

**The *Crossroad*: Personal  
Lessons From Mark's  
Gospel**

by

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MEQUON, WI

# THE CROSSROAD

## Personal Lessons from Mark's Gospel

### Lesson One: GOD'S TRAFFIC DIRECTOR! (1:1-8)

*And so John came. (vs.4)*

Just being able to hear his voice live made the moment memorable. This was my first opportunity to attend a Billy Graham Crusade and I did not mind at all that we were seated so away from the front that all I could see was the small speckled figure of someone standing there. The atmosphere and the voice that filled that stadium left me with no doubt that it was him. I was there and that was all that mattered. My two older children were also with me and having heard often of this legionary figure I knew this would be unforgettable to them. As I positioned myself to attempt a better look I wondered what it was that drew so many to hear the man. I guessed that it was simply that his life so adequately pointed others to Christ. That must be it. What other reason could there be to explain to someone with such a simple style and simple message for 50 years filling stadiums around the world. Here was an ordinary man who lived the whole of his life to bring others to the savior. He stands out in history as a man who stood at the cross roads directing the traffic of humanity to follow Jesus.

There are rare moments in our lives when we meet certain men or women of God who are completely sold out for God. You observe in their lives a single mind for the cause of Christ rarely seen in other people. Such a man was John the Baptist. Mark, the writer of this gospel, was so captivated by John the Baptist he chose to begin his gospel about the life and work of Jesus with John's story. Mark's interest in this gospel is Jesus, (see verse 1) but he begins with John. Why? Because John's life was so completely dedicated to the cause of Christ that his testimony was a logical start point. It would be well for us to emulate some of the unique characteristics that made up this man so that our lives can also promote our Lord in every aspect. In the next pages I want to trace those qualities that seem to distinguish John the Baptist, with the prayer that we might model our lives on his great example.

John the Baptist had a clear sense of his calling, and he lived it! John became what God wanted from him. He knew why he was here and he allowed nothing to prevent him from living God's way. Mark begins this section by quoting the prophet Isaiah who foretold a messenger who

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would come to prepare the way for the coming of the Lord. Isaiah was clearly speaking about John. Verse 2 tells us what God wanted for John. His purpose was to prepare the way for Christ. Then, with child like enthusiasm, Mark cannot wait to inform us that this man John lived out his calling. *“And so John came”* Mark explains in verse 4, thus drawing a link between the prophecy and the man. Isaiah’s prophecy unveils God purpose statement for John, but then in verse 5 Mark is happy to announce that John’s life fulfilled exactly the plan God had for him.

Can we say that of our selves? *“And so you came.”* Ephesians 1:4 helps us know what Gods plan is for us. *“For he chose us before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight”*, is only one example of God’s purpose statement for believers. The question we must ask ourselves is “are we living in such a way that God is having his way with us?” When our oldest son Travis was born we named him Travis Andrew. It was a significant name for us, rich with meaning and purpose. Travis Andrew means “man of God at the cross roads”, and this is what we desire for Travis; that he will become such a person whose life would serve a spiritual cross road for others. In our prayers and parental involvement, this purpose statement has served as a guide in our relationship to Travis. Little did we know what this would mean. We never anticipated that this cross road would come sooner than we thought and in a far more dramatic way than we thought. I will share through these lessons from Mark much of what it meant for him to stand at the cross road and what his suffering would teach me.

God expects us as parents to be steersmen impressing on our children why they are here, what God’s purpose for them is and then encouraging them to live it! We never know how long we will have them. There is no greater desire for parents then for their children to become godly people who direct traffic, calling others to join the road that leads to the cross and to new life in Jesus. I suspect John’s parents had a great deal to do with what John became. *“As a prisoner of the Lord then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.”* (Eph. 4:1)

The gospel of Mark is a personal invitation to follow Jesus. This call is first heard in the broad and open air of Galilee but the path that Jesus calls us to is a specific one with a definite destination. John the Baptist was a traffic director, a man of God at the cross roads, urging people to take the road that leads to the cross. He was God's messenger sent ahead of Christ *“who will prepare your way, a voice calling in the desert, prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.”* (vs.2-3) Luke adds, *“the crooked road shall become straight, the rough way smooth.*

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*And all mankind will see God's salvation."* (Luke 3:5-6) There is only one road that leads to God and it is the cross road. It is not an easy road. The sacrifices are great and the cost is heavy. But as you travel this path you will be overwhelmed by the presence of Jesus and the lives he touches along the way. As you travel this road you will also notice that the further you go the more visible the cross. So come and join Mark on this *Cross* road.

## **Lesson Two: KEEPING IT SIMPLE (1:1-8)**

*All the people went out to him. (vs.5)*

A British missionary by the name of Edwin Dennis, unlike Billy Graham, is an obscure figure who, but to the angels in heaven, has practically gone unnoticed in missionary circles. Raised a Devon (England) farmer it was not until Edwin was in his 40's that he traded in his plow to work in the harvest field among the Gambiano Indians in Columbia South America. Twenty Five years would go by before Edwin would return home for his first home assignment. You would never meet a more simple and uncomplicated man. His speaking is plain and unimpressive. Even in the modern environment of England he felt no shame in wearing his Gambiano "*skirt*".

There was something though about the man that drew the member of the congregation where I pastored in England to him. They call him "the legion" and he calls God "the boss". He has spent the entirety of his missionary career translating the Old Testament into the Gambiano language, and he is only on Genesis chapter six. I have no doubt this man will receive a great reward not for his accomplishments but for his simple but real love for the Lord Jesus Christ. When I think of a contemporary John the Baptist I can not help but think of Edwin Dennis.

John's life message was simple and singular. In many respects his life was not a complicated one. The epitaph on his tombstone would probably have read, "He simply wanted others to know about Jesus." This message was so magnetic that people came from everywhere to hear him. "*All the people went out to him.*" (The original tells us the people kept coming to him) There was nothing about his appearance that drew the crowds; he wore the unattractive garments of a shepherd. He held to a simple diet, unconcerned by what people thought of him or said about him. It was what John said, his message that emptied the towns and lined the shores of the Jordan with people.

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There should be nothing complicated about being a Christian. May God spare us and protect us from discarding the simple message out of any concern for ourselves. We live with a tension in our modern day that perhaps did not exist back in John's day, that of the church battling against the world for the mind of people. To gain the world's interest the Church will often package the message of the gospel in wrappings that will appeal and attract the pagan, but sometimes in a way that undermines the message. Ronald Dunn in his book When Heaven is Silent puts a magnifying glass uncomfortably close to today's' church. *In our attempt to win the world by impressing the world, we have abandoned the confrontational language of the cross for the wooing language of power, might, success and winning.*" No wonder, when people do respond, they do not deny themselves and die to the world because that is not being asked of them. Well, it was asked of John. "Repent and be baptized" was the simple call from this single-minded servant. The apostle Paul also lived with a simple rule in his presentation of the gospel. We would do well to follow his example.

*When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. . . For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power. (1 Cor. 2:1-5)*

May we be known, also, for what we have to say about Jesus and nothing more.

If you are absolutely obedient to God, then there is no ambiguity in you and you are mere simplicity before God. . . . One thing there is which all Satan's cunning and all the snares of temptation cannot take by surprise. That is simplicity. -Søren Aabye Kierkegaard

## **Lesson Three: LIVING WITHOUT DISTRACTIONS (1:1-8)**

*"John wore camels hair... and ate locusts" vs.6*

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It is crucial that believers see the world as it really is and most often, if not always, this is only possible when we live outside the world away from its trappings and distractions. God is often not viewed very clearly when our surrounding is the world. Some years ago our family took a trip into the highlands of Malaysia where the night sky offers a riveting view. I laid a blanket on the ground outside the cottage and my children and I sat back captivated by the overwhelming number of brilliantly-shining stars above us. It was an experience we could not have enjoyed from the city where artificial lighting dims the view of the galaxies.

There are two reasons why God placed John the Baptist in the wilderness and kept him there. The wilderness served as a good picture of the spiritual wilderness in which people lived and John's plea was that they leave their spiritual wilderness and come to Jesus. The parallel with Israel's wilderness wandering is rich here. But the wilderness was also good for John because here he was able to view God as he really is, living and growing away from the world's distractions.

I have a friend who some years ago chose to take the radical step of discarding his television set. This conviction stemmed from his own admission that he could not always control what he watched. Some five years passed and I recently asked him if he had since purchased a set assuming that time would have slowly relaxed this conviction. He has firmly held to it, treasuring the freedom of living without this distraction. Knowing him well, I observe that his view of God is better because of it.

While I do not personally feel the need to take such a step (I enjoy the news and sports too much!), I admire deeply those men and women who have taken specific measures to live uncluttered lives, and I seek to learn something from them. Men such as John, who did not choose to live out his faith on the fringe of the world's lures, but completely outside of them. He chose the wilderness as his home and there he lived simply, so that his devotion to God would remain pure and undiluted. He simply wore what he needed, and ate what was there. And therein lies the secret to living pure lives where the view of God is good. It is not in what we wear or what we eat, but in what we expose ourselves to, and often what we are exposed to depends on the environment we live in. It is difficult to keep your life pure if you live constantly in front of the television set. Keeping our thoughts and focus on God will not come easily if we are flirting with the world. How is your view of God?

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If you are in with God, you are at outs with this world. -GYPSY SMITH

*“And this was his message” (vs.7)*

Peer pressure is often perceived as a negative social reality, particularly when it involves our children. There is however a flipside to peer pressure that can be beneficial. My son recently came home begging that he might be able to purchase a bracelet with the inscription *WWJD* or *What Would Jesus Do?* Everyone in school is wearing one, he argued! Having just moved from England, where living out the Christian life is a cutting-edge reality, it was refreshing to see this positive side to peer pressure.

What Would Jesus Do? Christian young people in my son’s school are being challenged to do everything with this question in mind. It is a challenge to place Jesus above everything else. John did, and it showed in his message and his life style. He lived to exalt Jesus. This was the sum total of his life, the solitary purpose for his existence. What mattered most to John (exalting Christ) showed most clearly in his life message: “And this was his message”(or this is what sums up John) “after me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.” John’s life message disclosed how he saw himself in relationship to Jesus. He was merely a servant whose solitary task was to serve the Master. There was only one thing important to John and that was to do what he did and say what he said in order that Jesus succeeded.

