’t agree. This woman’s interest was sincere and she, observing that Jesus had a prophet’s insight into her life posed a question that probably had really nagged her. Her experience and training led her to believe that something was amiss – she’d been taught one thing and yet the truth was somehow elusive. Both the Jews and the Samaritans couldn’t be right. This woman wanted to know the truth of the matter even if it contradicted the traditions she’d grown up with. Again, a sincere desire for the truth is fundamental to growing in faith. So many Christians never progress in their spiritual walk because they stop desiring the truth – that’s because it’s humbling, very humbling.

*“Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews. But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such*

*to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.’’*

Jesus said, “You don’t see or perceive (and thus, know) what you worship.” And this isn’t limited to the woman or the situation. Undoubtedly, Jesus is referring to the mongrel nature of the theological ‘soup’ the Samaritans believed. But, it also speaks to the whole of fallen humanity. The truth is that everyone’s life is an act of worship to someone or something whether to self, Satan or the Son of God. Nevertheless, the vast majority of non-believers don’t see it. At best, they are playing a dangerous game with eternal consequences. Sin has drastically contorted their perception.

This woman wanted to see, to know the truth and He was staring her right in the face. From her sincere question came a liberating answer – God is not stoically sitting in the heavens listening to some and ignoring others. Rather, He’s actively seeking out those who will worship in His Spirit and with a true heart – nothing feigned, no games, no mindless religious routine. Jesus “needed” to go through Samaria as an illustration of what God is doing in this age – seeking those, like this woman, who want the truth and who will relate to Him, worship Him, literally ‘kiss the hand’ in Spirit and truth.

*“The woman said to Him, ‘I know that Messiah is coming’ (who is called Christ). ‘When He comes, He will tell us all things.’”*

*“Jesus said to her, ‘I who speak to you am He.’”*

Ah, this was the turning point. Note, that she responded, “I know” rather than “we know”. It became personal for her. Belief in Jesus Christ is nothing if it’s not personal. It is never because your parents are

believers or your spouse. In her statement, you can just sense this woman's anticipation of the glorious truth being revealed to her heart. She wasn't theologically 'savvy' but she knew she needed a Savior. Jesus was first a "Jew", then a "Sir", then a "prophet". Here, she brought up the topic of a Messiah, not Jesus.

At what point will you be satisfied with your relationship with Christ? Do you know you need a Savior? I submit that Jesus reveals Himself to us to the degree we desire to know Him.

*"And at this point His disciples came, and they marveled that He talked with a woman; yet no one said, 'What do You seek?' or, 'Why are You talking with her?'"*

*"The woman then left her waterpot, went her way into the city, and said to the men, 'Come, see a Man who told me all things that I ever did. Could this be the Christ?' Then they went out of the city and came to Him."*

Ha! You know, there's a waterpot left behind every time the living water leaps forth in someone's heart. The things we once thought important, even vital to satisfying our 'thirst' are simply not our passion any longer. I remember when I got saved, I ran down the hallways of the dorm I lived in knocking on all the doors of my friends, incredibly eager to share with them what I'd just discovered. So this woman tasted the heavenly fount and could not wait to share the news. Nevertheless, she was humble in her approach.

A few verses later, the scripture records, *"And many of the Samaritans of that city believed in Him because of the word of the woman who testified, 'He told me all that I ever did.' So when the Samaritans had*

*come to Him, they urged Him to stay with them; and He stayed there two days. And many more believed because of His own word.”*

*“Then they said to the woman, ‘Now we believe, not because of what you said, for we ourselves have heard Him and we know that this is indeed the Christ, the Savior of the world.’”*

Again, the prophetic posture of this story is displayed. Jesus stayed with these non-Jews for two days and they were just wonderfully receptive. No miracles were recorded; just the power of His word was enough to bring conversion. Peter recorded that, *“But, beloved, do not forget this one thing, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.”* (2 Pet 3:8) That is, we can see this ministry lasting, in a prophetic sense, about two thousand years. Of course, we are quickly approaching that point aren’t we? And it was after this period of time that Jesus returned to ‘His people’.

This also helps me understand why we’ve not seen during the church age as many bona fide miracles as we might think we would. Sure, God’s still in the business of miracles, but in all honesty, most people have come to Christ in this age based upon hearing Him personally speak to their heart.

It was in a mongrel Samaria that Jesus was first widely recognized as the Savior of the World. In a town called Drunken, it was indeed a ‘Happy Hour’ when the Lord found there those receptive to the Heavenly Quaff. For two days they listened and received the Living Water of His Words. May we all be as sincere with the Lord as this woman by the well. May we likewise leave our waterpots behind to spread the good news. It’s a

joyous message, a happy hour if you would, and we haven't got much time left.

## **The Second Sign**

**(See John 4)**

John 4:43 – 54

*“the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.” (Rev 19:10)*

How refreshing it must have been to Jesus during those two days in the town of Drunken. That’s what Sychar means – drunken. But the Samaritans weren’t the least bit inebriated physically. For two days, they drank of the water of life and without a single sign, not one miraculous healing or casting out of demons, they sincerely believed that Jesus was not only the Jewish Messiah but the Savior of the world. Why? His Word. They heard Him and believed.

This could hardly picture more prophetically the age in which we live and are quickly concluding. You see, for two days, (prophetically, two thousand years -- see 2 Pet 3:8), Christ ministered to these non-Jews, these ‘mongrel half-breeds’ who wanted to know God but were miserably misled by their traditions. In similar fashion those with the Spirit of Christ have ministered to the Lord’s sheep among the gentiles throughout this age, the church age.

But then it was time for Jesus to return to the Jews. Those in Judea were out to get Him, to take Him down, and those in His home town of Nazareth simply could not see Him as anything but the carpenter’s son. So, “...after the two days He departed from there and went to Galilee. For Jesus Himself testified that a prophet has no honor in his own country. So when He came to Galilee, the Galileans received Him, having seen all the

*things He did in Jerusalem at the feast; for they also had gone to the feast.”*

Notice the emphasis on seeing the things He did in Jerusalem. These folks were receptive but not in the manner of the Samaritans. They, like all who live by signs, craved more miracles to keep the leaky balloon of their shallow faith filled. Now, please do not think I mean to belittle the miracle working power of our Lord! To the contrary, He has done many, many outrageous miracles in my own life and I reverently treasure each one. Nevertheless, it is the wonderful Word of God that says, “...*faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.*” (Rom 10:17) Remember, the book of John is all about believing in Jesus (Jn 20:30,31).

Like the Galileans, the religious Jews of today are looking for a messiah who will fulfill myriad signs such as making it possible for them to build the temple and crushing their enemies. Actually, this is the very thing that will make them so susceptible to the lies and deceptions of the soon coming Antichrist. What they are looking for, he will seem to provide. Meanwhile, his protégé, the “false prophet”, will likely spin an interpretation of the scripture to make it look like the AC is the long awaited messiah and worthy of worship.

Back to our text. “*So Jesus came again to Cana of Galilee where He had made the water wine. And there was a certain nobleman whose son was sick at Capernaum. When he heard that Jesus had come out of Judea into Galilee, he went to Him and implored Him to come down and heal his son, for he was at the point of death.*” Now, this man was not

seeking a sign out of curiosity. He had a desperate need. He was of the king's court and had probably exhausted his other options. From Cana, it was about half a day's walk to Capernaum, and so it was no small thing he asked of Jesus. This stands in stark contrast to the Roman centurion of Matthew chapter eight, also in Capernaum, who insisted that Jesus had but to speak the word for his servant to be healed and that he wasn't worthy to have Christ come to his home. This father, however was desperately needing help for his son.

*“Then Jesus said to him, ‘Unless you people see signs and wonders, you will by no means believe.’”* ‘Wait a minute,’ you might ponder, ‘this fellow’s child was near death and yet Jesus seemed to scold him. That appears callous, almost distant.’ But Christ’s priority was and is faith – true faith in God. This man’s desperation had brought him the four to five hours journey from Capernaum to Cana. His first step back had to be in faith.

Notice also, that although Jesus addressed the man, he used the plural “you people”. What people? The Jews? Surely. However, let’s consider this a bit more. Paul wrote that the Jews, as a people seek after a sign, it’s in their nature (see 1 Cor 1:22). For this reason, I believe that Jesus here was speaking both to the Jewish people of His day and prophetically to those in these last days. You see, Jesus didn’t and doesn’t make mistakes... you’ll see what I mean.

*“The nobleman said to Him, ‘Sir, come down before my child dies!’”* Jesus said to him, ‘Go your way; your son lives.’ So the man believed the word that Jesus spoke to him, and he went his way. And as

*he was now going down, his servants met him and told him, saying, 'Your son lives!' Then he inquired of them the hour when he got better. And they said to him, 'Yesterday at the seventh hour the fever left him.' So the father knew that it was at the same hour in which Jesus said to him, 'Your son lives.' And he himself believed, and his whole household."*

Jesus had said, “‘Unless you people see signs and wonders, you will by no means believe.’” But then this man simply believed Jesus as He spoke the words, “your son lives”. In fact, it was only 1PM on the day this happened so if he had any doubt, the father could have easily made it back to Capernaum that evening. But in fact, he spent the rest of the day and the night in Cana before heading back. Clearly, he believed Jesus. The next day, when the servants confirmed the hour of his son’s healing, it served to confirm his faith and give birth to the same among his whole family. So, although Christ spoke to this man about the need for signs and wonders, he wasn’t speaking of him. Jesus was not mistaken! Never was, never is, never will be. Thus, it is likely that Jesus spoke of the Jewish people in general and it’s possible that this nobleman represents typically the group of Jews in the last days described as the ‘remnant’ – Jewish believers who will not be taken in by the AC’ s false miracles. (See Joel 2:32, Zeph 3:13, Zech 13:8-10, Rom 9:27; 11:5, Rev 12:17)

Whether that be the case or not, how about the rest of us believers? What does this vignette tell us of our Lord and our faith in Him?

God’s priority for us is faith and trust. It was the darkest, loneliest and most desperate night of my life. We had brought our 17 year old son, Gabriel, to the USF hospital for emergency critical care. His heart was enlarging and his pulmonary artery pressures were very high. As a

consequence, he was struggling to breath and his oxygenation levels had dropped from the 90's to the low 60's. As a teaching hospital, USF didn't assign a single doctor to be responsible for Gabe, but simply rotated interns through. Each one would ask the same questions, but none gave any help or hope. 24 different physicians in three days and only one indicated the least bit of compassion or concern. Gabriel's disease was rare and so they wanted to take advantage of the situation. In the process, they treated him as a guinea pig. The nursing staff was only slightly better but actually made things worse for our boy by mistakenly giving him drugs to which he reacted violently.

Clearly, he was getting worse and worse but we had trusted the Lord for 17 years, day by day, for his life and I could not face giving up on him. Four days without sleeping, I fought desperately in prayer.

His O2 levels were down in the 50's that night, if I remember right. I'd implored, just like this nobleman for God to intervene miraculously as He had before in Gabe's life. The weeping and desperation left me simply slumping on the floor of the deserted, dark waiting room. Then I knew, just knew, I had to let go. The Lord impressed upon my heart that He hadn't taken Gabe until then because of that. But now, it was time. He said to my heart that I had to trust Him, that Gabe was indeed in His hands, that heaven was real. I had to believe Him, not for health but for heaven.

To say that I did that full of faith would be a lie. But I did it. I told the Lord, "I trust You, Father. If it is Your will to take Him, and if You're waiting for me to release him in my heart, I do that now."

A few hours later, it was morning. His oxygen was down to the 40's and he struggled for every breath even with the oxygen mask over his face. I took a few moments to go to the waiting room again and pray. Suddenly, my daughter, Star rushed in exclaiming, "Dad! Dad! It's a miracle! His oxygen has gone back up to 93! They've never seen anything like it! The machine is working. They checked it and it's working right. Dad, come and see!"

My heart was pounding like thunder as I entered his little room and sure enough, I saw it with my own eyes – 91 and steady. Doctors and nurses were scrambling everywhere. The lead physician was dumbfounded. This was impossible. I whispered to Gabe – his eyes were closed and he was still breathing hard but with more peace – "Honey, your oxygen is back to near normal and these folks are amazed. The Lord is indeed here with you." He smiled his big grin.

It was real. The doctors verified it but couldn't explain it. For all of us who loved Gabe, it was a sign, a needed sign, that God was near, very near.

Even when He ushered Babe home later that day, I knew He had shown Himself – that He could do the temporary healing but chose to do the permanent healing.

Even when it means you don't get what you want from God, you must take Him at His word. You must know that you can trust Him for the ultimate good. Faith has never been about getting God to do things our way. It's always been about trusting Him and submitting to His way. When you've heard from Him and your heart is fully assured, that's when you can ask specifically with no wavering. All things are indeed possible

to him who believes but believing comes from hearing from Him first. Moving mountains, frankly, is not the big deal – He’s literally done that for me as well (someday I’ll share that story, perhaps) – the greater thing among the “all things” which are possible is when you can truly let Him have His way even when it is completely contrary to everything you desperately desire.

Next point, although the man implored, he also directed. Directing God is a sign of two things really. First, it reflects a fundamental distrust of Him. You see, if you truly believe He is Who He says He is – all good, all powerful, on your side, etc. – you can be confident that He will answer your prayers in the time and way that will ultimately and throughout eternity be best for you. Second, it shows that your relationship with Him is backwards – you’re trying to make Him submit to your will rather than finding your peace under the ‘shadow of His wing.’ For the nobleman, this posture had to change. As a member of the royal family or court, he was likely used to giving instructions to most of the people in his life.

Jesus didn’t go to the man’s home but He did save his son. Now, to his credit, the nobleman did not need a sign. He experienced a sudden change of heart and simply took Christ at His word. Believing His word without the tangible proof so to speak is always the guidepost that directs us along the narrow road of salvation. And this is as true for the newest believer as it is for the most aged saint. *“Faith is the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen.”*

As we consider Hebrews 11 and all the wonderful saints who are mentioned therein, we note that they all exhibited the same thing, the same

“I’ll take You at Your word, Lord” attitude. That’s why we call it the ‘Hall of Faith’.

Finally, Jesus acted when the nobleman addressed Him as Lord (Sir in the KJV). God is always concerned that we have the relationship right. Not because He needs the ‘strokes’ of our praise. But we will never be complete inwardly until we know Him as Lord. He is the Potter; we are the clay. If you’re like me, you will find yourself sometimes jumping off the potting wheel and landing splat on the floor. That’s a terribly humbling place to be, all mushy and disfigured – not because of what God did but what I did. It happens every time I try to be lord. How about you?

God may give us a sign from time to time. But the desire of His heart is that we learn to trust Him apart from signs, that we learn to relate to Him without directing or instructing for He indeed is our Lord. He truly does know what He’s doing.

*“This again is the second sign Jesus did when He had come out of Judea into Galilee.”*

# **Splash!**

## **Grumble, Grumble (See John 5)**

It just wasn't fair, and it was so frustrating! That's what he used to think; and now, his once sincere resolve had faded into a fatalistic sense of purposelessness. Falling, or rather shifting to the rear of the crowd, he figured that this was really where he belonged. Perhaps, he surmised, someone else could take his place and get the blessing. So there he lay, pitifully and grotesquely lamed – like a 'slug' on the pavement just waiting for God's 'saltshaker' to end his daily despondence.

There was a certain sense of sad humor as he watched the crowded area occasionally come to a frenzy, erupting with cries and splashes followed by the inevitable melancholy and murmuring. The competition was incredibly intense, and as a result he had come to think of himself as the ultimate loser. 'Both lame and unlucky. You know, if I just had someone to help me into the pool, I'd have a chance,' he thought.

To many, if not most of the people there, God was the originator and referee of this contest. Everyone knew that upon occasion, there was a rippling in the pool that could only be caused by an angel. Everyone also knew that the first one who managed to get into the pool after this disturbance of the water would be healed. Needless to say, everyone was perpetually sopping wet and as a consequence, cold and grumpy.

In any event, he'd come to accept that God must be a grand competitor Himself or at least He enjoyed giving the prize of a miracle to the most

dedicated, the quickest, the most resourceful or those that could push their way into position. It was clear that the healthy people in the area took delight as well in watching the chaos which spouted like a geyser now and then. Laughing mockery could be heard down every side alley.

After a long time, he was finally fed up with it all and resolved to his fate. ‘God is for the strong, the successful, the popular – for them, not me,’ he surmised. ‘It was good of Him to make a way – I mean, at least some can get a new life. But obviously, it’s not intended for me. My sins are just too ugly. I guess that’s why He’s judged me and here I am utterly hopeless. Reminds me of the ancient wilderness wanderings of our fathers.’

Sitting there, he had a lot of time to think about things and he developed a philosophy for most of what he observed, but God...? ‘Well, He was watching too, probably, from far away in heaven... I suppose He doesn’t care about me. Thirty-eight years like this!...Why...’

“Do you want to get well?” a calm inquiring voice tackled his attention.

‘What was that?’ Suddenly the shadow of a man nearby crossed his face blocking the blazing sun. He looked up and said, “Sir, I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me.”

‘What is this fellow doing here at the rear of the crowd?’ he wondered. ‘Hey, maybe I can convince him to help me to get in first! Maybe, he’ll push some of those big guys to the side. Maybe...’

“Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.”

To his utter amazement, he immediately sensed strength in his legs. His heart was beating incredibly fast... he jumped up and grabbed his mat. He

felt as though he'd never been lame. 'Where'd he go??' he exclaimed to himself, looking all around for the man who healed him and was now nowhere to be found.

The account of this wonderful miracle is found in John chapter five. Clearly, I'm taking some liberty in suggesting the thoughts that may have run through the lame man's mind. As you read it in the scripture though, you just want to shake your head in considering this poor man's plight. For thirty-eight years, a serious sin left him in his debilitating condition and ultimately he found himself hanging out at the only place he thought could help him yet he was no doubt hopeless in his pursuit for he apparently pictured God as a 'divine sports fan', an omnipotent umpire of sorts and he had to play the game in order to get the blessing.

But along came Jesus. Uninvited. Unannounced. Unknown.

One of the lessons we can glean from this story is how easy it is for us to think of God incorrectly -- in terms of what is valued in society. But God is not a competitor, nor is He interested in our competition. Neither are His blessings the result of some heavenly lotto. Now, you may think, 'Of course not!' But for many of us, the subtle impression lingers that God does applaud the spiritually 'strong' and ignore or abhor the 'weak'.

Sadly, many people admire Billy Graham, not for the power of his preaching but for the numbers -- the huge crowds, the vast organization, the thousands of respondents. Many people think large church organizations or glitzy Christian television programs are centers of Holy Spirit activity because of the sophisticated worship, the variety, the popular teachers, the radio, tape and TV options. Many people worship

God with the attitude of Bethesda. That is, ‘success’ in the contest is the measure of spirituality.

The ‘backwaters’ of this place are where the off-scouring settle. Pushed aside by the ‘healthy’ they come to the pool. The irony is that Bethesda means house of mercy or kindness and that’s what the spiritually hurting – the ‘unsuccessful’ are looking for. It’s not a physical place but a mindset. Pushed aside or simply not included with the ‘in’ crowd, many of God’s weaker sheep wind up discouraged and can get the impression that their Father in heaven is only interested in the ‘winners’, the spiritual people. Pastors whose pictures are prominent, lay leaders who are elders or deacons, anyone in ‘ministry’ – the spiritually bruised and beaten can often think that God really loves those people – He must – they made it into the pool so to speak before the rest of us. Ministers become celebrities of the congregation rather than servants.

But Jesus in this story blows that idea ‘out of the water’.

As a lesson on the character of our God and Saviour, this story mirrors the Old Testament account of the Hebrew nation wandering in the wilderness. Deut 2:14 tells us that, like this poor man, they sinned a great sin and wound up in the most difficult of circumstances for the same time -- 38 years. You remember, the older generation died off. Only the new generation, the new man in type, could enter by faith into the land of promise. For 38 years, the ark of God’s presence traveled with them but they remained homeless, because of their rebellious hearts.

It wasn’t until Moses died and Joshua took over that they could cross the Jordan dry-shod. You all know that Joshua is the same name as Jesus, and in our New Testament story, it is indeed Jesus who enters the scene and

takes charge. Now, as a symbol, Moses can be said to represent the law, the divine competition if you would. It was a godly game with hundreds of very good rules, but we all were quite hopeless to win it. And all our attempts to obey it, to win, to be the ‘first into the pool’ only drove us away, drove us further to the rear of the crowd. Do you know what I’m alluding to?

I suppose that there were those who pretended to have been healed in Bethesda’s waters, but they were probably only fooling themselves. There are also still sincere people today who to varying degrees try ‘faking it’ – oh, not so much with healing – that’s really not the point; rather, we can be insincere, dishonest with others and ourselves about our condition – our sin, our depravity, our total incapability to be good enough to please God on our own.

Referring back to the Jewish people in the wilderness, some of us also stumble in faith and then later try to make up for it by trying to do something like what we failed in earlier but on our own – just to show God we’re ‘worthy of His grace’ (which of course is an oxymoron). (See Num 14:39-45)

Now, prophetically, this story of Bethesda could be speaking of the Jewish people who did not recognize the Messiah partly because they misunderstood the true character of God. God loves the Jews, but for a long, long time they have missed it, they missed the opportunity to enter the spiritual land of promise and chose rather, like their forefathers, to wander with Moses in the wilderness, striving with their Maker. They sinned greatly in turning away from Christ, but one day soon, Jesus will

enter the picture again -- unannounced, uninvited but this time KNOWN. And they will be healed spiritually – no more games, no more contests.

Practically, we as Christians each must realize the Bethesda contest is not God's way, the mechanisms of religiosity do not faithfully portray the character or intent of our Lord. Much, if not most of that has been invented by others.

We have sinned. We are lame. Our attempts to win the religious contest will only result in our being cold, wet, grumpy and disillusioned. Clearly, we need a Savior – both to enter the kingdom of God and to live abundantly in it. You may not yet know Him, but His question is simple and to the point – “Do you want to be healed?”

Do you? Do you really? (Obviously, He asks the question for a reason.) Or do you just want Him to help you play the ‘game’, to help you into the ‘pool’? It's a difficult choice because it comes to truly believing in grace, believing in a fantastically gracious God. And that's a stretch for our naturally self-righteous performance-oriented senses. But, Bethesda was framed by five colonnades or porches and as many of you know, five speaks repeatedly of grace in the Bible.

Nevertheless, how many of us encourage the Bethesda mentality? How many of us act like ministry is a club rather than a calling? How many sheep are shifting to the back unable to ‘compete’ with the ‘winners’? We must take heed if we are to represent our Father faithfully – He sternly warns, *“And as for you, O My flock, thus says the Lord GOD: “Behold, I shall judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and goats. Is it too little for you to have eaten up the good pasture, that you must tread down with your feet the residue of your pasture--and to have drunk of the clear*

*waters, that you must foul the residue with your feet? And as for My flock, they eat what you have trampled with your feet, and they drink what you have fouled with your feet."*

*"Therefore thus says the Lord GOD to them: "Behold, I Myself will judge between the fat and the lean sheep. Because you have pushed with side and shoulder, butted all the weak ones with your horns, and scattered them abroad, therefore I will save My flock, and they shall no longer be a prey; and I will judge between sheep and sheep. Ez 34:17-22*

We must realize how easily the weak sheep are shifted out of focus, pushed to the side, scattered because they're not gathered. The Bethesda-Christianity does that. But God is not impressed with the powerful personalities.

Rather, here is our Savior – *"Behold! My Servant whom I uphold,*

*My Elect One in whom My soul delights!*

*I have put My Spirit upon Him;*

*He will bring forth justice to the Gentiles.*

*He will not cry out, nor raise His voice,*

*Nor cause His voice to be heard in the street.*

*A bruised reed He will not break,*

*And smoking flax He will not quench;*

*He will bring forth justice for truth."* Isa 42:1-3

Jesus goes to the discouraged, seeks out the lame, those in the rear of the crowd both in the world and in His church. While some are entertained by the 'splashing around', He offers the real solution and suddenly the game is over. Grace is the only way, not just a way.

Like Jesus, may we not be afraid to ignore the contest, to see it for what it is. May we find the ones to whom God seeks to be gracious. May we never push the weak aside.

# ***Out on a Limb?***

*(See John 6)*

*“Then a great multitude followed Him, because they saw His signs which He performed on those who were diseased. And Jesus went up on the mountain, and there He sat with His disciples.”*

*“Now the Passover, a feast of the Jews, was near. Then Jesus lifted up His eyes, and seeing a great multitude coming toward Him, He said to Philip, ‘Where shall we buy bread, that these may eat?’” (See John 6)*

We are all familiar with this story. Some 5,000 men along with thousands of women and children were approaching Jesus and His band of disciples. At this point, He had already done many marvelous miracles starting with the making of wine out of water. Philip, being one of His earliest followers had likely seen them all and now he was on the spot. Jesus’ question led him to first consider the practical, the logical impossibility of the situation – “where shall we buy bread...?”

*“But this He said to test him, for He Himself knew what He would do.”*

As we have written before, testing is an important principle of interaction with our Maker. Although God never tempts us with evil desires (see James 1:13, 14), He is very much into testing us at specific times for specific reasons. Yet, if you’re like me, testing in and of itself makes you uncomfortable because in our human experience it implies a pass or fail result.

John wanted to encourage our faith in Christ by recording a number of signs in his gospel. Nevertheless, it isn’t the sign in this chapter that first

grabs our attention but rather what prefaced it – the test. All believers are tested. Even Jesus was tested in all ways (Heb 4:15).

There, on the mountain, Christ knew what He was going to do so His question to Philip wasn't posed to discover a solution to the situation. The Lord wasn't befuddled or stressed out by the overwhelming crowd. The dining requirements weren't the least bit intimidating for Him.

So why the test?

*“Philip answered Him, ‘Two hundred denarii worth of bread is not sufficient for them, that every one of them may have a little.’”* Philip concluded that it would take an impossible or at least unreasonable sum of money to do what Jesus was implying, and there He stalled. Don't we often do the same?