It’s interesting how time has a way of reducing life to the essentials. Early on in my ministry I saw the future in terms of what I could accomplish for Christ. The years have humbled me, and today at a time of deep uncertainty about the future I am beginning to see that life is more about who we are before Christ than what we will do for him. John’s life message revolved around his position to the Savior not his achievements. Isn’t it interesting that very little is said about what John accomplished? I’m sure he achieved a lot - after all he did have a team of disciples who followed him and learned from him. Yet his biography is brief and it reveals a penetrating quality that sets aside all servants. Nothing else mattered but exalting Jesus. When the time was right John was willing to step back, fade from the picture if it meant more prominence for Jesus.

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What would change in your life if exalting Jesus became your message, your life ambition? How different would each day be if “What Would Jesus Do?” consumed you?

God’s main concern is that we are more interested in him than in work for him. Once you are rooted and grounded in Christ the greatest thing you can do is to be. Don’t try and be useful; be yourself and God will use you to further his ends. -OSWALD CHAMBERS (1874–1917)

## **Lesson Five: THAT’S MY BOY! (1:9-13)**

*“You are my Son whom I love and with you I am pleased”.(vs.11)*

I went to a soccer game this weekend at the Bible College I once attended. Back in my day the soccer team was not a powerhouse. “Average” would best sum up the standard of play. Today, the team wins trophies and has a squad to look out for in the local league. Much of the success the team has experienced is due to the talents of a young striker named Steve. Steve is a local boy who developed his skills while playing club soccer and with his ability could easily have won scholarships to bigger universities, but instead chose this small Bible College. What captured my attention the day I watched the game was not so much his skill on the field, but the support he received from his father off the field. Perched atop his pickup truck, Steve’s father apparently possessed a “that’s my boy” type of pride as he videotaped every move of the game. I understand he does this every game. Here is a son who is bringing pleasure to his father.

In the days of Noah we are told in the scriptures that there was very little on this earth that pleased God, the father of mankind. His children gave him very little to cheer about. In fact, in Genesis 6, we find things so unbearable to God that he makes that heart-wrenching decision to destroy the earth. Yet in the midst of this polluted scene, the outline of one righteous man is visible, and as a result God spares Noah. Noah was a son who brought pleasure to the Father.

In truth, it is not until the baptism of Jesus that a son finally appears who truly and completely pleases his father. “A voice came out of heaven, ‘You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.’” Until then there had been very little that pleased God about humanity. In Noah’s day when God saw the wickedness of man upon the earth where “every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time”, he was “grieved and his heart was filled with pain.” (Gen. 6:5-6). What joy it gave God to now look upon the earth and see the visible

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righteous presence of his own Son! It was a moment that would change the scene for God, since now there stood one who was fully man, and who would be pleasing in God's sight. If the technology existed, Mark would have videotaped the drama.

The scriptures tell us that we who enter into Christ become sons of God. *"To all who receive him, to those who believe in his name he gave the right to become children of God."* (John 1:12). After two thousand years, true, the state of the world is getting worse, but God's sons form an outline shaped like a bride being prepared for a great wedding - the church. As a member of that body, does your life, the way you live your life give God reason to say with pride, "that's my Boy"? I trust it does.

The Lord is very jealous over any saint who is utterly abandoned to him. He does not let that believer have any pleasures at all outside of himself.

-MADAME JEANNE MARIE DE LA MOTHE GUYON (1648–1717)

*"Come follow me"* (1:17)

Mark's account of the life and ministry of Jesus is a fast paced account. Moving from one event to another, Mark wants to show us the highlights of Jesus' three brief but revolutionary years on earth. Less concerned about details and chronological order, Mark wastes no time in showing us what happens when God himself comes into this broken and desperate world. Let's walk, or should I say run, with Mark as he takes us on this life-changing tour

There are many of us as Christians who do not fully understand what it means to follow Jesus. We might easily call ourselves followers of Jesus in such a glib way that it is no different than when we are speaking about the football team we support. Mark wants to challenge this shallow perception of discipleship by introducing to us two men whose worlds would turn upside down when asked to follow the Lord. They would have to lose something, but what they would gain in that loss would far surpass what was given up.

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Later in the gospels Jesus forewarns his disciples of the heavy cost to following him. *“For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul.”* (Matthew 16:25,26) Jesus' call to discipleship would be first heard in the open air around the sea of Galilee but his journey to Jerusalem from there would become more and more narrow. Those who followed began to feel overwhelmed by the cost and the more narrow the road the less followed.

Lets stand for just a moment above the shoreline of Galilee and observe more closely what Jesus was asking of Peter and Andrew. From this unique vantage point we discover that the call to follow Jesus always first involves a demand to give up something. In their case the expected response was to give up their livelihood as fishermen. There was something in what Jesus was asking that insisted that they no longer serve themselves, and that their focus in life change radically. For them to catch men, Jesus began by asking them to stop catching fish. These disciples would no longer return day after day to the small familiar confines of the Sea of Galilee (which served as a safe and secure occupation), but they would be thrust toward the unfamiliar shores of Humanities Sea. To follow Jesus demanded they give up the predictable, the secure, the safe, the common. But what they gave up would not compare with what they would gain. That is the way it always is with following Jesus. We give up everything, but it really isn't a loss because of what we are gaining in return for what we sacrifice. Jim Elliot, the missionary to Ecuador who was martyred by the Auca Indians whom he tried to reach, summed up this reality perfectly in his classic quote; “He is no fool who gives up what he can not keep in order to gain what he cannot lose.”

Recently I heard the outrageous story of a soccer game during a Southeast Asian tournament where the Indonesian national team would benefit at the quarter finals if they lost against their opponent. Apparently it would result in a better position in the semi-finals. Imagine for just a moment a team doing everything in their power to lose. Following the command of their coach this is exactly what the Indonesian side did. During several moments of the game a player from the Indonesian defense even put two goals into his own net. To assure that they ultimately would win, the team had to first lose.

Our coach, the Lord Jesus, asks the same of us. In the end, we are winners, but first there is something we have to be willing to lose. It sounds outrageous, but it is asked of us with an

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insistence that leaves us with no option. *“In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple.”* (Luke 14:33)

When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die. –DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

You will be dead so long as you refuse to die. --GEORGE MACDONALD

*“The people were amazed.”* (vs.21)

Mark’s torch now shines on the path Jesus takes as he moves away from the shores of Galilee to enter Capernaum. In Capernaum Jesus enters a Synagogue and the home of Simon and Andrew. In both places his presence causes a stir. In one, a demon possessed man is restored, in the other a faithful servant, Peter’s mother-in-law, is healed and in both cases those who witness the scene are awestruck.. In the synagogue a man who had apparently been a church attendee for years by this time, could not enter with the baggage of sin in his life remaining hidden. On that day his life would change radically. The moment he enters into that holy presence of the living God the demons within him are stirred and forced to acknowledge the true identity of Jesus. *“What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are – the Holy One of God.”* (vs.24)

What amazes me about this story is how a man could enter the sanctuary week after week and the presence and control of the evil in him is never challenged. He attended Church regularly and was never changed. It seems too unreal until we realize that our churches are filled week by week with people who go through all the rituals of worship without any of it penetrating past the surface of their lives. The presence of sin lingers and festers within causing a slow death. Entering a sanctuary where God is sung and spoken about is not a guarantee to a holy life. What changes a man? It happens only when the presence and the authoritative word of Christ confront us. It takes exposure to the “new teaching – and with authority” that was so new and fresh in the synagogue on that day. I had the joy of witnessing this sort of radical change wrought by God’s presence one Sunday morning.

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Ann had been attending our church for some months and many of us, knowing she was not a believer, wondered when the Holy Spirit would finally penetrate the surface to convict her of her sin. Our prayers for Ann were fervent. On this particular Sunday the sermon Ann heard was from the story of Joseph who unconditionally forgave his brothers in Gen.45. After the service Ann approached me to say she wanted to talk to me sometime in that week. A few days later I sat across from her in her living room, where she confessed to me that during the service the previous Sunday God had convicted her heart. She confessed that she could no longer attend Church week after week suppressing the reality that her life was separated from God. She realized now that God would unconditionally receive her in the same way Joseph received his brothers. There in that small living room this 75 year old woman, after having attended Church for years, was radically changed because she had finally met her Savior.

It is a penetrating question to ask of ourselves, but are we ever guilty of going through the rituals of worship without ever allowing the Spirit of God to convict and change us? May God keep us from remaining the same in his presence.

*If you can leave your church on Sunday morning with no feeling of discomfort, of conviction, of brokenness, of challenge, then for you the hour of worship has not been as dangerous as it should have been. The ease with which we go on being Christian sentimentalists is one of our worst faults.*

-PAUL STROMBERG REES

## **Lesson Eight: HEALED TO SERVE! (1:29-34)**

*“She began to wait on them” (vs.31)*

Jesus is not just at work in the Church but also in the home. May we be forgiven for thinking that the Church building and Church hour is the only time we can experience worship and the reality of his presence. When Jesus left the synagogue in Capernaum, we don't have to wait another week and return to the same place to see him work.. Mark tells us that he left the Synagogue and immediately (a favorite word of Mark's) entered the home of Simon Peter and his brother

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Andrew. There his presence caused just as much a stir and changed as many lives as it did in the sacred rooms of the synagogue. The place of worship only shifted from one venue to the other. Realize in your life of worship that when you leave church each Sunday morning, Jesus goes with you and he is as real and active in the home as he was during that sacred hour of worship.

When Jesus arrives at the home there is little opportunity to rest nor is there a meal waiting for them, for Peter's mother in law, the hostess of the home, is incapacitated by a fever. In the same way the man in the synagogue was unable to worship because of the demons in him, Peter's mother in law was unable to serve because of her illness. It was a condition that Jesus would not tolerate. The scriptures tell us he came and bore our sickness and infirmities (Matt. 8:17) and during his brief years on earth there were very few he did not reach out to heal. It was a demonstration of his power and proof of his Lordship over the body and creation.

Notice however that when Peter's mother in law was healed she responds by serving. "*The fever left her and she began to wait on them.*" (vs.31) God touched her, restored her, and she responded by serving him.

In God's family there is to be one great body of people: servants. In fact, that's the way to the top in his kingdom. -CHARLES R. SWINDOLL

## **Lesson Nine: I NEED A BREAK! (1:35-39)**

*"Jesus got up and left the house."* (vs.35)

May I pry open a window to my parental heart for a moment and allow you to view something that builds up tension in my life as a father? I am at a time in my life where many of the responsibilities of parenting have fallen on my shoulders as my wife recovers from a major brain operation. Now please understand that what I am about to share is meant in good humor about my children so whatever you do, don't take me too seriously. Here we go then. I want to share with you seven things children do that drive me crazy. I think, if you are a parent, you will relate.

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1. Tugging at my shirt as we walk in the store. (Always on one side only so as to make that side longer than the other.)
2. Telling me something while I am on the phone with someone else and expecting an immediate response.
3. Always waiting till I am in the bathroom before deciding they need something from me.
4. Asking for a drink of water after they have been tucked into bed.
5. Opening my zipper as I am standing talking to someone.
6. Running circles around me as I am speaking to someone while still holding on to that same side of my shirt.
7. Placing balloons only in places where I am sure to walk.

I share these things with you simply to emphasize how important it is to find time with God away from all other distractions. I am speaking here about the importance of solitude, and I draw this simple point from the passage we are looking at. If Jesus needed to get away from his disciples to be alone with God, then certainly we need moments when we need to place some distance between ourselves and those others who absorb most of our time. This is not selfishness but rather prudence, for there is no other way for God to be heard than to make ourselves completely available to him and no one else. Notice Jesus “got up” early and “left the house” and “went off to a solitary place”. Was this really necessary? Could he not have enjoyed a moment with God while still accessible to his disciples? Our Lord knew the value of being alone with God and he took the necessary steps to assure that nothing came in the way of this precious moment. You see, the only way we can make ourselves fully available to God is when we are not available to others. Jesus needed a break from his disciples. He needed solitude where he could speak with his father without his disciples tugging at his shirt. So by the time the disciples did find him, he was already off the phone and ready to work.

What steps are necessary for you to take in order to be fully available to God?

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Shall we not shut the door against earthly noise and find that, once the noise is gone, God will roar all about us? It's the silent communion of the closet that best declares his reality.

-CALVIN MILLER

Alone with God! It is there that what is hid with God is made known—God's ideals, God's hopes, God's doings. -OSWALD CHAMBERS (1874–1917)

*“Jesus sent him away with a strong warning.” (vs.43)*

Living a disciplined well-ordered life is perhaps the key to successful holy living. I have found in my life that when my private world is in disarray I have no sense of closeness with God. Without structure and discipline the rooms of my heart become sloppy and untidy and uninviting to my Lord. It is not that our efforts at routines and habits make us any holier, but that these efforts of self discipline enable us to keep our focus fixed on the one who makes us holy. Discipline does not make us holy but helps us to maintain holiness. It is significant that Peter calls us to holiness in 1 Peter 1 (be holy because I am holy; vs.16) by demanding first that we live self-controlled lives. (prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; vs.13). We are declared holy through the redemption work of Christ, but to live out that holiness requires careful disciplines on our part.

It seems from the passage before us that Jesus was speaking to a man whose life was not very tidy. Jesus heals him and tells him to go to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses prescribed. The man is commanded to direct his worship to God first rather than make his healing a celebrity cause. Being undisciplined he ignores the need for spiritual discipline and ritual, and with little regard to the effect this has on Christ he tells everyone he sees. You almost get the feeling that he was more interested in promoting himself than exalting Christ. While this cost Jesus the opportunity to speak freely, you wonder if it also cost the man his soul. He did not respond to Christ's healing by giving his life fully to God as an act of worship. Unless we lay our

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all on the altar, and discipline our lives in the way Christ prescribes, we can never experience holy living. Sometimes the price for this neglect is great.

Bob Dylan's conversion to Christianity and his subsequent rejection of it for Judaism has always been a mystery to me. I have before me one of Bob Dylan's classic albums in CD. The lyrics of *SAVED* are rich with Christian truths and expressions of commitment to the gospel. You cannot listen to these words and not believe that this man understood the gospel and had been touched in some significant way by the Lord Jesus. Yet why did this man who had such a clear understanding of the gospel reject its message, trading in the new wineskin for the old? It was only some years ago that I heard what I believe to be the answer to this question. Bob Dylan never became involved with other Christians and never joined a church family. He was touched by Jesus, but rather than go to the priest and offer sacrifices, he loosely spoke of Christ before the people only to become another Christian celebrity with no roots to the body of Christ.

May God help us to seek holiness first, to place our lives on the altar as living sacrifices even before we pour out what God has done before others.

*“So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and build up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.” (Col. 2:6,7)*

## **Lesson Eleven: THE TALK OF ETERNITY! (2:1-12)**

*“Son, your sins are forgiven.” (vs.6)*

The best thing that Jesus can ever do for us is not heal us, nor bless us materially, nor promise us a full and healthy life. These are nice perks for the Christian to enjoy as God's blessings, but they are not God's ultimate for us. Here then is the best Jesus has for us. He wants to forgive us and by doing so offer us the healthiest life possible.

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While in this home crowded to the brim with people, four men disrupt Jesus' sermon by bringing into the middle of the room their sick friend. Their persistence and expectation is so great that they went to the extent of tearing the roof off so as to insure Jesus would not overlook their need. Now, in their minds eyes there was really only one thing Jesus could do that would leave them satisfied – and that was to physically restore their friend. Give him back his legs! Help him to walk again! Restore the quality of his life! Help him to know the joy of running again! Within moments, all those in the room must have been sharing these expectations. The people wanted and expected a miracle, a physical healing, but Jesus did not view this to be the man's greatest need. Neither was it going to be his first response. The man needed spiritual healing and this is where Jesus would begin. So what does Jesus do? Before mending the man's legs, he mends his heart. He forgives him and by so doing restores the man to God. Then, to show he had the authority to forgive the man (and to shut the mouths of the skeptics in the crowd) he also restores the man physically.

Lets put this story into some eternal perspective for just a moment, for by so doing we will value much more the real healing that took place that day. If we had the opportunity 2000 years later to ask this man what really changed his life that day, he would tell us it was the declaration of forgiveness by Christ, not the command to rise up and walk. The miracle that would last for eternity was spiritual not physical. When the people filed out from that house the talk of the streets was no doubt about a lame man who now walked. The talk of eternity however is that here a man, separated from God by his sins, is now restored to God.

I write this at a moment in my life when the desire for healing is intense. In fact these meditations on Mark offer me a path to scatter many of my deep feelings on the matter. Only last week, and only four months after my wife came through a life-threatening operation to remove a brain tumor, my eleven year old son has been diagnosed as having an in-operable brain tumor. My longing that God would completely heal my wife who is currently undergoing intensive speech therapy, now embraces the hope that God would heal my son. Let's put all this into some spiritual perspective though. In 100 years from now whether God has healed my wife and son will be secondary to the spiritual work he has already done in their lives. They both love the Lord deeply and have been declared forgiven by the Lord Jesus. That is the talk of eternity. Yes, I cry out for God to physically heal. I too would tear the roof off any building if it made any

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difference. But I have to accept that the healing that ultimately determines our place with God is initially not as evident or dramatic. It is the declaration by Christ that we are forgiven.

How completely satisfying to turn from our limitations to a God who has none. Eternal years lie in his heart. For him time does not pass, it remains; and those who are in Christ share with him all the riches of limitless time and endless years. -A.W. TOZER (1897–1963)

*"Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house." (vs.15)*

Matthew was the sort of man others, particularly Jews, found unacceptable. He stood for everything that was anti-Israel. Everyday Matthew would sit in his tax collecting booth on the busy beaches of Galilee extorting money from his own countrymen and lining his own pockets with the extras. An Israelite working for the cause of expanding the cause of Rome was tantamount to being a traitor. One commentator sums up Matthew's lonely world this way. "He sat near the lake at a table. Around him were piles of money, and account books, and fish - but few friends." Matthew, the tax collector, was the Ebednezer Scrooge of his day. He had a great career, lots of material security, but he lived alone.

Matthew's tax booth offered him a good view of many of the activities that took place around the lake. Mark has already told us that Galilee was a popular visiting site for the Lord Jesus, so Matthew must have seen first hand many of the things Jesus did, and his teaching must have burned conviction into his heart. So when Jesus worked his way through the crowds toward that isolated tax booth the call to follow became irresistible to the man no one else cared for. Matthew left his booth and followed Jesus, but not until he had invited Jesus to his home. It is here in Matthew's home that we discover something unprecedented about God's acceptance of man. The picture Mark paints for us of Matthew's home is at best a worldly one, full of sinners and traitors. The Pharisees were appalled that Jesus would even consider entering this home, let alone eat with these sinners and outcasts.

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The home of Matthew on that day serves as a microcosm of the Church today. Everything that took place then is something taking place week after week as sinners and traitors gather together in homes and churches. The body of Christ is a place where all are welcome and accepted by Christ and called to leave all behind to follow him. Jesus had every right to condemn Matthew and his band of cronies as he has the right to reject each of us who have betrayed him and the cause of his kingdom. It was by accepting Matthew however, not by rejecting him, that Jesus drew this sinner to himself. I believe this dinner at Matthew's home was a farewell party to his past life as he chose to now follow a new Master.

Let's think for just a moment of the value of acceptance. I have found in my life that I am able to be most myself around those people who accept me as I am. Their presence does not place on me pressures to be something that I am not and I find that their easy acceptance of me becomes an invitation to share my heart knowing that what I share will not be cause for rejection. There is one thing Jesus does as we invite him into the home of our hearts that no one else is willing or able to do. He moves to accept us and invites us to leave everything behind in order to follow him. The truth is, we can be nothing but ourselves around him. What is startling is that he accepts us anyway. This acceptance then becomes a start point for dealing with the sin in our lives.

There was something about the way Jesus was in the home of Matthew that permitted everyone to relax. Around Jesus the sick could comfortably speak of their pain. Those who were sinners did not need to cover their sin – Jesus knew them already as sinners. They could speak freely of their failure and faults as he placed his arms around them offering healing and forgiveness. By accepting Matthew and his friends for who they were, Jesus invited them to disclose everything. I am sure Matthew was not the only one added to the list of Jesus' followers on that day, and today the numbers continue to increase.