Testing goes back to Eden where the choice to heed or rebel against God was placed squarely in the middle of the garden paradise. The first mention, however, of testing is in Genesis 22:

*“Now it came to pass after these things that God tested Abraham, and said to him, ‘Abraham!’”*

*“And he said, ‘Here I am.’”*

*“Then He said, ‘Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.’”*

The Greek word for the test pertaining to Philip and the feast is the same one used in Heb 11:17 that points back in time to this passage of Abraham with Isaac. In other words, the same type of thing was taking place with both men.

Throughout his pilgrimage, Abraham had demonstrated a full spectrum of human interaction with his Maker from:

- obedience in leaving Haran to go to the promised land to
- the disobedience of bringing along Lot to
- the fear of man in Egypt when he portrayed Sarai as his sister rather than his wife to
- the courage and faith to take on five armies to rescue his nephew Lot to
- the carnal ‘helping God out’ by having a son with Sarai’s handmaid Hagar to
- the faith to bargain with God to spare Sodom for just five godly people to
- the bitter grief and discouragement when Sodom was destroyed to
- the abandoning of Sarah to Abimelech soon after God had promised a son through her to
- the obedience of the circumcision to
- the obedience of sending out Hagar and her son Ishmael to
- the test of Genesis 22 which is perhaps the most obvious prophetic picture of what the heavenly Father later did with His Son, Jesus.

It’s clear that God did not pick Abram to leave Ur and later Haran because he was initially full of faith but because He knew the end from the beginning. He knew Abraham. (See Gen 18:19) Christ didn’t pick Philip and the other disciples because from the beginning they were outstanding examples of spirituality. In fact, Jesus, in answering Philip’s demand that He show them the Father responded, “*Have I been with you so long, and*

*yet you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; so how can you say, 'Show us the Father'?"* Yet Christ knew the end from the beginning. He knew the Philip who would die a martyr's death for his Lord.

So why the tests?

James tells us that there are various types of tests - James 1:2.

Generally, there are two sources and two intended outcomes. God tests our faith. Satan tempts our flesh. The proving of your faith in Christ produces steadfastness and patient enduring – James 1:3. In contrast, the tempting or 'baiting' test is not from God – James 1:14. It is intended to lead us astray from the truth into sin – James 1:16

In Eden, we were baited by the serpent with fruit from a tree. This is significant and instructive for both types of testing involve a sort of tasting if you would. You see, throughout scripture, mankind is likened unto trees – usually fruit bearing trees. Israel is typified specifically by the fig, the olive and the grape. The righteous are likened unto fruit bearing palms. (Psa 92:12) Jesus is likened unto an apple tree as well as the trunk of the grape tree. He is also pictured by the Tree of Life as He is the source of life to men. The person who meditates in the Word of God continually is like a tree that prospers near the rivers of water. (Psa 1) The wicked are like a fruitless yet vigorous tree. (Psa 37:35) The faithful remnant of believers will be called trees of righteousness. (Isa 61:3) Jesus spoke of righteous and evil men as trees (Mat 7:17, 18, 12:33) and even gave a blind man spiritual insight while healing his vision so that he initially did see men as trees (Mark 8:24). Paul likened believers unto wild olive branches grafted into the good olive tree. Jude characterized

the false believers unto trees “*whose fruit withers, without fruit, twice dead, plucked up by the roots.*” (Jud 1:12)

This tree imagery is important because it is intended to illustrate that God desires fruit from our lives – spiritual fruit. This is for our benefit and for His good pleasure. Jesus referred to our Father as the “husbandman” – the One who tends the vine or tree (John 15:1). Add to this what James recorded, “*Behold, the husbandman waits for the precious fruit of the earth, and has long patience for it...*” (James 5:7) and what Paul wrote, “*The husbandman that labors must be first partaker of the fruits.*” (2 Tim 2:6) and you begin to get the picture. When He’s testing, His purpose is to patiently produce, mature and ‘taste’ our fruit. Jesus also alluded to this when He gave the parable lessons in Luke 13:6-9 and Mat 21:33 – 41.

I think that’s one reason He placed Adam in the Garden of Eden in the first place. Beyond the simple enjoyment of the paradise and the blessing of God’s fellowship, Adam was probably meant to learn that as he tended the garden to maturity so God is tending us.

Now, He already knows what kind of tree you are so to speak. He knows all things. And the good news is that in testing us, ‘failure is not an option’ if you would. You see, He knows you and has promised never to test you to a greater degree than you can handle. (See 1 Cor 10:13). Like Philip, there are probably times you know you’ve fallen short, but you can be confident, as His child, that God is nonetheless working out His good will in you.

Peter, who, from our perspective, ‘failed’ the Lord at the very time he claimed that he wouldn’t later wrote, “*In this you greatly rejoice, though*

*now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ, whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, receiving the end of your faith--the salvation of your souls.” 1 Pet 1:6-9*

Additionally, the Lord may ‘taste’ the fruit of His work in your heart, but He is ever the initiator, for He first instructs us to taste His ‘fruit’, the fruit of His Spirit. See Gal 5:22, 23.

*“Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good;” Psa 34:8*

The psalmist praises, *“How sweet are Your words to my taste, Sweeter than honey to my mouth!” Psa 119:103*

It is written of the Beloved (Jesus) in the Song of Songs, *“As the apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among the sons. I sat down under his shadow with great delight, and his fruit was sweet to my taste.” Song 2:3*

Peter wrote, *“...as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby, if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is gracious.” 1 Pet 2:2, 3*

You see, in tasting the fruit of His Spirit, we experience the planting, watering, pruning, cleaning, fertilizing and weeding of His gentle hands which in turn causes us to bear the same kind of fruit. Love begets love!

Now, when Satan is testing or tempting, he is trying to get us to taste his fruit which simply appeals to the desires of our flesh. In fact, he is known as the “tempter” in scripture and his desire is to destroy us. James

wrote, "...each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death." James 1:14, 15 And Peter wrote, "Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul." 1 Pet 2:11

So back to Philip and Abraham. As Jesus showed, God knows what He's going to do ahead of time, all the time. He knows what kind of 'tree' you are. If you're born again, you are "His planting" (Isa 60:21, 61:3). On the mount with Christ, Philip came up short in faith, but Jesus never came down on him for missing the point. On the mount with Christ, the maturity of Abraham's faith was demonstrated and God commended him. On the mount alone, Christ passed the ultimate test of faith in our Father. In all cases, the Lord was glorified.

In testing our faith, God is ever glorified; of that you can be confident. In baiting a sincere believer's flesh, Satan, though at times seemingly successful, is fighting a lost battle - Calvary settled the issue.

You know how you should walk, so walk. And always remember, when you belong to the Lord, no created thing can separate you from His love. As Paul concluded, "...the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh, ... What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?...

*Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written:*

*'For Your sake we are killed all day long;*

*We are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.'*”

*“Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:2,3 & 31-39) Hallelujah!*

# Open Book

(See John 8)

Everyone who had condemned her to death was gone. But, there was Jesus, writing on the ground. Surely a stillness permeated the place so completely that no one dared to break it. The disciples probably looked on from the background, mouths agape. Did she dare approach? She was guilty and everyone knew it. She knew it.

The mob had departed, but incredibly, she remained. Nothing prevented her from running away. No one forced her to face the Teacher. Did her feet shuffle? Was her mouth dry? Did her heart race? Just one word from the man before her and she would have been brutally executed earlier. He had not defended her or dismissed her guilt but rather put it in the proper perspective. What would he do now that the threatening crowd had dispersed? (See John chapter 8)

How many would come that close to death and then stick around to face the conclusion of the matter? Yet, this woman waited. Why?

Faced with the painful humiliating reality of personal sin, people react in different ways. Peter wept bitterly. (Mat 26:75) The humble worshiper in Christ's parable, "*standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner.*" (Luke 18) Paul exclaimed, "*Oh, wretched man that I am. Who shall deliver me from this body of death?*" (Rom 7:24) Isaiah cried, "*Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips,...*" (Isa 6:5) Cain barked, "*Am I my brother's keeper?*" (Gen 4:9) Judas hung himself.

(Acts 1:18) Adam ‘passed the buck’. (Gen 3:12) David confessed. (2 Sam 12:7-13) Saul made excuses. (1 Sam 13:11)

Basically though, our reactions show that we all fall into one of two camps -- children of light or children of darkness. You see, men love darkness. *And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.* (John 3:19) On the other hand, the children of God love light for they are the children of light. *For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus.* (Gal 3:26) *Ye are all the children of light, and the children of the day: we are not of the night, nor of darkness.* (1Th 5:5) In this life however, both fall short – some less than others. Nevertheless, both miss the mark.

Now, where ever the Light of Life shines it exposes. (Eph 5:13) When it exposes sin in our lives, we react to it based upon how we perceive God. And we perceive God based upon our relationship to Him.

So how does the light shine? Most of us as believers are not confronted with sin directly by other people because our contemporary concepts of church participation focus us on teaching/preaching and musical worship to the exclusion of sanctification and authentic pastoring. We so much want to be in unity that we can tend to dismiss the notion of loving correction as an endangerment to that goal. And it’s true that high-minded criticality will drive wedges between people, but in some cases, we’ve swung the pendulum so far to the extreme that wayward believers are rarely confronted lovingly with their error on a personal basis.

Consequently, we need to listen individually even more closely to the voice of the Holy Spirit within as He brings conviction of sin. Notice, I

did not say condemnation. For the believer, there is no condemnation from God but rather conviction and correction.

Now all of this is important to us because we live in the Christian culture characteristic of Laodecia. (See Rev 3) Observably, the large majority in this culture are spiritually “*neither cold nor hot*” and by comparison to the church throughout the ages, have the sad distinction of acting like we are “*rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing*”. We are coddled in ‘country clubs’ we boast as churches and experience the Christian life as not much more than a buffet of choices focused fundamentally on personal gratification. And the sad thing is that we are typically blind to it. Many have left Jesus outside knocking and don’t realize it.

When some audacious preacher has the temerity to tell us about our condition even in the most cautious terms, the ‘spiritually offended’ find another buffet at which to dine, a more amiable country club, a more interesting essay to read.

You may think I’m being harsh, unfair, overly this or that, but we are in this ‘soup’ together. Like Lot’s children when he tried to warn them, you may think I’m not to be taken seriously. You may think, ‘I’m not a sinner like this woman taken in adultery.’ If so, you’ve missed the point for indeed you are – so am I.

On the other hand, you may be standing with me, and like the woman in our story above, before the Lord, ashamed, exposed, unworthy of His defense. If you are truly ‘hanging with me’ on this, it is likely because you know you’re guilty, but you also sense that the One whom you’re facing will not condemn. Oh, we could run away. We could try to hide from the awful truth.

This woman stayed to hear from her Savior. She stayed to look into His eyes and know His heart. When He said, *“Woman, where are those accusers of yours? Has no one condemned you?”* she may have been hanging her head. But, when she replied, *“No one, Lord.”* I’m very much inclined to envision her eyes finding His in hope. The light was shining and she was bathing in it. Jesus washed her with these words, *“Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more.”*

Several commentators note that the Greek word used earlier for “without sin” when Jesus answered the accusing mob, can mean without the same sin – whether it was the same type of sin or simply sin in general, the others knew they were guilty too. They had dropped their stones and walked away. Confronted with the fact of their own personal sin, they did not stick around. The light was too much for them. They retreated into their beloved darkness.

Interestingly enough, this story was not read in the early churches generally. It was even left out of most early Greek manuscripts. *“Augustine definitely stated that certain individuals had removed from their codices the section regarding the adulteress, because they feared women would appeal to this story as an excuse for infidelity ... asceticism played an important role in the sub-apostolic age.”* -- William Hendriksen

Most generally, contemporary commentators deal with John 8:1-11 even though the new paragraph mark begins with verse 13. Now, divisions of paragraph magnitude were the first punctuation marks that were added into the New Testament texts so the assumption that this story ends with verse 11 is not based upon something provided by the author in the original language. In fact, early manuscripts place John 7:53 – 8:11 in

several places. Those placements, however, cannot be given any more legitimacy than the complete exclusion of the passage. I'm inclined to believe that the text in John 8 from verse 1 – 20 represents a single passage pertaining to what happened as Jesus was teaching in the temple treasury. Notice it begins and ends with those comments.

Having said that, it seems that to those who were watching this whole scene agasp, He continued, *"I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life."* The word He used here for follow means to follow as a disciple. This was likely a general statement, but it could also be that this woman at one point previously had tried to follow Jesus. In addition, He addressed her kindly, using the general term, *gune*, that denotes a woman, usually a married woman, the same word He used to address Mary his mother and other women who distinctively had faith in Him. Clearly, we do not know for sure whether that is the case or not, however she found not only a temporary reprieve from her accusers but grace. And that is because, contrary to the rest of the sinful crowd, she stuck around. She welcomed the Light.