*You are not accepted by God because you deserve to be, or because you have worked hard for him; but because Jesus died for you. -COLIN URQUHART*

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*“on that day they will fast” (vs.20)*

The scene is still so vivid and the emotions associated with it still tender. Since my parents were missionaries in the isolated jungles of Irian Jaya there were no schooling options other than the boarding school located some 300 miles away from home. As I sat on the first day in the single engine airplane now racing down the dirt runway my eyes shifted away from the fading image of my parents waving goodbye to the small package held in my hands. My mother gave me clear instructions not to open the package until the plane was well off the ground. For a moment I forgot my tears and excitedly ripped open the wrapping, which revealed a small colorful ring that fitted perfectly on my finger. In the weeks and months that followed with the adjustments and pangs for home, that little ring would serve as slight comfort in the separation that would be a pattern for my life in the years that followed.

I learned something valuable about separation in those formative years. That is, until you are with the ones you love the most (in my case, my parents) you are never really settled or feel that you are at home. The passage on fasting that we are looking at has really more to do with separation and reunion than it does the discipline of fasting. To Jesus there was no sense in his disciples fasting when the one they loved most, the giver and provider of life himself, was with them. A time would come however, and we live in that time today, when Jesus would be physically removed from their presence leaving them and all his followers with a sense of something missing that would remain until he returned. It is in his absence that our longing for him increases. Fasting during that separation would ensure that nothing or no one else would fill the vacuum caused by his absence.

I really don't think Jesus is all that interested in whether I fast or not. He wants to know if I miss him. Do I long to be with him as though I can never become settled until I am? Do I feel out of place in this world knowing that he is preparing a better place for me and one day will return to take me there? Am I determined to allow nothing else to become a substitute for him? I don't know whatever happened to that colorful ring. If I found it, it would bring back a flood of

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memories of separations and reunions. But my personal experience has prepared me for a far greater reunion, and I can't wait for it.

## **Lesson Fourteen: LOOSEN UP! (2:18-28)**

It is here that Jesus shows us that you don't have to live a rigid life to be holy. Many Christians would do well do study his example. I grew up in a strong missionary setting (see previous devotional) where early on I learned to associate holiness with the do's and don'ts of Christian living at the boarding school where I attended. No sports on Sunday. hair had to be at a certain length, and at one point the dorm parents insisted on measuring girls dresses to assure the distance between the knees and the hem of the dress did not exceed 4 inches. The leadership meant well and only functioned within the attitude of that day when Christians furiously sought to fight against the tide of rebellion against authoritarianism. There were many times I wondered what all this really had to do with the Christian life.

Similarly the Pharisees in our story were close to losing the heart factor of Sabbath keeping. People could not be blamed for asking what the Sabbath was really for anyway and what it really had to do with holiness. God never meant for the Sabbath to become a measure or rule for holiness but he did intend that it help his people to live out their holiness. Is Jesus suggesting here though that it is possible to break rules and still remain within the boundary lines of godly living? If the rules are man-made than then the answer to this is yes. At this moment in history the Jewish religious leaders had imposed so many rules on God's people it became literally impossible for the faithful to even come close to measuring up. Trying became such a burden that by the time Jesus came the heart factor had been completely lost in the maze of legal living. What God intended from the Sabbath was no longer recognizable.

By having his disciples eat grain on the Sabbath, Jesus was not attempting to relax the rules but rather redirect people to the only rule of holiness, to what Sabbath keeping was originally intended for. This had to do with the condition of mans heart, not his ability to live up to heavy demands.

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What Jesus also sought to include here is that his presence with the disciples in that field and his participation with them made this activity perfectly acceptable. We find here a precise measure of whether something we do is acceptable to God or not. That is, is it something Jesus would willingly do with us? Here are some pointed questions to ask ourselves as we look for the heart factor in all our activities. Would Jesus be found sitting with us watching a particular program on television? Would we find him comfortably listening to our conversation? Would he be pleased with the places we go? Yet in all this let us be careful not to become so rigid that we lose the heart factor. Here is the only rule to holiness that we are to measure our lives against: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength." (Mark 12:30) Some Christians have become so rigid they have lost this measuring stick along their walk toward holiness.

So here is a little advice. Loosen up, and go enjoy some ears of corn once in a while, even if it is Sunday.

There are people who do not want us to be free. They don't want us to be free before God, accepted just as we are by his grace. They don't want us to be free to express our faith originally and creatively in the world. They . . . insist that all look alike, talk alike and act alike, thus validating one another's worth. Without being aware of it we become anxious about what others will say about us, obsessively concerned about what others think we should do. We no longer live the good news but anxiously try to memorize and recite the script that someone else has assigned to us. We may be secure, but we will not be free. -EUGENE PETERSON

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## ARE DEMONS BETTER AT WORSHIP THAN SOME OF US? (3:7-12)

*“They fell before him and cried out.” (vs.11)*

Mark paints for us a striking contrast here between the crowd and the evil spirits. The crowds “heard all he was doing” and out of curiosity, fascination and perhaps personal need rushed to him. To these Jesus was a popular celebrity who had come to town. The evil spirits react much differently, not because of all Jesus has done but because they know who he is. “They fell down before him and cried out ‘you are the Son of God.’” Fear gripped them for they knew that their world had been invaded by the very presence of the living God and it would mean their eventual end. It seems then from the two reactions to Christ’s presence that it is the demons who are better at worship than the cheering crowd.

It is also interesting that Jesus puts some space between himself and the pressing crowd, but directly confronts the evil spirits. Acknowledging their correct identification of him, he gives them strict orders not to tell any one else who he is. The pieces were not yet fully in place for this revelation to be made public.

What is it that draws you to Jesus? Why do you go to him? Do you rush to him because of the popular things you hear he can do for you? Or do you fall at his feet in awe because of who he is, as John does in his vision of Christ in Revelation 1:17; “*when I saw him I fell at his feet as though dead.*”. If the demons cried out and fell before him acknowledging his Lordship even over the demonic realm, then what is asked of us who love him and live for him?

Our family recently returned from six years of missionary service in England and I have to confess that some of the changes in those six years to our home country have left me off balance. This was brought home to me when I bought some stamps and proceeded to lick one, only to find out that I was meant to peel the back off and place it directly on my envelope. Perhaps the most disturbing in my six year absence has been the increasing commercialization of Christianity in America. The selling and promoting of Christian material and memorabilia has made the Christian industry a significant part of the economic market of the United States. For example, the Christian music industry takes in a staggering one billion dollars and more each year, forcing

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the industry to promote musicians with the same marketing tactics used by the world. Christian musicians are celebrities who certainly must struggle with the tension between Christian discipleship and the temptation for fame and popularity. One only needs to visit the local Christian bookstore to see that the name of Jesus has become a commodity to be sold, not a Lord to be worshipped. It's hard to imagine falling down before him and crying out, "you are the Son of God", as your eyes glance over the trinkets and clever Christian ornaments on display. I would imagine like he did in Galilee, Jesus puts some distance between himself and the commercial crowd.

Interestingly, I felt I had a deeper sense of awe in Jesus in the pagan environment of England than I sense here in the saturated Christian community of the town where I live in the Bible belt of the South. I am fighting to retain that sense of awe and wish that this reverence for Jesus would not be watered down in this climate where Christians want Jesus to be a popular celebrity. Don't misunderstand me. I do appreciate the fish stickers, and I value the WWJD bracelets and music. I just don't want to lose the wonder of who he really is. Perhaps we should listen to those demons once in a while.

If worship does not change us, it has not been worship. To stand before the Holy One of eternity is to change. Worship begins in holy expectancy; it ends in holy obedience. -RICHARD J. FOSTER

## **Lesson Sixteen: YOU KNOW YOU ARE DISCIPLE IF.... (3:13-19)**

*"These are the twelve he appointed.." vs.16*

Last month it was 20 years since the Jonestown tragedy when to the world's horror, over 900 people committed suicide at the command of one man, Jim Jones. I am currently reading a book by a follower of Jim Jones who only months before this event knew enough about the man to get out. Sharon Layton escaped knowing that many lives were in danger, and leaving behind her mother, father and brother she tried to warn as many as possible of what would certainly

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transpire. Sharon was a follower of Jim Jones who knew where to draw the line between following and wholehearted commitment. Sadly for 900 others this line was blurred.

After reading Mark's account I am not satisfied with the standard explanation that a disciple is merely one who follows Jesus. Many followed Jesus but did not commit their lives to him. To follow someone does not necessarily mean you will go the distance with them. It is in verse 14 that we have the most descriptive picture of discipleship in Mark's following words: "*He appointed twelve – designated them apostles – that they might be with him and that he might send them out ... to have authority to drive out demons."* What really is a disciple? Study this passage carefully, measure your life next to it and you will know what kind of disciple you really are. Are you ready? Here are three important qualities to know about a true disciple.

## **1. You know you are a disciple if ... you are regularly needing to spend time with the Lord in personal devotions.**

Notice Christ called the twelve firstly for the purpose of being with him - "*that they might be with him.*" It was from these moments of intimate fellowship with the Lord that the basics of their Christian lives were formed. The disciples were to understand that you can never serve God until you first know him. Later one of the apostles, John, would value this personal side of discipleship. Reflecting on his relationship with Christ, John now an old man, wrote these words found in his first epistle: "*That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched – this we proclaim concerning the word of life*" (1 John 1:1). Jesus first called his disciples to that mountain, in order that they might be with him.

## **1. You know you are a disciple if ... you are compelled to tell others about Jesus.**

Jesus removed these potential followers from the world so they might get to know him personally, with the objective of returning them into the world to tell others about the fellowship they too can have with Christ - "*That he might send them out.*" Look again what John says in his first letter: "*This we proclaim concerning the word of Life.*" You will find in your Christian walk that time spent with Christ in intimate fellowship will lead to a life of witness. You just can't spend time with Christ without wanting others to know about him. When my younger sister

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was dating the man who is now her husband, she was so madly in love with him my wife and I remember that he was all she ever talked about. So it should be with all true disciples. Are you so in love with Christ, having spent moments of intimate fellowship with him, that you are compelled to tell others? Our lack of witness for Christ perhaps betrays a lack of time spent with Christ. Jesus called those disciples to that mountain so that he might send them out.

## **1. You know you are a disciple if ... your passion is to see others set free from their sins.**

The task to which Jesus sends his disciples is a radical and life changing one. There is nothing light or casual about the life work of a disciple. Leaving that mountain Jesus sends the twelve out to *have authority to drive out demons*. The disciples were called to a confrontation ministry bringing them into direct conflict with the enemy and with the aim of bringing people to spiritual freedom. It is a task Jesus came to do and one he calls all disciples to. *“He sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed..”* (Luke 4:18)

If you find yourself discipling someone struggling with (or new to) the faith, your final aim ought to be to bring this person to spiritual victory. The key battleground in attaining discipleship is to discover and experience freedom in Christ. Freedom comes only when the devil has been driven out of our lives. The disciples would leave that mountain to return to the ordinary experiences of life with authority given by Christ over the enemy.

Are you a disciple? Look over the points above and prayerfully review how you are doing. Are you discouraged by how poorly your life measures to the call of discipleship? If so, then listen. Jesus is calling you to the mountain. Go and join him. You’ll enjoy fellowship with him. He will send you back to bring others to him. See you there.

In every Christian’s heart there is a cross and a throne, and the Christian is on the throne till he puts himself on the cross; if he refuses the cross, he remains on the throne. Perhaps this is at the bottom of the backsliding and worldliness among gospel believers today. We want to be saved, but we insist that Christ do all the dying. No cross for us, no dethronement, no dying. We remain king within the little kingdom

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of Mansoul and wear our tinsel crown with all the pride of a Caesar; but we doom ourselves to shadows and weakness and spiritual sterility. -A. W. TOZER

## **Lesson Seventeen: LISTENING – A VITAL PART OF WORSHIP (4:1-20)**

*“He who has an ear let him hear.” (vs.9)*

Someone was giving me directions recently but I was only half listening. My mind was somewhere else and I found myself absorbing only fragments of the directions being given. I quickly discovered that the little bits I took in were not enough to successfully take me to my destination. I swallowed my pride and pulled into a service station to try again, this time with eager attentiveness.

We can often be like that when we listen to the directions of Jesus as we move through this road called life. The parable of the sower teaches us that unless we give complete attention to what our Lord has to say, we can easily get distracted from our path. The key theme to the parable is about listening but the sort of listening that is determined and undivided. Look carefully at how Jesus begins this parable. You will observe that he calls us first to listen. *“Listen. A farmer went out to sow”* (vs.3). Follow along through the parable into the next parable of the Lamp. Stand and you will notice that at several junctures Jesus pauses to ensure his listeners are still with him. *“He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”*(vs.9) *“If any one has ears to hear, let him hear.”* (vs.23) *“Consider carefully what you hear.”* (vs.24)

Look more carefully at the content of the parable of the sower and again you will notice that Jesus is continually appealing to our hearing. When later he gives an explanation of the parable to his disciples we find that the most successful way that the enemy has to keep us from obeying God is to cause us to be poor listeners. Some people (vs13) are like seed that fall along the path. *“As soon as they hear it Satan comes and takes it away.”* Others (vs. 16) are guilty of being like seed sown on rocky ground. They *“hear the word with joy”* but since their roots are shallow, what they hear sinks in only so deep. And others (vs. 18) are like seed sown in thorns. They too *“hear the word”* but the worries of this life choke it out.

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In each of these cases the problem is with our hearing. Sometimes we just aren't very good listeners. We are too distracted. We think about other things while our Lord speaks to us. The consequence can be tragic. Shallow lives, worry filled lives, and rejection of truth can be the unfortunate results of the neglect of listening to what our Lord has to say to us.

Let me just add here that I believe listening is a crucial part of our worship. Think about this for a minute. When you sit in church how much of your time is spent in listening? I would suggest that about three-quarters of the time spent during the worship service involves us, the worshiper, listening. We listen to the scripture being read. Or do we? We listen to the prayer being offered to God -or do we? We listen to the sermon preached. Or do we? Do you see what I mean when I say that listening is a vital part of worship? You see, it is through the sense of hearing that God's word touches us and (depending on the quality of our listening) penetrates deep and invokes a radical change to the soil of our hearts. How are you at listening? Next time you worship, value the role of listening.

God has given man one tongue but two ears that we may hear twice as much as we speak.

## **Lesson Eighteen: THREE PARABLES AND A STORM (4:21-41)**

*"Do you still have no faith?." (vs.40)*

I have learned a deep and penetrating lesson in these last months. Sometimes in life it takes a storm for us to really experience the reality of what God has been saying to us. When God's word remains only a theory that we consider once in a while, it will do no good in helping us during the harsh realities of life. Sometimes it takes a storm for God's word to have a transforming affect on our lives. It is in storms that we have few options of our own. It is in storms that our own resources and abilities will mean nothing -we have to rely completely on his. It is in storms that we value as never before the presence of Christ with us. It is in storms that suddenly what God wants, or his will for us, matters to us. We become completely subject to him.

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You will notice that the narrative of the storm in vs. 35-41 is preceded by three parables. Through these parables Christ seeks to pass on truths that transform, kingdom truths that when applied are meant to change us to his way of living. I am sure when the disciples heard Jesus speaking they marveled at Jesus' ability to communicate. His stories were profound and full of meaning. But how much of it really hit home? How much of what Jesus said really found a permanent home in their hearts and lives, becoming a determining force in directing them to his way of living? Probably very little. You see, it would take a God-ordained storm for these truths to take on lasting meaning in their lives.

You will find in your life that knowing truth is often not sufficient to move us to God's way for us. Sometimes God has to take us through a storm for these truths to find a permanent place in our lives. Storms have a way of driving truths deep into our character. For the disciples, this storm would develop and deepen their faith in Christ in a way that merely knowing truth could not do. Jesus' question, when the sea grew calm at his command, "do you still have no faith?" I believe was a rhetorical question meant to draw a connection between what they had just experienced and the truths he had taught them prior to their entering the boat. In this storm the parables would take on new meaning.

I have a cousin in Holland who many years ago was given the opportunity by my father to hear the clear message of the gospel. At times, my cousin gave intellectual assent to what he heard and at one point even flirted with Christianity, but it was obvious from his lack of fruit and shallow commitment that it had never taken on true meaning in his life. Until the storms came that is. For over ten years my cousin was swept into a world of drugs and alcohol where he found himself becoming more desperate as each year passed. A moment finally came when presented with the gospel again, my cousin accepted the truth of God's word. In his storm the words meant something. He gave his heart to Christ and to this day is deepening his roots and nurturing a beautiful relationship with the Lord of Storms himself.

Do you understand the value of storms? Are you willing to accept this principle I have recently learned, that sometimes it does take heavy storms for God's word to find a lasting and effective place in our lives? May the Lord prepare you for the next storm.

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*“Consider it pure joy my brothers whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so you might be complete, not lacking in anything.”* (James 1:2-4)

A Christian who walks by faith accepts all circumstances from God. He thanks God when everything goes good, when everything goes bad, and for the “blues” somewhere in-between. He thanks God whether he feels like it or not. -ERWIN W. LUTZER

## **Lesson Nineteen: BEFORE AND AFTER! (5:1-20)**

*“They saw the man sitting there dressed in his right mind.”* (vs.16)

I have never easily fallen for the promotion of a product that uses the before and after argument. Recently while in line at the grocery store I lapsed into the inexcusable temptation of reading the cover of one of those tabloid magazines. The front-page picture did catch my eye, I have to admit. There before me were two pictures of the same person, one before taking the miraculous diet, the other only weeks after. Now to me it was obvious that the clothing and hairstyle had an amazing and deceptive altering affect on the person, but before I could entertain any more cynical thoughts it was time for me to purchase my goods.

There was nothing touched up or deceptive about the man we meet in our story today. The after was a complete change from the before. Christ Jesus made a complete and lasting difference in

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his life and never again would he be the same. In an extreme way perhaps this man illustrates the difference that occurs in our lives after Christ Jesus has met us. All of us have our own before and after testimony to give and there are times we need to be reminded of it. You won't need to read a tabloid to know your story, but do take a moment right now and review the change Jesus has brought about in your life. Perhaps reviewing the event of this story will help. Let's get to know this man and as we do you may well notice some similarities with your own life.

1. His life was lived out in darkness – Verse 3 tells us this man lived in the tombs. His home was a burial site and his bed was very likely a tomb stone. You see, the world without Christ is a vast graveyard. While man seeks to deny this fact, the reality of it does catch up with him at the end of his life. Life without Jesus is death. Just the other day we drove some friends to visit a scenic area near our home and on the way the husband remarked how beautiful the cemetery looked, located on a sloping hill and with a mountain serving as a back drop. The irony struck me. We have managed somehow to make a layout of tombs an attractive place. That is the way we view our world at times. The reality of life without Christ is that it is ugly darkness. There is nothing pleasant about this world. The Apostle Paul was strikingly somber in his description of such a world. *“As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world.”* (Ephesians 2:1-2)

2. Apart from Christ this man was beyond help – *“no one could bind him anymore, not even chains.”* (vs.3). His case was helpless and had now become hopeless. There was a time when those around him, perhaps family, put him in chains and the chains did restrain him, but in time, he became uncontrollable. No one could even come near him. You see, physical chains could not help him because his problem was a spiritual one. Demons can not be bound with physical chains.

There are many problems we face, if not all problems, that that will never have human or earthly solutions. Man's problem is basically a spiritual one. Those of us who have been in ministry know that any attempts to solve these problems through human means will prove futile. Money, medicines, support groups, counseling will eventually prove futile means to deliver a person from their spiritual need. There are many around us like this man who live through life beyond help. Family and friends can only watch from a distance, helplessly observing their loved one crying out for help.

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3. This man cried for help – What a vivid and sad portrait Mark paints for us of this man. It's the stuff nightmares are made of. "*night and day among the tombs and in the hills he would cry and cut himself with stones.*" (vs.5). Yet his only company were the dead. Desperate, this man screamed for help. Something deep within the walls of his insanity cried for relief, yet those who heard could do nothing to help. Stop and listen to those around you. Those at work, at home, in your neighborhood. Can you hear the cry?

4. It was difficult to distinguish this man from the legions that occupied his life – Very little of the original creation of God showed in this man. His life was now fully controlled by the legion of demons that occupied him. Herein lies the wonder of this story. Others could only see a mad lunatic who had lost all of his recognizable traits, yet here before him on that day stood the one who knew him and loved him as no other did or could. Jesus knew that beneath the oppression and occupation lay dormant the original creation of God. By the power of a resurrection this man would become himself again, but better yet, the self made in God's image. So overpowered by demons, this man could only be set free by Christ's initiative. Think of this for a moment. Every person who lives in oppression can be set free only by the power of Christ's resurrection. No one can save himself, but Christ can set everyone free. So powerful is the resurrection of Christ that no one is so far gone that he is not able to know freedom. Do you know that for your life?