In some Christian circles there is a tendency to hide from the light not so much because of what the Lord will think but what we suspect men will think. We believe that men will usually want to 'stone us'. But being 'salt and light' in this world has much more to do with honesty and humility than moral purity. To "walk in the Light" does not mean to walk in such a way that everyone oo's and ah's at your spiritual splendor or achievements but that under the guidance of the Spirit of God you are an **open book** – not pretending or disguised but rather transparent and on

display. You see, this is the only way people can really see Jesus Christ working in you and through you. This is how they see your good works and glorify God.(Mat 5:16)

John wrote, “*If we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*” (1 John 1:7-9 emphasis added)

Paul wrote, “*Brethren, if any person is overtaken in misconduct or sin of any sort, you who are spiritual [who are responsive to and controlled by the Spirit] should set him right and restore and reinstate him, without any sense of superiority and with all gentleness, keeping an attentive eye on yourself, lest you should be tempted also.*

*Bear (endure, carry) one another's burdens and troublesome moral faults, and in this way fulfill and observe perfectly the law of Christ (the Messiah) and complete what is lacking [in your obedience to it].*

*For if any person thinks himself to be somebody [too important to condescend to shoulder another's load] when he is nobody ..., he deceives and deludes and cheats himself.” (Gal 6:1-3 Amplified Version)*

Do you love the Light even though it exposes? You will if you're born again. When you know your Father and your Savior as you should, His light is wonderfully welcome. It is truthful, but it is Life. Don't hide from it. Don't just drop your rock and retreat. Don't follow the crowd. Walk in the Light – the shining Light of the bright Morning Star. Hang in there

and discover the grace that is in the face of our Savior Jesus (See Mat 17:2 and 2 Cor 4:6).

# All Muddied Up

(See John 9)

“Ouch! Wha-what are you doing?! Hey, I didn’t ask for this! Man, that stings!”

Here’s this guy, born blind. He’s never seen anything, anytime, anywhere. He’s probably been parked there on the street by parents or friends to beg for coins or handouts. But he’s not complaining; he knows nothing else really. And, then comes his time... an appointment with his Creator.

Along comes Jesus with His disciples and before you know it, they’re pursuing a perplexing issue – why was this man born blind?

Now, either they knew him or someone filled them in because there’s no record of this fellow explaining his state of being born that way. In any event, the situation was theologically a ‘hot button’ for the rabbis taught that if such was the case, either the man sinned in the womb and thus deserved blindness or else his parents sinned such that the fruit of their folly was to pass blindness on to their child.

So the disciples asked, “*Rabbi* (a title used by the Jews to address their teachers), *who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?*” (See John 9) You see, just as the only thing this blind fellow knew was darkness, all the disciples could fathom was what the rabbis opined. Either the man sinned or his parents – that’s all they knew, and it was darkness as well – spiritual darkness. Now, they were curious, what would rabbi Jesus say?

So what Christ Jesus replied must have just zapped them.

*“Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him.”*

‘Whoa, no one sinned!?! Lord, you mean this guy’s been blind for his whole life, he’s begged in the streets, he’s been unwelcome in the synagogue ... so God’s works can be seen??’ If I were there, that’s probably what I would have thought; ‘You mean his pitiful state is somehow God’s work? That doesn’t add up, rabbi.’ What about cause and effect??

In some ways, the disciples were just as blind as this man but perhaps at a disadvantage for at least the blind man knew he was blind.

Now, the Old Testament scriptures contain promises that the Messiah would open the eyes of the blind and Jesus did that numerous times. But I submit that as great a miracle as it is to physically heal, spiritual blindness is far more consequential and to be healed of the same far more noteworthy. Typically though, we are so blind to the spiritual world, that we undervalue it and tend to interpret God’s ways, His works and His wonders in the context of the here and now; it’s all we know. We were born into it after all. In this way, we were born blind as well.

When God’s word says, “...*exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think...*” our minds tend first to consider temporal blessings. When we read, “... *Who heals all our diseases...*” we first figure that it means now - here in this life. We sometimes hear the pragmatists among us lightly referring to eternity as “the sweet by and by” or as “pie in the sky.” Frankly, many of us only understand the Word of God in the context of

the temporal – that is until we get mud in our eyes. And that’s just what Christ did.

Like you, I’ve heard a lot of good guesses as to why Jesus made mud with His spit and rubbed it into this man’s eyes. He could have spoken the command, “Now see.” Or gently touched him or used any other more ‘dignified’ way to do this miracle but no – for this guy, He made mud -- spit and dirt. Wow, that must have stung something awful! I mean, I get one speck of dust in my contacts and I know it right away.

But two points jump out – first, it was certainly a pragmatic way to ensure that this man who might not have done so otherwise would obey the command to go wash in the pool of Siloam.

And why spit? I’ll suggest that as the spit came from Christ’s mouth, so too do the situations that sometimes ‘muddy our own eyes’. Now, I’m not talking about the situations that come to us solely as a consequence of our sin, but rather the troubles and difficulties He Himself has ordained for our ultimate benefit. Sometimes dirty deals, muddy messes yet spoken forth by His mouth.

(Prophetically, this is interesting for Jesus made “pelos” – mud or clay, which speaks expressly in the Bible of the Jewish people (Isa 64:8, Jer 18:6). You could say this pictures God using the Jews as an ‘irritation’ in the eyes of the blind world in order that they might come to see Christ.) Anyway, this man has got mud in his eyes.

And washing is just what the ‘doctor’ ordered in such a case – washing by the water of God’s Word! (Eph 5:26) For His Word is truly enlightening (Psa 119:130). But such washing is not just the result of scholarship – rather, receptivity and obedience. Let me repeat that –

washing isn't simply looking at the water, it isn't just learning about the water, it isn't even in just listening to the water – it is in contact with the water, emersion in the water – that is, receptivity and obedience.

Some folks think that because they simply read or listen to the Word, that, in and of itself, is taking care of this cleansing and that's not necessarily so. Oh, reading the scriptures diligently and listening to those speaking it are absolutely critical in the life of a believer! But, it doesn't stop there. Whether in the pew or the pulpit, the heart that pleases God is the one that trembles at His word (Isaiah 66:2) and that takes heed to it (Psa 119:9).

Second, this gives us a wonderful illustration of how God gives sight to the eyes of our heart – spiritual sight. This fellow was the subject of God's attention; Christ came to him. Not the other way around. Jesus knew his condition and his situation. In like manner, whether you've considered yourself a 'seeker' or no, if you're saved and a member of God's family, it's because God found you. And...

Mud works. It's God's way so often with those of us who are not only blind but satisfied with that blindness. Mud is not a healing balm, it's an irritant! So are the situations God puts us in sometimes to eventually open our eyes. Heartaches, heartbreaks, tribulation and sorrow – so often, they're 'mud in the eye'.

But in obedience to Jesus, this guy went to the pool of Siloam to wash. It was southeast of the old city, but who knows how far it was; perhaps he wondered along the way why this man Jesus did it this way. Have you wandered and wondered in tribulation? Seem like you're just feeling your way along sometimes? Impossible situation? Recall, no one had ever

healed a person who'd been born blind before, and this guy knew it. He knew his situation was impossible. (John 9:32)

But he went, he washed, and he returned seeing. Dear friend, if you're in such a state, take courage that your Siloam is reachable. God wouldn't send you there if it weren't. How far away is it? Not far. You'll make it. Wash in the water of His Word. Not only will you be clean, but you will see for the first time what you never saw before – not just physically but spiritually.

You see, as if to punctuate the point, the Holy Spirit demonstrates to us that this man who first only knew his Maker as someone called Jesus (John 9:11), came to see Him as a healer (John 9:15), then a prophet (John 9:17), then as the Son of God (John 9:38). The true healing was his salvation. He saw Christ for who He is and believed.

While the disciples were still calling Jesus “rabbi” (John 9:2), this man, once doubly blind, now called Him Lord. He became ‘heavenly minded’ so to speak. One dear pastor friend of mine told me that since becoming devastatingly ill, he recognized the context of heaven and eternity in so much more of the scripture than ever before.

Mud does that. It leads to new eyesight as God opens our eyes to behold wondrous things (Psa 119:18), to recognize our Messiah, to better know our Father, to discern His Spirit, to set our minds on things above and thus to bear truly good fruit.

Can you relate to this guy? Stumbling in the darkness of grief and sorrow, I came to my own Siloam and began to wash and wash and wash and wash and wash. Gradually, my smoldering ember of hope re-ignited

and then as if by the nape of the neck, the Lord took me out of the pit and set my feet once again upon the Rock (*Psa 40:2*)

In the ‘trembling’ study of His Word, you will see Him and be reminded of what you know – God is good. Heaven is real. His promises are sure. Your heart will recognize your Savior afresh and much more clearly. You’ll realize that it was His hand that gently applied the mud if you would.

Certainly, we can appreciate the application of this passage to those who don’t know the Lord. But, we as Christians can also have much more to see concerning our triune Lord. By salvation, we know Him as Savior, we know Him as our Lord, our King, our Maker, our Bridegroom, our Father, our Comforter, our ... but can we still see more? Yes, resoundingly, yes. In fact, I’m convinced that we will spend eternity doing so.

In heaven the four living creatures (full of eyes) around God’s throne keep saying, “Holy, holy, holy!” each time they see Him. Clearly, they are continually astounded and awed!

But here in these Shadowlands, while we’re still in a tent of flesh, He will often muddy us up for that very same purpose – to see Him more clearly.

# *Life and Love*

*(See John 11)*

The seventh sign which the apostle John recorded for us in his gospel is clearly the most powerful. In fact, as you examine the ‘trend’ of the signs John picked to nurture our faith, they lead us up a spiritual mountain and with this chapter we are nearing the summit. Each sign has stretched our hearts to embrace an increasingly impressive Savior. Like Abraham with his son Isaac ascending Mt. Moriah, we can sense the approaching lesson, the impending decision point. We are being guided toward the apex of belief a step at a time.

A careful study of Genesis chapters one and two shows that the first statement God made to Adam dealt with death. (Gen 2:15-17) And, since Paul wrote, “*The last enemy that will be destroyed is death,*” like bookends, you can consider it as the first and last enemy of mankind. (See 1 Cor 15:26). We all must deal with death – our own and the death of those we love.

Thus, as we make the trek up this spiritual mount so to speak, the panoramic vista is not revealed until we reach the top. There, the breathtaking scene is revealed -- the ultimate plan and purposes of God. Unless you take these next steps of faith concerning life and love, your faith will be frail. Whether ‘the hike’ has left you hopeful or heavy of heart, hang in there. This sign will usher you in to a whole new perspective.

*Now a certain man was sick, Lazarus of Bethany, the town of Mary and her sister Martha. It was that Mary who anointed the Lord with fragrant*

*oil and wiped His feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was sick. Therefore the sisters sent to Him, saying, "Lord, behold, he whom **You love** is sick."*

*When Jesus heard that, He said, "This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it."*

The first thing John wanted us to understand is that there was a wonderful, personal, even intimate and worshipful relationship between this little trio and Jesus. In fact, it is emphasized that Jesus loved Lazarus. Their words and conduct lead us to assume that the siblings loved Christ as well, but the critical point that John, by the Spirit, communicated was Jesus' love. This is vital to keep in view, for we often tend to think that God responds to us, to our need, to our plight because we love Him and that isn't so. God loves you. His response to your pleas is not based upon the condition of your sometimes wayward heart. It is based upon His relentless, compelling love for you and His Son. It is a love that doesn't change. It is vast and never ending.

The Lord's message, likely carried back to the family, spoke of God the Father and God the Son being glorified through the circumstance. Specifically, He said that His beloved friend's illness would not end in death. What a difficult thing it must have been for Mary and Martha to hear that and yet witness their brother's dieing and being entombed. Can you relate to that? Have you ever felt let down by the Lord based upon something you thought you understood from His Word or that you thought you received in prayer?

*Now **Jesus loved** Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So, when He heard that he was sick, He stayed two more days in the place where He was. Then after this He said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again."*

Now, lest you think, after those first verses, that Jesus loved Lazarus and Mary, since she was known for her worship of the Lord, but less so Martha, the Spirit turned around the order and clarified that Jesus truly loved Martha (and, oh, her sister too). This is to dispel the notion that God only loves the ‘spiritual’ folks, the really worshipful ones. Lazarus was the one in need, Mary was the spiritual celebrity of sorts and Martha, well she was just there to serve. She expressed her love differently than Mary and perhaps the intensity of spiritual matters was a bit much for her. Nevertheless, John emphasized that Jesus loved her. So too, those of you who relate to Martha.

Also, notice that little “So” (or “Therefore” depending on your translation) following the declaration of His love for them. In other words, what He did, He did because He loved them. He stayed two days before making His return. Now, we know that He could have spoken the word and Lazarus would have been healed or even raised up. The trek back to Bethany wasn’t necessary for His friend’s health. But it all was necessary for a far more consequential purpose – their faith.

Limited by His earthly body, His return came when the man had been in the tomb for four days. Although it is not our main lesson, I suggest that this whole story is prophetically picturesque as well. We realize from 2Pet 3:8 that a prophetic day represents a 1000 years. Thus, Jesus waiting to return to Bethany (which means House of Misery) for two days could picture Christ waiting two thousand years to return to our miserable planet

earth in order to save and resurrect His people. The four days could picture the four thousand years it's been since the calling forth of Abraham and the beginning of the Jewish people until now. And interestingly enough, Lazarus the name means "helped by God", whereas both Mary and Martha's names are rooted in the word for "rebellious" or "rebellion". Remember, this is a word picture and has nothing to do with the specific people. This may be significant in light of Zech 13:7-9 which, referring to the Jewish people in the last days, says,

*Then I will turn My hand against the little ones.*

*And it shall come to pass in all the land,"*

*Says the LORD,*

*"That two-thirds in it shall be cut off and die, (the rebellious)*

*But one-third shall be left in it:*

*I will bring the one-third through the fire, (those 'helped by God')*

*Will refine them as silver is refined,*

*And test them as gold is tested.*

*They will call on My name,*

*And I will answer them.*

*I will say, "This is My people';*

*And each one will say, "The LORD is my God.""*

It may also be significant that Jesus will say next, "*Our friend Lazarus sleeps, but I go that I may wake him.*" If indeed Lazarus represents, as his name indicates, the remnant of the Jewish people whom God helps during the tribulation, the following verses which clearly pertain to that time are in line with this prophetic picture:

Your dead shall live; *(the remnant who will be saved)*

Together with my dead body *(Jesus)* they shall arise.