The before and after of this man is a testimony of God's grace. Yet, it is the same miracle that has taken place in the life of every believer. It is the same Christ and the same power that saved that man on that day that saves us. "*What a wretched man I am. Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord.*" (Romans 7:24,25)

Free at last, free at last. Thank God Almighty, I'm free at last.

—Inscription on the gravestone of Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929–1968)

## **Lesson Twenty: DELAYS! FAITH REFINING OPPORTUNITIES! (5:21-43)**

*"Don't be afraid, just believe."* (vs.36)

On this journey with Mark there have been times when I have had to linger at the scene longer than usual. This story of a man about to lose his daughter, his plea for Christ to heal her strikes a

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familiar cord in my own heart. You see, as I write this I too have a twelve year child who faces a serious illness and I too have had to fall at the feet of my Lord pleading that he will spare my child. While Jairus' story covers a span of perhaps only a few hours, mine has been a prolonged one of months. In fact, it has now been two months since my son was first diagnosed with this brain stem tumor and since then he has undergone six intense weeks of radiation treatment. Today we wait another six weeks before we will know from a scan what the effect of the radiation has been. Waiting on our Lord to respond to our cry is often the most testing of times but it is also when our faith has the opportunity to be nurtured. That is what I believe to be happening in this story.

Jairus, Mark tells us, is a lay leader in the Synagogue at Capernaum where Jesus had visited previously. As Synagogue ruler it was Jarius' responsibility to maintain the upkeep of the temple. His view of life within the walls of the temple gave him rare opportunities to observe things others would not see. Perhaps Jairus had been captivated by Christ's teachings at the Lord's previous visit recorded for us in Chapter 1:21. But on this day there was little that mattered to Jarius but the condition of his daughter. Putting aside his job Mark tells us that on seeing Jesus Jairus "*fell at his feet and pleaded earnestly with him. My daughter is dying*"(vs.22-23). Mark records no response from Christ but one. "*So Jesus went with him..*" (Vs.23). But on the journey Jairus' hope for healing is shattered on two fronts. First, Jesus' attention is taken away from his daughter when a sick woman distracts him and receives healing from him. Secondly, this delay was enough to bring about the death of his dear daughter.

Our journey of faith will often take us on the path of pain, anguish and uncertainty. I have shared with you frequently in these meditations that I am presently on that path. There is nothing more needed on this journey than to know that our Lord Jesus Christ travels with us as he did with Jairus. We know that Jesus accompanies us because he has told us so in his word. We are to believe that in faith. On your travels equip yourself with these words from Hebrews 13:5-6. "*I will never leave you; never will I forsake you.. So we can say with confidence, the Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid.*"

You will also experience on this journey moments when you can only hang in there by faith as it will appear that our Lord delays in responding to your need. It happened to Jairus and it often happens to us. Sometimes it will appear that Christ has put our need to one side and is too busy

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ministering to the need of someone else. It is only when our story is complete that we discover otherwise. If it had not been for this delay to Jairus' pressing need, Jesus' words would not have been so penetrating. *"Don't be afraid, just believe"* were uttered by our Lord when the situation had grown desperate and all hope of intervention had past. The sort of belief and trust Jesus looked for in Jairus required this delay. It is the sort of belief we need when it appears that Jesus has abandoned us. It is the sort of faith that accepts Jesus is in control even when death has not been averted. A better rendering of this command by Christ would be, *"just keep believing"*. "Do not give up Jairus. Keep believing in me even though it appears that all hope is lost. Hang in there Jairus! I am still with you." And isn't it wonderful that while teaching Jairus through this delay, Jesus had time to reach out to a desperate woman suffering from an illness no one else could cure? That is the way our Lord works. What he does and the way he does it is always for our best and for his glory. What ever you are going through, don't be afraid just believe.

What we need very badly these days is a company of Christians who are prepared to trust God as completely now as they know they must do at the last day. For each of us the time is coming when we shall have nothing but God. Health and wealth and friends and hiding places will be swept away, and we shall have only God. To the man of pseudo-faith that is a terrifying thought, but to real faith it is one of the most comforting thoughts the heart can entertain. -A. W. TOZER

## **Lesson Twenty One: UNWELCOME HERO! (6:1-6)**

*"And they took offense at him" (vs.3)*

Most moviegoers are quite familiar with the actor Tom Cruise. Dashing handsome, Cruise has been the heartthrob of several generations with his suave performance in movies such as TOP GUN, where he plays a daring and fearless fighter pilot. I am told though, that despite his widespread popularity, Tom Cruise refuses to visit his hometown and high school. Why? Because in high school, Cruise was unpopular. He was just an ordinary kid, one of those weird drama students who had little to do with sports or the persona he is now associated with. Perhaps Cruise

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knows that he will not receive the same adulation from those who know him well, as he does from the general public.

This must have been how Nazareth received the Lord Jesus. Jesus goes back to his hometown as an unwelcome hero. People certainly must have known about his miracles and growing popularity. But they also remember how he was just an ordinary carpenter, one of their own who did not stand out as any different than all the others in the community. The reaction to Jesus outside Nazareth was amazement, wonder, worship and excitement. Mark gives us a markedly contrasting of his reception at Nazareth. *"Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't this Mary's son, and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us?"* (vs.3)

Luke in his record of this same scene reminds us that Jesus provoked this reaction when, in the Synagogue, he is handed the scriptures and uses the opportunity to announce that he is the very fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy about the Messiah: *"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, and he began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."* (Luke 4:18-19) So incensed are the people by this that Luke later tells us they take Jesus outside the Synagogue and drag him to a cliff with intentions of throwing him over. That is quite a strong reaction for simply standing up and reading the scripture in Church isn't it?

It is hard to believe Nazareth could be so foolish in rejecting the very one who came to offer hope and life, until we realize that Nazareth is really just a picture of our world. In fact, John in his gospel pointedly remarks that *"he came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him."* (John 1:1) The atmosphere that existed in Nazareth then lingers today not just in our world but often times with us. People have a hard time accepting that God himself came and took an ordinary place with us. Like Nazareth, many have a hard time believing that God can be so ordinary, so human. But it was what Jesus demanded of them that caused such a reaction. He wanted them to accept not only that he was the Messiah, but the Messiah who required their allegiance. There in lies the resistance. It was not what Jesus announced as much as what he required from that announcement that brought resistance to the surface. You see, to believe he is

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the Messiah demands submission on our part. The people of Nazareth were not ready for that and Christ was forced to go elsewhere to conduct his ministry. We should pity not only Nazareth for such foolishness but also those today who are not willing to receive into their lives the one who loves them. May God help you to not only acknowledge him as Lord, but submit fully to his Lordship so that he might dwell freely with you and call you one of his own.

## **Lesson Twenty Two: READY! SET! GO! (Mark 6:7-13)**

*“Calling the twelve to him he sent them out.” (vs.7)*

We do not gather around Jesus to become unused sponges. Jesus called the twelve to him in order that they might be sent out as his servants. Time spent with him was in preparation for a task of high privilege and responsibility. It is the nature of discipleship to be with Jesus, yes to know him, but also to be sent out to a world that does not know him.

It was my last week of Bible College and I asked a friend of mine what he planned to do know that this phase of his life was complete. His answer? He planned on being a professional student the rest of his life pursuing one degree after another. My friend had no plans of doing anything with the degrees he received.

It can often be that way with Christians. There comes a time though when we have to be sent out to do something with the equipment Jesus has given us. This was just such a moment that Mark speaks about here in our passage. Do you remember what Mark told us back in Mark 3:14 when the disciples were first called by Christ? Jesus calls the twelve to him *“that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach.”* Christians spend time with the Lord Jesus, yes to know him, but then to take what they know and share it with a world that does not know. That is the task of discipleship.

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Christ's instructions to his disciples provide some relevant principles for us today as we seek to serve him in our world. These principles can be of great help to missionary organizations and churches as they prepare workers for the harvest.

1. In our service to God we need accountability and support. Jesus sent out the twelve, not as lone rangers, but in twos. Why? So they would not be alone in the harvest field. In pairs, the workers would find support, encouragement and accountability from each other. The pressures would be great, the resistance strong. Two would offer the strength that would be necessary for the job which would not be available in a solitary ministry. Likewise, no missionary, no pastor and no church worker should launch out without a strong network of support and accountability.
2. In our service to God we are to depend only on God for our financial and material support. *"Take nothing with you except a staff"*, Jesus instructs. The point here is not that we reject financial support but that material things and money should never consume us, for when they do we become ineffective in our ministry. Missionaries and pastors who complain about money, and lack of possessions, are distracted from their task and need to reorder their priorities. Christ's instruction would also encourage the host people to be generous and to care for the worker. Perceptions among those in the host country are a vital consideration in the work of missionaries, and a worker should never appear to be living above the average income level of the people he works with.
3. In our service to God we should work till the work is done. *"Stay there until you leave the town."* Christ's exhortation demanded that the worker should not leave until sufficient investment was made. The worker was to teach and instruct his converts until they had sufficient strength to continue without dependence on him or her. I remember in my ministry in England how important this principle of discipleship was in my involvement with new believers. I based my investment on the words of Paul from Colossians 2:6 which serves as a beacon for the task of discipling. Here is what we should want to see in the lives of new believers. *"So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness."* It is only when the new convert is well on this path that we can move on.

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4. In our service to God we are to be confronting those who need change. The goal of preaching and discipleship is to see people's lives change and that will always require the radical work of conviction and repentance. No one can turn to God and grow in God without first going through this process. This is why in verse twelve we find that "*they went out and preached that people should repent.*" Jesus warned that there would be times when people would refuse that call and reject the disciple. If so, the disciple was to make a visual statement of their departure, "shake the dust off their feet", to serve as a "testimony against them." This was a common act of the Pharisees when they left the house of someone unclean. People who refuse the free gift of salvation need to know that what they do will have dire consequences. They remain unclean before God and can not be reconciled to him.

In verse 30 the disciples return and "*reported to him (Jesus) all they had done and taught.*" Notice this time they are referred to by Mark as *apostles* and not *disciples*. As *disciples* they spent time learning from the Lord, as *apostles* they now served the Lord in the harvest field. And what joy it must have been for them to speak of the lives that were changed and exchanging stories of those who refused their message. A day will come when we too will gather round the Lord and joy will overflow as we speak to him about all he did for us and through us in our service for him. My exhortation? Don't remain a student. Go out and serve. The Lord has equipped you and he is with you. Speak boldly! Look for lives to be changed! Be strong and courageous for the Lord your God is with you.

Begin at once; before you venture away from this quiet moment, ask your King to take you wholly into his service, and place all the hours of this day quite simply at his disposal, and ask him to make and keep you ready to do just exactly what he appoints. Never mind about tomorrow; one day at a time is enough. Try it today, and see if it is not a day of strange, almost curious peace, so sweet that you will be only too thankful when tomorrow comes to ask him to take it also.

-FRANCES RIDLEY HAVERGAL (1836–1879)

**Lesson Twenty Three: TRADING ETERNITY FOR A DANCE (6:14-29)**

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*“He did not want to refuse her.” (vs.26)*

It seems ludicrous to any reader of this story that someone like Herod could ignore John the Baptist’s invitation to eternal life for the fleeting passion of his step-daughter’s seductive dance. In this context Herod makes a vow to her that whatever she wants, even if it is half the kingdom, is hers. Herod’s wife and daughter waste no time in exploiting this weak moment in Herod’s authority and proceed to request the head of John the Baptist. This throws Herod immediately into a world of conflict where his passion for the flesh and his convicted soul clash. He has made a vow and in that culture keeping a vow was more noble than the sanctity of human life. Herod sees that he has no choice. In defeat and resignation he gives the order to execute John, a man whom Herod had grown to like and under whose words he had fallen under some conviction of spirit.

It seems tragic to us that Herod *“did not want to refuse her”* while refusing John’s call to repent and receive eternal life. His was ultimately a costly choice. And unless Herod repented at the end of his life he died having traded eternal life for the fleeting passions of his step-daughter’s seductive dance. Like Esau, a bowl of soup looked better than a settled place in eternity.

What a tragic trade off, but it is one being carried out in the market place of the human soul daily. Even Christians must fight off daily that which is temporary in order to keep hold of that which is eternal. A persistent NO! to the passions of this world is necessary for us to keep our view of what truly satisfies and lasts.

Mark tells us this story because King Herod was hearing about all that Christ was doing. *“King Herod heard about this for Jesus’ name had become well known.”* (vs.14). This led the people, and perhaps even Herod, to believe that John the Baptist had come back to life. Mark’s point in bringing this up goes deeper than Herod’s reaction to John’s death. Here was a second chance for Herod. John’s voice is no longer heard, but a greater voice could now be heard that certainly placed more conviction on Herod’s heart than John’s ever did. Yet nowhere do we read that he responds to Christ. Herod refuses the Word of Life himself. Jesus had been the subject of all John’s words and now this word was walking outside the walls of Herod’s palace. Did Herod see Christ? Could he hear him speak? Did John’s words haunt Herod through Christ’s mouth? We will never know, but what we do know matters now. It concerns you and me. Don’t turn aside

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when Christ speaks. And most importantly never trade the demands of his word for the seductive dances of this world.

I thank thee, O Lord, that thou hast so set eternity within my heart that no earthly thing can ever satisfy me wholly. -JOHN BAILLIE (1741–1806)

## **Lesson Twenty Four: A TABLE IN THE DESERT! (6:30-44)**

*“They ate and were satisfied” (vs.42)*

The next scene Mark describes for us takes place out in the desert. *“This is a remote place”* we are told, and the time is *“late in the day.”* (vs.35). It was hot, isolated and crowded. Jesus is moved by this scene and experiences deep compassion for the crowd because *“they are like sheep without a shepherd.”* (vs.34) His reaction is understandable. Anybody willing to travel into a remote region of the desert with no lunch or snacks in the heat of the day must be desperate for something. And so Jesus responds by teaching them and then feeding them.

What we see next stands as one of the most beautiful and dramatic scenes in all of the scriptures. An unimpressive two fish and five loaves of bread are distributed and somehow manage to stretch to feed a crowd of over 5000 people. By this Jesus leaves his mark as the provider for man and the shepherd who is able and willing to lead his flock to spiritual food even in the remotest of times. People have been looking to him for such miracles since and have never been disappointed.

I claimed Psalm 23 as my beacon some months back as I began what I believed would become a year of respite and recovery. After my wife had spend two harrowing months in the hospital following a life-threatening brain tumor operation, the year ahead would serve as a necessary sabbatical. The words that open the Psalm were like a soothing balm on my wounded soul. I felt the Shepherd leading me and *making me to lie down in green pastures*. My soul needed *restoring* and I looked forward to many hours sitting on the edge of his river of delight enjoying quite waters. One month into this time of spiritual and emotional recovery the Lord unexpectedly

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chose to lead us through the *valley of the shadow of death*. The roar of another storm – the inoperable brain tumor of our son Travis, has shattered those quiet moments by the still waters. Like the crowd seated in that hot desert I too have felt worn out and spiritually hungry wondering how the Lord could possibly meet my need with the little I have to give him. But he does.

You see, the Lord Jesus will frequently prepare a table for us even in *presence of my enemies*. That enemy can be the threat of death, loss, sickness and loneliness. There is never a moment Jesus cannot take the little we give him and turn it into an abundance. The desert seems an unlikely place for a banquet table but that is what Jesus has for every one of us. I trust you are feeding well. *Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.* (Psalm 23:6)

God feeds even the worm in the earth. –YIDDISH PROVERB

## **Lesson Twenty Five: WITH JESUS IN THE BOAT, WE CAN SMILE AT THE STORM! (6:45-56)**

*“THE WIND AGAINST THEM.”* (VS.48)

I would never consider myself an accomplished wind surfer, especially after my ill-fated first attempt some years ago on a visit to Malaysia. My brother made it look so easy as he glided effortlessly over the rolling waves convincing me that if he could do it, so could I. I was quickly to find out that getting on the board was not the most difficult part of this sport. What defeated me, and contributed to my decision to stick with only land sports, was my inability to stay on that board against the forces of wind and current. The harder I tried the further off course I went. When my brother could no longer see me from the shore he assumed I had found a resting-place among the corals nearly a mile from where I was supposed to be. In fact, I was stuck and would have remained there had he not mercifully put off the need to get back at me for all the things I did to him as a child.

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Stuck and helpless must have been the best way to describe the disciples on that day when Jesus told them to cross the sea. It was late afternoon and the calm of the Sea of Galilee was interrupted by a sudden and ferocious storm. Caught in this dilemma the disciples found that the harder they tried, the further off course they went. Safe to say, if Jesus had not come to their rescue their fate would have been sealed. Yet, he did not leave them to struggle through this storm on their own. Mark beautifully portrays Christ looking from the shore and observing the disciples “*straining at the oars because the wind was against them.*”

Many of us will often find ourselves caught in storms within which we find ourselves helpless. Our tendency is to strain at the oars on our own, but the more we do the further off course we drift. There are some storms we just can't handle on our own - we need the help of our Lord. This story offers some important truths that will bring calm and progress to our wind-whipped lives and which you will find both encouraging and challenging.

**First**, we can find assurance in knowing that **Jesus knows our need** and takes that need to the Father even before he responds to us. 1 John 2:1 tells us we have an advocate who “*speaks to the Father in our defense.*” Christ knew the forces would rage against his disciples and his strategy to rescue them began with prayer. There is a lesson here for effective service. It too must begin with prayer.

**Second**, we can find comfort in knowing that **he sees our need**. Verse 48 tells us “*he saw them straining at the oars.*” Our struggles in life are not unseen by our precious Father. Christians are urged to take on their trials with the deep awareness that God our Father knows and he sees what we undergo. We are not alone. The rescue of Israel began with their plight being made visible to God. His view of their bondage reflected the pain of his heart in having to see them suffer under such great bondage. “*The Israelites groaned in their slavery... God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant.*” (Exodus 2:23-24) Through the scriptures we observe a God who sees first then acts on our behalf.

**Third, He has the power over the need.** By walking on water to come to their rescue he proved that he has the power over the need. He holds the power over nature so he can certainly exercise that power over the need. Think of it! He made that mountain on which he prayed that morning with his own hands. The wind that pounded against that boat was made by

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his command. The waters were his idea. There is no force against us that is not under his control and subject to his power.

**Fourth**, we find **that he will often wait till we need him before he responds** to our plight. God often chooses not to help us until we admit our helplessness. There is little he can do for people who stubbornly want to look to solve their own problems.

**Fifth**, we are encouraged to know that **he will climb in the boat to be with us**. It is interesting that the Lord reassures his disciples with the words, *“Take courage it is I. Don’t be afraid.”* (vs.50) He says this before he climbs into the boat. Trust must come in the storm, not when the storm is past. In fact trusting in the calm will do nothing for us other than prepare us for the next storm. It is in the tumult that we need to hear the calm assurance of his voice; but it is ultimately his involvement with us that brings about the calm. A popular children’s song puts it best; *with Jesus in the boat we can smile at the storm.*

It is in verse 52 that we find that the Lord allowed this storm because the lessons from the fish and the loaves had not been learnt. *“Their hearts were hardened.”* All storms are sent to help us better learn the lessons of God. They are sent to teach us complete trust. I hope these lessons from the storms will help you next time you find yourself straining at the oars. The Lord will take care of you.

There is no panic in trust. -BERTHA MUNRO

## **Lesson Twenty Six: EFFECTIVE HEARTWASHING! (7:1-23)**

*“They worship me in vain”* (vs.7)

When my wife Elaine spent her two months in the hospital following her surgery she lived approximately five of those weeks in isolation due to an infection she had contracted. The rules for visiting were strict and had to be adhered to by family, friends, nurses and doctors. It became a common ritual during those weeks to stop at the entrance of the door, tear off and put on a paper

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apron, and wash my hands vigorously with disinfectant soap. Only when the ritual met the satisfaction of the nurse in charge could I enter. The ceremony had to be repeated again with similar care upon our departure.