Awake and sing, you who dwell in dust;

For your dew is like the dew of herbs,

And the earth shall cast out the dead.

Come, my people, enter your chambers, *(in the wilderness during the tribulation?)*

And shut your doors behind you;

Hide yourself, as it were, for a little moment,

Until the indignation is past.

For behold, the LORD comes out of His place

To punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity;

The earth will also disclose her blood,

And will no more cover her slain.

Isaiah 26:19-21

Awake, awake!

*Put on your strength, O Zion;*

*Put on your beautiful garments, (robes of righteousness?)*

*O Jerusalem, the holy city!*

*For the uncircumcised and the unclean*

*Shall no longer come to you.*

Isaiah 52:1

*At that time Michael shall stand up,*

*The great prince who stands watch over the sons of your people;*

*And there shall be a time of trouble, (Jacob's Trouble – the tribulation)*

*Such as never was since there was a nation,  
Even to that time.*

*And at that time your people (the Jewish remnant) shall be delivered,  
Every one who is found written in the book.*

*And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake,  
Dan 12:1,2*

Be that as it may, Jesus waited because He loved them. Likewise, God will wait until the time is right concerning you and I as well. Not because He doesn't care but just the opposite, because He does. If Jesus had responded immediately as the sisters (and Lazarus!) desired, the healing would have taken place and yet the far greater miracle would have been missed. And as a result, the people's belief in Jesus as the Christ would have been static and less potent.

*The disciples said to Him, "Rabbi, lately the Jews sought to stone You, and are You going there again?"*

*Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. But if one walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him."*

*These things He said, and after that He said to them, "Our friend Lazarus sleeps, but I go that I may wake him up."*

*Then His disciples said, "Lord, if he sleeps he will get well." However, Jesus spoke of his death, but they thought that He was speaking about taking rest in sleep.*

*Then Jesus said to them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. And I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, that you may believe. Nevertheless let us go to him."*

This last verse grabs me. He said that He was glad He wasn't there so that they would believe. Believe what? Again, we are reminded that John has presented this specifically to help us to believe that Jesus is the Christ (See John 20:30,31). However, they had already confessed that they believed He was the Messiah back in chapter Six when Peter said, "You alone have the words of life." But, as with Martha in the coming verses, I suggest that their faith in Christ was not yet full. Likewise, our faith in Christ grows; we often believe in a Christ Who first changes our direction in life, Who then provides for us, Who heals our maladies and does miracles, Who teaches and comforts us, Who leads us in our pilgrimage and then Who ultimately goes with us through the valley of the shadow of death and resurrects us to eternal life.

*Then Thomas, who is called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with Him."*

You gotta love Thomas. Church history indicates that he may have been called the Twin because he so closely resembled Jesus. In any case, he was willing to die with the Lord. Perhaps this was why he was bitterly defiant in accepting the resurrection, feeling shunned and left out when Jesus at first appeared to everyone else but him. Perhaps he felt like his love was unreciprocated. Ever feel that way? Like Thomas, when we do, we need to consider His scars.

*So when Jesus came, He found that he had already been in the tomb four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles away. And*

*many of the Jews had joined the women around Martha and Mary, to comfort them concerning their brother.*

*Now Martha, as soon as she heard that Jesus was coming, went and met Him, but Mary was sitting in the house. Now Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give You."*

*Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."*

*Martha said to Him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."*

*Jesus said to her, "**I am the resurrection and the life.** He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?"*

*She said to Him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who is to come into the world."*

Notice how she skirted the answer? Now, she was grieving and perhaps deeply disappointed in Jesus. The Lord had said her brother wouldn't die and yet ... he died. She called for His help and He had seemed to turn a cold shoulder. She wanted to believe. She gave Him the best answer she could at the time. Perhaps, "the Christ, the Son of God" meant to her an anointed teacher or healer or great leader, someone with influence in the heavenlies. This was what it meant to the disciples at this point. Yet, Jesus wanted her to believe something far more powerful; He wanted her and His disciples to believe a pinnacle principle of Christian faith – "*I am the resurrection and the life.*" Notice that this potent faith is in the person of Jesus and that it is in the present tense – not something He was or will be but something He is forever.

*And when she had said these things, she went her way and secretly called Mary her sister, saying, "The Teacher has come and is calling for you." As soon as she heard that, she arose quickly and came to Him. Now Jesus had not yet come into the town, but was in the place where Martha met Him. Then the Jews who were with her in the house, and comforting her, when they saw that Mary rose up quickly and went out, followed her, saying, "She is going to the tomb to weep there."*

*Then, when Mary came where Jesus was, and saw Him, she fell down at His feet, saying to Him, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died."*

Mary's statement, echoing Martha's, was true. That's exactly why He'd waited. But she didn't understand that yet any more than her sister. Martha probably used the name "Rabbi" when she said "the Teacher". In any case, that description is a long ways from what we should think of when we hear the title, Son of God. Whether or not she ever held a more noble concept of Jesus, at this point He was just a Teacher.

The bitterness of disappointment can do that to our concept of the Lord. We may publicly confess that we think of Him as "the Christ, the Son of God" and yet privately consider Him "the Teacher". Indeed, Jesus was the Teacher but He was/is far, far more.

*Therefore, when Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her weeping, He groaned in the spirit and was troubled. And He said, "Where have you laid him?"*

*They said to Him, "Lord, come and see."*

*Jesus wept. Then the Jews said, "See how **He loved him!**"*

Many have proposed reasons for Christ's tears here. The wording though points back to His seeing Mary weeping as well as those with her. What this tells me is that despite His divine power and foreknowledge, Jesus and God the Father completely know and even share our sadness. The Greeks thought of divinity as being stoic, that is, unfeeling. However, Jesus, seeing the sorrow of His dearly loved friend wept with her. (See Romans 12:15) As He walks with us through the deepest, darkest times of our lives, He's not there 'in name only' but rather as a participant, One Who knows the way because He's traveled it before and now along with you.

*And some of them said, "Could not this Man, who opened the eyes of the blind, also have kept this man from dying?"*

*Then Jesus, again groaning in Himself, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone."*

*Martha, the sister of him who was dead, said to Him, "Lord, by this time there is a stench, for he has been dead four days."*

Fundamentally, this expression, "groaning in Himself" means to be moved with anger. Was He angry at their lack of faith? Perhaps. Martha still didn't get it. No one present got it. They simply DIDN'T know who Jesus really is. And so, this was to be a wake up call for everyone including Lazarus.

*Jesus said to her, "Did I not say to you that if you would believe you would see the glory of God?" Then they took away the stone from the place where the dead man was lying. And Jesus lifted up His eyes and said, "Father, I thank You that You have heard Me. And I know that You always hear Me, but because of the people who are standing by I said this,*

*that they may believe that You sent Me." Now when He had said these things, He cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come forth!" And he who had died came out bound hand and foot with grave clothes, and his face was wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Loose him, and let him go."*

Like Mary and Martha, the death of a loved one can sorely test our faith in Christ. We can allow our grief to relegate Him to the role of the ‘Someday Savior’ – because we don’t understand His ways. The whole situation then stinks and whether like Mary we fall weeping at His feet or like Martha simply run away from the spiritual intensity, our feeble perception of Christ is wrongly based upon our seeing Him as late or missing or utterly disappointing. Meanwhile, He weeps with us.

Like Lazarus, we have all been wrapped in the grave clothes of sin and doubt. But Jesus loves us. Coming forth from the tomb in response the call of Christ is a wonderful picture of salvation. But even in such a state – new life – we need to be ‘unwrapped’ and Jesus gives that job to those who love us.

Like everyone in the story, Jesus wants us to know, to truly know, that He is the Resurrection and the Life. It’s not just someday in the ‘sweet bye and bye’. It’s in Him and it’s now – life and love.

Climbing this pilgrimage trail, the dark horizon that has drawn your attention downward suddenly gives way as you reach the summit. There, the splendor and magnificence of the heavenly view lifts your tired, broken heart into excitement, cascading joy, a perfect peace. You are filled with astonishment at Who this Man really is. ‘What was I thinking??’ your heart sings and laughs. He is so much more than I ever thought. And He’s led me here because He loves me. How difficult the

journey can be, but it is truly unworthy to be compared to what awaits us who love Him. Now, I know God sent You. Hallelujah!

## What's the 'Diff'?

(See John 15)

Slammed up against the locker, held firmly some distance above the floor by his incensed classmate, my then 15 year old son Michael had simply told his very large and infamously brutal assailant, "Jesus loves you and gave His life for you." The reply was an angry, "Don't ever mention that name to me again!" or something to that effect.

We are different, or we're supposed to be, and the world hates it. Jesus guaranteed that if we would live a godly life, we'd be loved and hated, appreciated and persecuted. (John 15:18-20) Increasingly though, something is happening to the church – it's happened before of course, and in fact there's some Old Testament stories which illustrate it.

In Exodus, we read that Moses led the Hebrew people out of Egypt; many Bible teachers liken their freedom from Pharaoh and passing through the Red Sea unto an OT picture of NT salvation and consequent baptism. Anyway, as they traveled, Exodus 12:28 says, "*And a mixed multitude went up also with them; and flocks, and herds, even very much cattle.*" of whom Matthew Henry notes, "*Probably the greatest part of this mixed multitude were but a rude unthinking mob, that followed the crowd they knew not why; we afterwards find that they proved a snare to them, and it is probable that when, soon afterwards, they understood that the children of Israel were to continue forty years in the wilderness, they quitted them, and returned to Egypt.*"

These stragglers, caught in the tow if you would of the newly liberated Hebrew people were both a snare and a vulnerability. It was in these

outskirts of the camp, the outer fringes so to speak, that this mixed multitude had a terrible effect. As Numbers 11:1-4 shows, a murmuring arose there against the Lord and as a consequence, He sent a consuming fire among them. Yet remaining unrepentant, this same group of people then began to lust uncontrollably, and their attitude led the people of Israel nearby to do the same. They wept and moaned again that they wanted MEAT – flesh, flesh, flesh! They even began to despise the heavenly mannah.

It drove Moses to the brink – he wanted out; he wanted God just to kill him. Instead, the Lord brought an incredibly huge swarm of quail into the camp right in the ‘strike-zone’. So, as my pastor used to say, “They were battin’ down the quail. Homers everywhere!” (See Num 11:32 Yeah, I know, it was a poor pun then and still is.)

But then the Lord brought judgment upon those who lusted -- “*And while the flesh was yet between their teeth, ere it was chewed, the wrath of the LORD was kindled against the people, and the LORD smote the people with a very great plague. And he called the name of that place Kibrothhattaavah (graves of lust): because there they buried the people that lusted.*” Num 11:33,34

Not only was the mixed multitude a snare to Israel, but they were a weakness and a vulnerability as well. You see, as the host of Israel moved, it was these fringe-folk who were attacked first. Moses, in Deuteronomy reminded them, “*Remember what Amalek did unto thee by the way, when ye were come forth out of Egypt; How he met thee by the way, and smote the hindmost of thee, even all that were feeble behind thee, when thou wast faint and weary; and he feared not God.*” Deut 25:17,18

The feeble and weak naturally fell behind and thus were amidst the mixed multitude. There, they were prey to the Amalekites (see Ex 17:8-15) – those descendants of Esau who quite adequately portray the sinful flesh.

Yes, mixture has been the perpetual plague-conundrum of Israel. The more they stood out from the world around them, the more they wanted to fit in. The more they fit in, the more they wanted to rise above and be separate. This is historically true and prophetically accurate as well. In Hosea, the Lord said, “*Ephraim, (the ten northern tribes of Israel) he hath mixed himself among the people;*” (Hos 7:8) Historically, although they have in some case adopted the ways of the gentiles around them, the Jews have remained a ‘lumpy’ mix at best. In fact, no other people group has lasted more than two generations outside their homeland as clearly indigenous. The Israelites however, were displaced from their homeland for as much as 2500 years and yet maintained their national identity.

And prophetically -- in Daniel’s famous interpretation of King Nebuchadnezzar’s dream, he revealed that, “...*whereas thou sawest iron mixed with miry clay, they shall mingle themselves with the seed of men: but they shall not cleave one to another, even as iron is not mixed with clay.*” (Dan 2:43) As I’ve written before, I’m convinced that the clay in this vision is properly interpreted to be the Jewish people – the scripture makes that clear in Isa 45:9, Jer 18:6 and Isa 64:8. Therefore, I’m persuaded that this mingling with the ‘seed of men’ (i.e. gentiles) will be done by the Jews, trying as ever to fit in to the world - perhaps, it speaks specifically of Israel trying to mingle with the EU.

In any event, the consequences of mixture are the same for the church as for the Jewish people. As the last days church has in many places and in

many aspects cooled to a tepid temp spiritually, it has become itself a mix indistinguishable from the world. Christian media mimics the world, denominational leadership is more and more infused with worldliness, compromise and even devilish notions. Recent surveys reveal that more than a third of pastors and church leaders are playing with porn. The majority in several main line denominations doubt the divinity of Christ. Divorce and marital fidelity is statistically now no different in the Christian community than it is in the society at large. Meanwhile, the Bible is being labeled as hate-language or irrelevant, and conference after conference at the highest international political and religious levels are convening to figure out how to make us all believe one homogenous soup of toxic spiritual waste. Yes, I know I'm using strong language.

And we have our own mixed multitude don't we. Those who 'follow along' but haven't really bought into a sincere faith in Christ. Now, I'm not at all advocating anything like sending them 'back to Egypt'. But, we must realize that if we allow mixture in our own walk, it will bring with it, as it did with the Jews, lusting, murmuring against God and a vulnerability to the attacks of 'the flesh'. The real issue is that we need to take the 'beam out of our own eyes'!

And if we do, we'll be different. We'll stand out from the world around us. It's truly a day of decision for the church. The enemy of Christ has sensed our corporate lukewarmness and is pouring on the ice water if you know what I mean. Have you noticed how aggressive the homosexual community has become in the media, the schools, the government and the workplace? Have you noticed how timid our political and religious leaders have become in defining the true difference between satanically

inspired religions and faith in Christ? Have you noticed how utterly and grotesquely violent and lewd the preponderance of our ‘entertainment’ has become? Accidental? No way.

A very large portion of the church has put aside the Word of God and has instead allowed the news and entertainment industry (‘Christian’ or otherwise) to formulate their ‘truth for today’. At the same time, those who take a valid stand for any real Christian values are portrayed as just “fringe elements” – so say the reports. In truth, it is the spiritual ‘fringe’ elements themselves that are the ones fingering the faithful as “extremists” and “hate mongers”. And oh how they love to latch on to some truly tragic situation involving a so-called believer and shout it to the world as evidence of the ‘weirdness’ of the Christian faith.

Meanwhile, on the whole, we’ve become overly consumed with being ‘relevant’, seeker-sensitive, ‘successful’, entertaining and attractive. We’ve invested countless millions in buildings, parking lots, potted plants and pew pads (all of which are appreciated!), but invested comparatively little in the true house of God. It’s time for divine differentiation. *“Finding his newly-appointed pastor standing at his study window in the church weeping as he looked over the inner city's tragic conditions, a layman sought to console him: ‘Don't worry. After you've been here a while, you'll get used to it.’ Responded the minister, ‘Yes, I know. That's why I am crying.’”*-- Dennis Marquardt

Yes, it’s time for true believers to be different again -- to love our enemies, to share the gospel, to genuinely care for the family of God, to devour the Word of God and to obey it, to forgive from the heart, to eschew evil and cling to what is good, to intercede sacrificially for one

another, to seek to approve the excellent, to speak the truth in love and having done all, to stand... It's time to rejoice in that difference and know that although we are the minority here, we belong to the enormous family of believers – the 'majority' in heaven!

Lord, break the mold of worldly acceptance, comfort and ease even as it's congealing around us. Open our eyes to behold the true state of our souls. Grant us peace in the knowledge of your grace and fire in the knowledge of your coming. Give us a fearlessness of man no matter the cost.

*“Nikolai Berdyaev, who abandoned Marx for Christianity, insists that neither history nor theology nor the church brought him to the Christian faith, but a simple woman called only Mother Maria. He was present at a concentration camp when the Nazis were murdering Jews in gas chambers. One distraught mother refused to part with her baby. When Maria saw that the officer was only interested in numbers, without a word she pushed the mother aside and quickly took her place. This action revealed to Berdyaev the heart of Christianity--and what atonement means.”* -- James S. Hewett, Illustrations Unlimited (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc, 1988)

*“Blessed are ye, when men shall hate you, and when they shall separate you from their company, and shall reproach you, and cast out your name as evil, for the Son of man's sake.”* Luke 6:22

*“Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you,”*

2 Cor 6:17

In closing, we will be thankful one day soon for the separation that godliness brings. We don't have to force the issue. Just living a truly godly life will make us stand out from the world. Personal discomfort, even disgrace, may be the price, but it's worth it. You know, that fellow who bullied my son for his witness? Well, a year or so later, he ran up to Mike in school and thanked him earnestly adding that during the summer, he'd given his heart to Christ – and now he is different too.

May each of us find the blessedness of difference from this world by conforming to the awesome character of our Lord Jesus Christ. May we never be the so-called 'difference without a distinction'. God grant us courage, conviction, comfort and Christ-likedness in these treacherous times. God bless you.

# ***X-treme Faith***

***(See John 19)***

I recently taught a class on the supernatural power of God. Frankly, I had mixed emotions about it – Numerous times in our lives, the Lord has amazed Darlene and I with bona fide miracles from genuine healings to earthquakes to obviously divine provision, angelic protection and supernatural knowledge. However, in the latter part of our pilgrimage, He has been bringing home an understanding that is to us stronger and even more valuable as God’s children. To amplify and make the point clear, I’m going to present the following excerpts from a study on the disciple John from the well known writer, Beth Moore.

*After beating Jesus within inches of His life, soldiers held His hands and feet against the crude wood and fastened Him there with a hammer and three long nails. Whether or not John saw the pounding of the hammer, heaven could hear the pounding of his heart. At a time when any thinking man would want to run for his life, John, probably the youngest of all the disciples, stayed near the cross.*

*Above young John hung his world, his hero, his attachment, his future, his leader, the love of his life. Three years earlier he was trying to gain his daddy’s approval with a boat and net. He hadn’t asked for Jesus, Jesus asked for him. And here he stood. Isaiah tells us that by the time the foes of Jesus finished with Him, “his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness” (Isa 52:14).*

*“When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, ‘Dear woman, here is your son’” (John 19:26). Don’t take it lightly. Hear it. Not the way the passion plays do it. Hear the real thing. Hear a voice erupting from labored outburst as Jesus tried to lift Himself up and draw breath to speak.*

*Because Jesus’ condition made speech harder than dying, every word spoken from the cross is critical. Chronic pain is jealous like few other things. It doesn’t like to share. A man in pain can hardly think of anything else; yet Jesus did. Perhaps His heart’s pain exceeded the pain of His shredded frame. The look on His mother’s face. Her horror. Her suffering.*

*Then He gazed straight into the young face of the one standing nearby. Less than 24 hours earlier John’s face had nestled against His chest in innocent affection. John was the baby of the family, as we call Melissa, and he knew it. He no doubt reveled in its privilege. If anyone had an excuse to run from the cross, perhaps it was John. But he didn’t.*

*Jesus saw the disciple whom He loved standing nearby. I believe love and compassion hemorrhaged from His heart. “To the disciple, [He said,] ‘Here is your mother.’ From that time on, this disciple took her into his home.” (John 19:27).*

*If the cross is about anything, it is about reconciliation: “He himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility” (Eph 2:14). I think the unbelief of Christ’s brothers had raised a wall of hostility between them and His disciples. As Christ gazed on His beloved mother and His beloved disciple, He saw His*

*own two worlds desperately in need of reconciliation and a woman who no doubt was torn between the two.*

*Simeon's prophecy to Mary was fulfilled before Jesus' very eyes: "'A sword will pierce your own soul too'" (Luke 2:35). How like Jesus to start stitching a heart back together even as the knife was tearing it apart. One day soon His family and His disciples would be united, but the firstfruit of that harvest waved beneath the cross of Christ: "From that time on, this disciple took her into his home: (John 19:27).*

*How perfectly appropriate! Right at the foot of the cross we discover the element that set John apart from the rest. I am a huge fan of Peter and can relate to him far more readily than John, but the inspired words the Holy Spirit later entrusted to the Son of Thunder (see Mark 3:17) suggest a profound uniqueness. I am reminded of a saint about whom God said, "'My servant Caleb has a different spirit and follows me wholeheartedly'" (see Num 14:24). God didn't mean a different Holy Spirit. God referred to something wonderful about Caleb's human spirit that made him unique. I believe John had something similar. These were fallible men prone to the dictates of their own flesh just like the rest of us, but they had something that was almost incomparable when overtaken by the Holy Spirit. They were simply different.*

*You and I have arrived at a red-letter moment on which much of the remainder of our journey hinges. I am convinced we've stumbled on the very thing that set John apart and made him the fertile soil into which God could sow the seeds of such a Gospel, such epistles, and such a revelation. John remained nearby Jesus, whether his leader was on the mount of transfiguration or in the depths of Gethsemane's suffering. John*

*affectionately leaned on Him during the feast but also followed Him into the courts for the trials. John clung to Jesus when He raised the dead, and he clung to Jesus when He became the dead.*

*John stood nearby when human reason implied that his faithful leader's mission had failed. He could not have comprehended that the plan of the ages was going perfectly. Yet he remained. He who looked on a face that "shone like the sun" (Matt 17:2) was willing to look on a face that was bloody and spit upon. He stayed nearby during Christ's brightest hour and His darkest hour. The young disciple **knew Jesus in the extreme** (emphasis added). John was willing to look when others covered their eyes. And he beheld Him. How can we behold what we are unwilling to see?*

*We cannot claim to know anyone intimately whom we've not known in the intensity of both agony and elation. Anyone with eyes willing to truly behold Jesus will at times be confused and shocked by what she sees. You see, if we're willing to be taken to the extreme of His glory where we gain intimate knowledge, we will undoubtedly see Him in situations that we cannot explain and that sometimes disturb. Then comes the question: Will we walk away from Jesus when our human understanding sees Him look weak and defeated? Do you know what I mean by that question?*

*What will we do when we can't explain what Jesus is doing? Will we remain nearby when He doesn't stop a tragedy? Based on earthly evidence, human reasoning concludes that He is either mean or weak. Think, Beloved, about what I'm saying. Will we cling when our human reasoning implies that evil has defeated Him? Or that evil seems to be found in Him? Will we stand by faith when human logic says to run?*

*That's what will make us different.*

And God has called us to be different. On the mission field in Europe, when our first son died, the well meaning people around us as well as the enemy our souls left us feeling like the tragedy had happened because we simply lacked enough faith. It was a brutal club of condemnation until the truth of scripture shined into our hearts. Forever, God is still a God of miracles and by His grace we've witnessed many, but by far the greatest power of God is to transform a faithless worm into a child of the Most High – one who will follow his/her Good Shepherd whether He is transfigured or disfigured in their sight. May God grant each of us the extreme faith to do as Jesus did on the cross and as John did before the cross – both continued in love through the deep dark place. Both looked up as must we.

# Death of the Debt Collector

(See John 20)

*Now the first day of the week Mary Magdalene went to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. Then she ran and came to Simon Peter, and to the other disciple, whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him.*

*Peter therefore went out, and the other disciple, and were going to the tomb. So they both ran together, and the other disciple outran Peter and came to the tomb first. And he, stooping down and looking in, saw the linen cloths lying there; yet he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb; and he saw the linen cloths lying there, and the handkerchief that had been around His head, not lying with the linen cloths, but folded together in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who came to the tomb first, went in also; and he saw and believed. For as yet they did not know the Scripture, that He must rise again from the dead. Then the disciples went away again to their own homes.*

*But Mary stood outside by the tomb weeping, and as she wept she stooped down and looked into the tomb. And she saw two angels in white sitting, one at the head and the other at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain. Then they said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?"*

*She said to them, "Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him."*

*Now when she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, and did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?"*

*She, supposing Him to be the gardener, said to Him, "Sir, if You have carried Him away, tell me where You have laid Him, and I will take Him away."*

*Jesus said to her, "Mary!"*

*She turned and said to Him, "Rabboni!" (which is to say, Teacher).*

*Jesus said to her, "Do not cling to Me, for I have not yet ascended to My Father; but go to My brethren and say to them, "I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God.""*

*Mary Magdalene came and told the disciples that she had seen the Lord, and that He had spoken these things to her. (John 20:1-18)*

This is the big one. This is the sign of all signs for all time. Yet, Jesus said it was to be given to a perhaps unexpected group. He said, "*An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.*" (Mat 12: 39,40)

All the previous signs in the book of John were recorded to encourage the believers to increase their faith in Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah (Jn 20:30,31). But, the sign of the resurrection was specifically said by Christ to be for an evil and adulterous generation of sign seekers. Now, the resurrection of Jesus is the most blessed event in all the history of mankind. It is the fundamental belief required for salvation. The Bible says, "*...if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus (that is, who He is*

and what He did for you on Calvary's cross) *and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.*" (Rom 10:9) Now, over the centuries, many Christians and 'Christian' cults have added to these simple requirements, but there are no other requirements for salvation – no additional belief(s) or mandatory 'merit badges'.

It's the one key. It's the narrow way. It's the doorway to eternal life. So, of course, it's for the evil and adulterous – that's you and me, not just the Pharisee. The resurrection is the underpinning for our entire faith – no resurrection, no Christianity. Paul wrote, "*...if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty...And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins! Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished.*" (1 Cor 15:14,17,18)

From the earliest times of Biblical history, this has been the creed. In what is probably the oldest book of the scriptures, a weary, tested yet confident Job declared, "*I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end He will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see Him with my own eyes – I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!*" (Job 19:25 – 27) A dead redeemer wouldn't do it; it was the living Redeemer upon whom he fixed his faith.

The critics of Christ rarely debate His motives or death. They are quick, however, to try to dismiss His resurrection.

Wasn't the cross enough?? Can't we just believe that Christ died for our sins? What's so critical about believing the witnesses to His resurrection? To answer this, we must follow the Apostle John so to speak into the realm of the spirit. In the book of Revelation, he recorded, "*And I saw in*

*the right hand of Him who sat on the throne a scroll written inside and on the back, sealed with seven seals. Then I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, 'Who is worthy to open the scroll and to loose its seals?' And no one in heaven or on the earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll, or to look at it."*

*"So I wept much, because no one was found worthy to open and read the scroll, or to look at it. But one of the elders said to me, 'Do not weep. Behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has prevailed to open the scroll and to loose its seven seals.'"*

*"And I looked, and behold, in the midst of the throne and of the four living creatures, and in the midst of the elders, stood a Lamb as though it had been slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent out into all the earth. Then He came and took the scroll out of the right hand of Him who sat on the throne." (Rev 5:1-7)*

Here, the Lamb of God who had been slain and was yet alive came and took the scroll with the seven seals. He was the only One who could look at it, hold it and open it. Note that John, when at first it appeared that no one could take the scroll from God the Father, wept much. The scene was obviously tearing him up, rending his heart.

All men die. Some men have died for good or noble reasons. A few have died heroically. Yet none were found worthy to take the scroll. Why is this, and what's this scroll anyway?

When mankind represented by Adam and Eve opened the door to sin and death, humanity began to build an enormous, unimaginably huge debt. Recall Jesus taught us to pray, *"And forgive us our debts, As we forgive our debtors."*(Mat 6:12) The Bible says that all men are born in sin. As a

consequence, we have a sin nature. The old saying is we're not sinners because we sin; we sin because we're sinners. (See e.g. Rom 3:23) In addition, the right to rule this world which was given originally by God to man passed to Satan, "the god of this world". We know this as Jesus did not contest the devil's claim during His wilderness temptation. Luke recorded that, "*The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And he said to him, "I will give you all their authority and splendor, for it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. So if you worship me, it will all be yours."*" (Luke 4:5-7)

Now, in Leviticus 25, the Lord specified that the earth is His and therefore any debt incurred on the land if not redeemed would nevertheless be cancelled during the year of Jubilee (every 50<sup>th</sup> year). However, that which pertained to man, that which man established, that is, his kingdoms, walled cities and such – the stuff of which man is quite proud – if it fell into a debt situation and was not redeemed, it remained forever indebted. Sin creates a debt and its 'collector' is death which was the power of Satan (Heb 2:14).

In John's day, it was common to have scrolls representing a form of ownership such as a deed or an inheritance. If a debt was incurred against the property represented by the scroll, it would be sealed and the debt recorded on the outside. Only when the debt(s) were paid could the scroll be surrendered and opened. With this in mind, I suggest that the scroll seen by John in the heavenly scene was representative of mankind. The earth, though it is under a curse (see Gen 3:17) belongs to the Lord. Mankind, however, had to be redeemed.

Because all men sin and die, none could ever pay the debt of sin. What was needed was someone sinless, someone perfect. This was pictured for thousands of years in the sacrifice of a spotless, i.e. perfect lamb. Enter Jesus, the one and only Man to live a sinless life. In taking upon Himself the entirety of our sin at Calvary, He satisfied the debt and destroyed the debt collector. He and He alone is worthy to take the scroll – to look upon it and open it. Mankind is now His. If He had not paid the debt with His life, John knew that all of us would forever be obligated to die.

Now, back to our original question – what is it about the resurrection that makes it the key to eternal life. After all, couldn't Jesus just have gone on to heaven in as a purely spirit-being? Why come back in a physical (albeit more powerful) body? Here's why -- the resurrection is the one sign for evil and adulterous sign seekers because it shows that God, as the final Judge, accepted the payment for our evil and adulterous ways as being made in full. None of the debt remains; past, present and future sin – it's all paid for. The resurrection is our guarantee that we indeed have eternal life in Christ Jesus if we will simply believe and accept it. Without the resurrection, we would have at best been left guessing. Because of it, we can be 100% sure -- since our Savior emerged from that tomb, we will never see death either. We who believe will simply one day pass from a temporal life to eternal life in a moment.

“Max Lucado, in his book, *Six Hours One Friday*, tells the story of a missionary in Brazil who discovered a tribe of Indians in a remote part of the jungle. They lived near a large river. The tribe was in need of medical attention. A contagious disease was ravaging the population. People were dying daily.”

“A hospital was not too terribly far away—across the river, but the Indians would not cross it because they believed it was inhabited by evil spirits. To enter the water would mean certain death. The missionary explained how he had crossed the river and was unharmed. They were not impressed. He then took them to the bank and placed his hand in the water. They still wouldn’t go in. He walked into the water up to his waist and splashed water on his face. It didn’t matter. They were still afraid to enter the river. Finally, he dove into the river, swam beneath the surface until he emerged on the other side. He punched a triumphant fist into the air. He had entered the water and escaped. It was then that the Indians broke out into a cheer and followed him across.”

“That’s exactly what Jesus did! He told the people of His day that they need not fear the river of death, but they wouldn’t believe. He touched a dead boy and called him back to life. They still didn’t believe. He whispered life into the body of a dead girl and got the same result. He let a dead man spend 4 days in a tomb and then called him out and the people still didn’t believe Him. Finally, He entered the river of death and came out on the other side. No wonder we celebrate the Resurrection!” (Bruce Howell)

On a final note, it’s fascinating that Jesus referred to His resurrection as being the sign of the prophet Jonah for he was the only prophet who was specifically sent to preach to the gentiles. You’ll recall that it was after Jonah’s ‘resurrection’ out of the belly of the great fish that the message of repentance was taken to the gentile nation. And they received it! They repented and were saved from judgment. So it has been with the message

of the gospel. It was taken to the gentiles and they have received it as well.

Simply put, Christ's death on Calvary reconciled us to God and His resurrection brought us life, that is, saved us from death. Paul wrote, "*For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life.*" (Rom 5:10)

Receive the sign of Jonah. Believe the resurrection and live!

# Wrong Questions, Right Answer

(See John 20)

Wandering through the phenomenal collection of art in the Louvre museum you can get an odd sense of awe and futility. This former residence of Napoleon is just so packed full with mankind's creative treasures, it numbs the mind. Crowds gather around the Mona Lisa while the rooms of renaissance sculptures are virtually empty – there are definitely popular favorites. After several hours, I discovered mine. It grabbed me instantly and I had to sit down in a kind of surrender to its message. Let me take you to a story in John 20 to explain:

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*To say it was salting the wound would be a gross understatement. The only person who had truly loved her, the one who had freed her from slavery to sin and evil spirits, the one she called Lord and who held her heart – the rulers had mocked, tortured and sadistically killed him. And now, this...*

*She'd come to the tomb early. Stumbling her way through the dark garden, she'd found it open -- the stone covering rolled back! OPEN!?*

*"Why?!" her heart cried out along with her lips. 'Why?!'*

*Searching for reasons in a storm of confusion and ever-deepening heartbreak, she grasped at an answer – 'they have taken his body!'*

*She ran to where she found Peter, still sulking, and John. "They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb and ..." she began. Hearing this, Peter jumped to his feet and ran out – confused, angry, grieving.*

*'Oh, no! Why?!' his heart lamented.*

*"...and we don't know where they've laid him!" she finished.*

*At that, John broke out of his own dismay and bounded after Peter. He caught up and passed him by, reaching the tomb first. 'Why?!' his heart searched along with his eyes as he stooped and looked in, seeing just the strips of linen left behind.*

*Peter ambled past, breathing heavily, and entered the cave. Like his fellow disciple, he beheld the linen wrappings and the neatly folded face cloth.*

*Then John ventured in. For some reason, he saw and something 'clicked' inwardly – he believed.*

*But Mary remained outside. After the two men had left, she continued weeping. Now convinced that she would never see her beloved again, she looked inside. A bit surprised, she beheld two men dressed in white sitting at either end of the now empty grave clothes.*

*"Dear woman, why are you weeping?" they asked. She explained what seemed to be obvious, "Because they have taken away my Lord... and I don't know where they've laid Him."*

*'How-did-it-happen' questions were the last thing her heart could deal with now. She turned away with one more 'Oh, why?!' echoing within her heart.*

*Just then, another gentle voice said, "Dear woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" Inexplicably, this voice seemed to unlock a watershed of heartbroken love.*

*This man was the gardener, she thought, he would know... “Sir, if You have carried Him away, tell me where You have laid Him, and I will take Him away.”*

*A breathless moment passed... Then came a familiar voice and along with it, the scent of fresh rain, wild roses and joy.*

*“Mary,” He spoke softly.*

*And her heart exploded!*

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In dark and lonely times, a broken heart searches for answers. Even our Lord Jesus, on the cross, cried out a “Why?” (see Mat 27:46 or Mark 15:34). So it’s easy for me to imagine the disciples of Christ doing the same thing.

But God generally doesn’t give us the answers we think we need. Not on our terms or timelines it seems. Oh, He answers our prayers, but if you spend some time in the Gospels, you quickly conclude that Jesus wasn’t trying to be anyone’s answer-man, not in the way his critics or insincere public desired.

You see, God knows that what our hearts and souls truly crave is rightness. But answers to the ‘whys’ or ‘wherefores’ cannot bring redemption, restoration, resurrection – rightness. At these times, what we need comes not from an intellectual or emotional explanation no matter how profound, but from our souls being wrapped in His loving heart.

For all things are or will be made right in Him. He, Himself, is the Answer – this is not just a play on words but rather the most awesome truth. (see John 14:6).

When Mary wanted simply to find the body of Jesus, her heart, engulfed in sorrow, was searching for an answer to the wrong question. She, in her mind, saw her Savior as in the painting before which I sat.

But while ‘whys’ and ‘wherefores’ within her earnestly desired answers, they were born out of false assumptions. There was Jesus just behind her and it only took one word from Him to make everything right – righter than right – better than right – exceedingly abundantly better than what she could imagine as right. In fact, it was already right – His word simply revealed it to her.

And we are in the same boat with Mary (or rather the disciples) bailing the same water so to speak, wondering if our God really cares. However, if He gave us just the answers to our whys, it would only be like handing us another bailing bucket. You remember the story. Jesus told his disciples, “Let’s go over to the other side” of the lake. And while He was asleep on a pillow in the stern of the boat, a sudden storm had filled it with water (see Mark 4).

But with a single command, the raging storm was stilled.

And we are in the same room with Jairus. His mind first filled with hopes of prevention is now muddied by fear of his little girl’s death. (See Luke 8:41-56). Jesus didn’t just have an explanation but rather, with a single command – resurrection.

Now, sorrows will come, if they haven’t already, for we are living in treacherous days. As a result, many people are asking these same questions (or will be) and those who are dealing with tragedy will not generally be lifted up by some well meaning teacher’s 10-point lesson on God’s righteous judgments, His sovereignty, His mercy, etc.

But what hurting people need most is Christ Himself. Not just theological answers to the whys or wherefores but an honest, intimate connection to the One who but speaks the word and makes it right or reveals that it is already right.

As the birth pangs of these last days get more intense, we must know how to answer, yes. But even more so, we must be those who display Christ, His love and compassion. We must lead His children to Him, guide them into His arms.

There, held close to His heart, the clay of our souls is fashioned in trust. It's a tender place for He Who came to heal the broken hearted (Isa 61:1) died with a broken heart Himself (John 19:34).

**And He rose again!**

So the tragedy wasn't the end but the doorway into unexpected joy. Likewise, your hardship, your tragedy, as difficult as it is, is not the end of joy, the end of love. In Christ and only in Christ, it will one day soon be understood with a completely new perspective – a resurrection perspective.

Looking at that painting, it hit me – He's not there in that grave, in that condition, even though everyone who knew and loved Him thought He was. He was in that grave – He probably looked much like that. His death was real, the pain was real, the sorrow real, the anguish real. But early on the third day, Jesus – the Way the Truth and the Life, conquered sin and death and brought in the real reality – resurrection and eternal life in an indescribably wonderful place.

Mary, the disciples on the lake, Jairus and his family -- all discovered what we need to realize and hold on to – Jesus ends the whys and

wherefores of our burdened hearts – not with explanations so much as with loving, perfect restoration – making all things right, maybe not here, but absolutely in heaven – a real place, a steadfast promise, a rock-solid guarantee for those who trust in Christ. Meanwhile, let’s look eagerly toward heaven and live in genuine expectation.

## ***The Pastor Posture*** ***(See John 21)***

### ***John 21:1 - 19***

Seven disciples and an all-nighter. Nothing to show for it. Almost like their nets were broken.

After Jesus' resurrection, after He had spoken with His followers but before His ascension, these fellows were back in their old stomping grounds and turning to their old trade. "*Simon Peter said to them, 'I am going fishing.'*"

*"They said to him, 'We are going with you also.' They went out and immediately got into the boat, and that night they caught nothing."*

In order to appreciate what's happening in this chapter, we need to take a look at the previous chapter of John's gospel. There, he concludes with, "*And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.*"

In the first 20 chapters, he spelled out his version of the good news to lead people to faith in Christ. But then, in the last chapter of his book, he launched into something different. It is not directed to those just coming to faith in Jesus; it rather speaks to those who have known Him and yet are in need. In need of what?

Glad you asked. You see, as awed and overjoyed as these ragamuffins were with their risen Savior, they were surely discouraged and down on themselves for their own behavior – Peter, as you recall, not many days

earlier dished out some satanic advice to Jesus concerning the cross and then denied vigorously ever knowing Him at His trial. After the resurrection, Thomas was filled with an almost defiant doubt that Jesus was alive again. James and John certainly remembered disputing with the others when they desired thrones on the left and right of Christ's. Nathanael and the others deserted Jesus, leaving Him in the garden like a bunch of scared cats. Surely, it was on their minds and they must have pondered just how do you face such glorious majesty when your life includes such a travesty of failures?

Peter had once told Jesus, *"Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!"* (Luke 5:8) Even a relatively righteous man is confronted with his short comings before a perfect holy Lord. Isaiah the prophet, beholding the glory of God said, *"Woe is me, for I am undone!"* (Isa 6:5)

I suggest that these guys weren't fishing for enjoyment. They were in the retreat of guilt and condemnation. And they caught nothing. You recall Jesus told them, *"Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing."* (John 15:4,5)

Yes, indeed, their 'nets' if you would, were broken.

*"But when the morning had now come, Jesus stood on the shore; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Then Jesus said to them, 'Children, have you any food?' They answered Him, 'No.'"*

Now, everyone knows that it's rare to find an honest fisherman. (ha)  
But, these guys didn't even have a story about the one that got away.  
Their two-letter answer said volumes.

*"And He said to them, 'Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some.' So they cast, and now they were not able to draw it in because of the multitude of fish. Therefore that disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, 'It is the Lord!'"*

John recognized the handiwork of the Lord and perhaps that's one reason why this story was special to him. Undoubtedly, he remembered a similar event that had marked the beginning of his own discipleship. (See Luke 5:1-11)

*"Now when Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on his outer garment (for he had removed it), and plunged into the sea."* Fascinating! How many of you know that if you want to swim well, you don't drape yourself in a coat or cloak. Clearly, this was something that stuck out in John's memory as well. What was Peter thinking?

Was he trying to prove something to the Lord? Why was his outer garment necessary? Obviously, he was so thrilled that he didn't want to wait for the boat to get to shore and the fish were the last thing on his mind. But he wanted that covering. He didn't want to approach his Lord 'in the buff' so to speak. He was zealous to come to Jesus but careful to be covered. I suggest that it was another indication of the self-consciousness born from the awareness of his sin. Adam and Eve did the same thing back in the garden of Eden. (See Gen 3:7)

*"But the other disciples came in the little boat (for they were not far from land, but about two hundred cubits), dragging the net with fish.*

*Then, as soon as they had come to land, they saw a fire of coals there, and fish laid on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, 'Bring some of the fish which you have just caught.'*”

Many good sermons have used these verses to affirm God’s ability to provide the things we need – that we inevitably wind up tired, hungry and empty handed when we launch out on our own. If we will but turn to Christ, He will provide.

But that is not what I think the primary message is here. Jesus was clearly inviting fellowship. Isn’t His grace and love obvious. Rather than a lecture or rebuke, a breakfast is prepared – a welcome back meal. Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever! These guys probably thought the Lord was bitterly disappointed with them and on the look out for others who would be more faithful and less bumbling. But of Jesus, it is written, *“A bruised reed He will not break, And smoking flax He will not quench;”* (Isa 42:3) He even credits them with catching the fish! Ha!

*“Simon Peter went up and dragged the net to land, full of large fish, one hundred and fifty-three; and although there were so many, the net was not broken.”*

Don’t you just love this guy? First, he leaves the others to drag this haul of fish so large that they couldn’t take it in the little boat. And now, when he notes the Lord’s interest in the fish, he jumps up and single-handedly drags the whole catch to shore.

*“Why do you suppose the number of fish is recorded? And why are we told the net was not broken? Earlier, in a similar miracle, Luke says when they took in a haul miraculously, the net broke (5:6). This speaks of evangelism. In the amphitheatre, in crusades, the Gospel is preached and*

*a haul is taken in, but not all who respond will continue on. In the Parable of the Soils, only one in four goes on to bear abundant fruit (Matthew 13). Consequently, when we baptize 60 or 80 people on a Sunday morning, I know not every one is going to go on and bring forth fruit abundantly. But of those who are truly in the Kingdom, of those who are brought to shore, not one will be lost. Each one will be accounted for exactly. Thus, as this scenario unfolds, Jesus shows Peter and John that they are not only fishers of men, but tenders of sheep.”*

*“You see, in the arena of evangelism, we cannot deal with statistics because we can't see men's hearts. But in shepherding ministry — in pastoring, in discipling, in parenting — we must account for every sheep. We must be aware of the brother or sister in need of tending, of touch, of care. Whose job is this? Yours and mine together. Those of us who love the Lord have the joint responsibility of saying, ‘Where is #151? I gotta go find him.’” (Jon Courson)*

Yes, the net did not break and that caught John’s attention. You see, John was a net mender. Jesus found him doing just that when He called him to follow (See Matt 4:21) and we know from both scripture as well as church history that John was a mender of ‘nets’ within the body of Christ. Also, there’s nothing like a friendly meal to help mend a discouraged heart. So...

*“Jesus said to them, ‘Come and eat breakfast.’ Yet none of the disciples dared ask Him, ‘Who are You?’--knowing that it was the Lord.”*

Surely, they recognized the miraculous haul of fish just as John did. But, there was more – His manner, His kindness and then... His servant-heart --

*“Jesus then came and took the bread and gave it to them, and likewise the fish. This is now the third time Jesus showed Himself to His disciples after He was raised from the dead. “*

This gives me such hope. These guys had physically witnessed the resurrected Savior twice before (all right – just once for you Thomas) and they still wound up in a dumpy, fishless, all night boon-doggle. How often I’ve mused, ‘If I could just see Jesus, just once, I’d be so faithful, so obedient, so...’ but it wasn’t just seeing the Savior that changed these guys, that drew them on and motivated them to give their all for Jesus. It was loving Him. *“For the love of Christ compels us...”* (2 Cor 5:14)

*“So when they had eaten breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me more than these?”*

*He said to Him, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.”*

*He said to him, “Feed My lambs.”*

OK, all of you net-menders – take note. Jesus referred to either the fish or the fishermen when He said, “...more than these”, but that’s not the most important issue. Peter was addressed as Simon which connotes the opposite of Peter. Simon implies wishy-washy or go-with-the-flow. Peter means rock. This is relevant but not the key either.

The word for love He used was ‘agapao’ which means to love dearly. With this, the target was revealed. The question was perfect. The issue is, always has been and always will be – love. Loving God supremely.

Simon searched his heart.

He was on the spot. His honest answer was, “Lord, you know I ‘phileo’ You.” Or “I like you.” Phileo means love, but it is not at all the caliber of ‘agapao’. It is more akin to friendship.

*“He said to him again a second time, ‘Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?’”*

*“He said to Him, ‘Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.’”*

*“He said to him, ‘Tend My sheep.’”*

In this second question, there was no comparison. Jesus simply asked, “Do you agapao Me?” It is interesting that, as with the first round, Peter said, “Yes” but qualified it by again saying that he ‘phileo’ed Jesus. Clearly, Peter was confessing that he did not have this agapao love for Christ. Consequently, Christ ‘notched’ it down again...

*“He said to him the third time, ‘Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?’ Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, ‘Do you love Me?’”*

*“And he said to Him, ‘Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You.’”*

*“Jesus said to him, ‘Feed My sheep.’”*

This time, Jesus used ‘phileo’. He said, “Simon, do you phileo Me?” and Peter was grieved or literally ‘thrown into sorrow or sadness’ not because of three questions but because the third one was the one he had been so bitter about – he phileo’ed but he also failed.

Jesus started with “Do you agapao Me more than these?” or “Do you love Me supremely.” Then, He simply asked, “Do you agapao Me?” And then, He concluded with, “Do you phileo Me?” Now, one good explanation for this is that Jesus was restoring Peter regarding his three denials. However, there is something more here to be understood.

To love God supremely has been the foundation and essence of His desire for us from the beginning. (See Mat 22:37; Deut 13:3) Peter, who

had spent some three years in the presence of Christ, had witnessed the crucifixion and then the resurrected Messiah could not confess to this kind of love. Yet, Christ was not surprised or disturbed. Rather, what John, the apostle of love observed and presented to us was a mending of Peter's 'net' and a revelation of Christ's heart for all who would minister to His people.

Jesus didn't refer in this passage to the coming power of the Holy Spirit. That came later. He did however lay out a clear path to supreme love which of course is the fruit of the Spirit. In that, He gave Peter three charges, each associated with a degree of devotion. Beginning with the last one and moving backward chronologically, let's examine them closely.

At entry level so to speak, (v17) in His third interchange with Peter, Jesus said to him, the transliteration "bosko mou probaton" which is translated "Feed My sheep." Indeed, bosko means feed and mou means my or mine, but probaton more appropriately means any four-footed grazer. Jesus was saying, "OK, Simon, you phileo Me. Feed my four-footed grazers." This is the proverbial step in the right direction. Mending nets takes time, and the best thing to do is to get busy helping others – feed their souls – get out of your pit of self – leave the conundrum of your sin nature in the Lord's hands. Start feeding His grazers. At this point, that's probably all they look like to you – they belong to the Lord, but they're just grazers.

Now, for the second interchange -- progressing heavenward toward agapao love, to love Jesus dearly, there is the associated, "poimaino mou probaton" (v16). This is best translated as "Tend my grazers as a

herdsman.” At this point, it is more than feeding, it’s tending. The typical Middle Eastern herdsman in tending his master’s property would watch for enemies of the herd, defend the herd, heal the wounded, find and save the lost or trapped and love the herd so as to earn their trust. These herdsman, contrary to the way we do in the west, would walk before, and the animals would follow.

Deeper, holier love has associated with it deeper commitment and involvement with those God loves. There is a greater giving out. Jesus said, “*By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love one to another.*”(John 13:35) Specifically, agape love. When feeding becomes tending, when phileo becomes agapao, that’s when the world begins to recognize us as Christ’s. Many dear people in ministry get stuck in the phileo and feeding. They teach, teach, teach but they don’t reach out in compassion and real self sacrificial tending of God’s ‘grazers’. (Ouch!)

OK, now for the first interchange -- the summit is heaven’s love – a supreme love for God – to agapao Him “more than these”. It makes no difference what the word “these” refers to; it’s ambiguous because it simply means more than anything else. Associated with this, Jesus charges Peter to “bosko mou arnion”. With “bosko”, we’re back to feeding, but the key is that we’re no longer feeding just any four-footed grazers. “Arnion” means “little lambs”. Little lambs are nursed. Nursing is feeding in close quarters. It’s intimate. It’s not just leading the way into green pastures or tossing some grain their way. The sustenance is coming from you, from your heart. And it might hurt a bit. It is when we have this kind of love that we see the herd as a flock and, by the way, not

as a bunch of old ewes or rams but little lambs. We see God's children as He sees them. This is also important for it is how Jesus Himself is seen in heaven. In Revelation, He is described as such 24 times. You might say that when our love for Jesus is agapao and supreme, we see Him in His people.

Peter and the boys had gone fishing apart from Christ's direction. That's pretty clear because they came up empty, they caught nada. They'd gone their own way. And recall, Peter had girded himself before diving into the water – the natural response of the self-willed man or woman before a holy, loving God. It is because we are ashamed that we sense our loveless heart must be covered. However, playing upon this circumstance, Jesus foretold that he would completely change, that he would one day give his life for his Lord.

*“Most assuredly, I say to you, when you were younger (or until now and for some time), you girded yourself and walked where you wished; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish.’ This He spoke, signifying by what death he would glorify God. And when He had spoken this, He said to him, ‘Follow Me.’”*

In closing, I submit that our church corporately is hurting for lack of pastors, not just in name or title but in truth. Oh, we have lots of wonderfully dedicated people in the pulpit teaching and preaching and most are there with a deeply sincere heart to love and tend God's people. But our churches as a whole simply don't model the life and ministry of

Christ. Today's churches are businesses with slogans and growth plans that mimic corporate business strategies. We have equated size with success while multitudes in our midst remain untended.

I suggest that there are manifold more pastors in our family than we would have ever believed. From our text we can see that while 'nursing shepherds' is the ministry associated with loving Christ supremely, in many places it's nearly impossible to even get an appointment with the pastor. We've got it wrong in this approach. Gifted oratory and good organization is not necessarily synonymous with spiritual health and growth even if multitudes attend. Someone once said, "A big church is like a battleship and a battleship can do a lot more damage to Satan than a rowboat." That's probably true but that ship will surely sink if it's holey rather than holy.

I humbly urge each of us to consider what Jesus said to Peter and how it may apply to us and to our family in Christ. And may God raise up in our midst many, many more with the gifting and grace to pastor – to feed, to tend and to nurse as He leads.