Imagine if we invested similar diligence in keeping our hearts pure. The religious leaders of Israel had convinced the people that purity of heart could only be achieved through outward ceremony. The ritual of washing hands “*pots, pitchers and kettles*” for some became an obsession. Jesus observed that this tradition of ceremonial washing completely ignored the need for spiritual cleansing. “*These people honor me with their lips but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain.*” (vs.6-7). There existed here a clash between the teaching of men, satisfied merely with outward ceremony, and the command of God who demands absolute purity of the heart first then outward purity. Ceremonial washing or any other outward discipline for that matter never came close to reaching the issues of the heart. The best it did was made sure a person had clean hands. While many there were satisfied with clean hands, Jesus was concerned with their filthy hearts first and foremost. “*For from within, out of men’s hearts come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man unclean.*” (vs.22-23)

While most of us are not guilty of obsessive hand washing, there is a hope among many that outward activities can serve as cleaning agents for the heart. While God does require clean hands from us (see Psalm 24:2) it must begin with the heart. When the washing agent of the blood of Jesus makes our hearts clean, only then are the hands and all outward activities declared clean. Here is where you can begin today. “*Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.*” (Heb. 10:22)

God takes notice of clean hands, not full hands. -LATIN PROVERB

Why did God abolish the law? Its standards reflected his righteousness, but the law as a system was replaced because it was powerless. It could not bring us what we desperately need—righteousness. -ERWIN W. LUTZER

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## **Lesson Twenty Seven: HAVING WORDS TO YOUR THOUGHTS! (Mark 7:31-37)**

*His tongue was loosened and he began to speak plainly! (vs. 35)*

The other day, as is our daily custom, my wife Elaine and I enjoyed a good walk together. We use this time, or I should say I use this time, to help her re-develop a link between her words and her thoughts. Helping Elaine express herself has given me a new appreciation for the power and delicacy of the brain. Because Elaine has had to re-learn a good deal of her speech, I have at moments forgotten that her sharpness and intelligence have remained intact. So while quizzing her on some biblical doctrines on this particular walk, I asked her if she remembered what the term *incarnation* meant. She stopped, glared at me and said sharply, “*Do you think I am stupid? Of course I do.*” I was humbly reminded again that her struggle is not in knowing something but in being able to express that thing.

Following Elaine’s surgery to remove a brain tumor in June of last year, she has suffered with a condition called *fluency aphasia*. Interestingly it was Sigmund Freud who came up with this term in his efforts to understand why stroke patients had the inability to express themselves. *Aphasia* is simply the inability to articulate words, *fluency aphasia* implies that the person can make sounds but most of them are incomprehensible. When Elaine first came home from the hospital she spoke a lot. but much of what she said did not make any sense. She had virtually lost all ability to associate words with concepts and thoughts. She now tells me that she thought she was speaking normally and wondered why people looked so confused when she spoke to them. It was only when she began intensive speech therapy upon our return to America that she began to hear how wrong she sounded. And only then did she begin to improve. Today after nine months she can interact quite well but struggles with some names and nouns.

It is difficult for those of us who live with someone with *Aphasia* to keep in mind that their inability to talk does not mean the ability to process thoughts is lacking. When struggling to say a word Elaine will often say “*I can see it, it’s right there*” and by writing the first letter of the word on her palm, she cues herself effectively enough to come up with the word she has visualized in her mind. You see, inside her mind the process of forming words and developing thoughts remains unchanged. Just because a person cannot speak does not mean they do not go through the same reasoning and word development processes as we do. The struggle is in

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expressing those thoughts to us. Those of us on the outside cannot know those thoughts until they are spoken.

Can we not say the same of God's communication with us? Until God sent his Son to us, the one who John refers to as *the Word made flesh* (or the *Logos* John 1:14), the thoughts of God remain a mystery to us. Through the Word (Jesus) we not only hear God speak, we also get to know him personally. It is by the revelation of God that the thoughts of God are expressed. "*He made known to us the mystery of his will.*" (Eph. 1:9)

It is a powerful but tender scene Mark portrays in this passage. Jesus, the Word made flesh stands before the helpless figure of a deaf and mute man. This man has lived the whole of his life with his thoughts, passions, ideas and frustrations locked in his mind. Until he could speak his inner world remained a mystery to those near him. But no longer! The Lord Jesus, master over speech, the one who with a single word created the universe and holds it together (Col. 1:16) takes those same hands that formed the stars and shaped the earth, to break open this man's private world. With a simple command, "*be opened*" this man's secret world is unlocked and like a burst dam the words flood out. "*His tongue was loosened and he began to speak plainly*".

One month after Elaine's surgery, when it became apparent that she had lost her speech, I read this story from Mark's gospel. Next to this verse I penned the words, "*my daily prayer for Elaine. July 1998.*" The Lord is answering my prayer. Her tongue is being loosened and she is beginning to speak plainly. Praise God. Meanwhile, I have grown to love and value the importance of single words. I stand at her side like a cheerleader praising her when she says a new word. (As I write this, she bent down to the floor, picked up some gloves and said, "*I don't recognize these*". I can now add the word *recognize* to her new words list.) I strain with her as she attempts to properly position her lips and tongue to form the "*th*" sound, or the letters "*p*" and "*l*". I quiz her daily on what day it is, what date and what month. Having once been a diligent reader of novels and study books, she now struggles through books my five-year-old is reading. She was once a gifted teacher of children and gave her life to help and disciple other women. Yet those traits are not lost. Even now I observe her with children. She plays with them and loves them. After therapy, she will walk to a friend whose father is in the hospital to pray with her. At a Church dinner, she grabs the drink pitcher and asks if anyone wants a refill. Actions do seem to speak louder than words.

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I am reminded daily that the loss of speech does not change who a person is, or what a person thinks. And more than all this, like the crowds in the Decapolis I am “*overwhelmed with amazement*” at the one who is touching her lips and restoring her speech. Her tongue is being loosened and she is beginning to speak plainly. Praise God, and may he receive the glory.

Every revelation of truth felt with interior savor and spiritual joy is a secret whispering of God in the ear of a pure soul. -WALTER HILTON (1340–1396)

## **Lesson Twenty Eight: OPEN MY EYES LORD, I WANT TO SEE JESUS. (8:22-26)**

*“Then his eyes were opened ... He saw everything clearly.” (vs. 25)*

The story of Fanny Crosbie is one of the most touching testimonies of love for Jesus. Fanny Crosbie was born blind. She lived the entirety of her life having never viewed a flower, enjoyed a sunset, observed a face, or read a bible. Despite this, her spiritual sight was perfect. Her power to perceive spiritual reality and understand God’s grace gave her more insight than most of us who can see will ever experience. She took this deep love for Jesus and with it penned over 3000 Christian hymns including, “Jesus, Keep Me Near the Cross,” “Rescue the Perishing,” “All the Way My Savior Leads Me,” “I Am Thine, O Lord,” “Sweet Hour of Prayer,” and “To God Be the Glory. Toward the end of her life someone asked Fanny if given her choice at birth would she request perfect sight. “Never” she answered. She would not trade her blindness for anything. It was a gift from God she treasured. When asked why, she gave this stunning reply. *“Because when I go to heaven, the first face I want to see is the face of my Lord Jesus.”*

So it was for the man in our story and all those healed of blindness by Jesus. Friends of this man begged Jesus to touch him. They had a deep longing that he see. Bethsaida however was not a place for miracles. Because of the hardness of the people’s hearts, Jesus removes the man from this oppressive atmosphere of unbelief and takes him into the clear air of faith outside the village. This is the only incident in the scriptures where Jesus heals a man in two stages. The man first glimpsed the blurred images of people moving around like trees walking. Once again Jesus touches the man. *“His sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly.” (vs.25)* His sight

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restored, the man is instructed not to return to the unbelieving environment of Bethsaida, but to his own town. (In Matthew 11:21 Jesus warns Bethsaida that their persistent unbelief would deny them the opportunity of seeing any miracles.)

Blindness in the scriptures is often an illustration of a sin-dominated life. To be blind is to be unable to see. To be spiritually blind is to be unable to see the truth. 1 Cor. 4:4 speaks of the spiritually blind when it says that *the god of this age has blinded the minds of the unbeliever so that they can not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ.* To give us this spiritual sight sometimes our Lord must remove us from the hard and unbelieving atmosphere that surrounds us. Sometimes this spiritual restoration will not happen at once and will involve a process where things slowly become more clear to us. First we see what looks like trees walking, but as our Lord touches us again we see things clearly, the most wonderful of these new sights being the face of our Lord Jesus. Like Fanny Crosby that should be our one longing, to see him face to face. And when we do we are not to return to the unbelieving community we came from but to a new place undistracted by the sights of this world. May God open our eyes to help us see him. *“Now we see as a poor reflection as in a mirror; but then we shall see him face to face.”* (1 Cor. 13:12)

Vision is the art of seeing things invisible. -JONATHAN SWIFT (1667–1745)

## **Lesson Twenty Nine: NO GLORY WITHOUT THE CROSS! (8:27-38)**

*“He spoke plainly about this”* (vs.32)

From here on Mark’s gospel quickens in its pace and the road that leads to the cross becomes more visible. In the next chapter Jesus is going to lift the veil to allow the disciples a wonderful but rare opportunity to view his glory in its fullness. But before he does, he warns them that they must understand that he came to suffer. There will be no glory without the cross. The disciples will have to prepare themselves with the right theology before they can see his glory. It is no

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coincidence that Mark places these two narratives in this order. Impressed deep in our minds there must lie that understanding that one will never truly see the face of God until he has first suffered and left everything of this world behind. The relationship between suffering and glory is an essential one, for without suffering there is no glory.

When Peter hears Jesus speak this way he reacts with noble zeal. Taking Jesus aside he rebukes Jesus. Literally Peter is attempting to censor Jesus, to cause him to stop speaking this way any longer. It was not a half-hearted reaction by Peter, but a full attempt to silence Jesus and one that pledged all his personal efforts to assure that what Jesus had said would not come about. Just prior to Peter's statement Jesus had asked the disciples who they thought he was. It was Peter who answered, "*You are the Christ.*" (vs.29) Willing to acknowledge that Jesus came as Messiah, Peter could not accept that the way it would come about was through suffering. Jesus rebukes Peter and even implies that his reaction is from the devil. "*Get behind me Satan.. You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.*" (vs.32)

It is after this exchange, that Jesus calls his disciples together along with the crowd that is there, and uses what has happened to challenge each to a new level of discipleship. *The Son of Man must suffer many things and so must you! Do you want to follow me? Well, you will have to suffer. Do you know where I am going? The cross! Follow me and that is where you too will go. It is not worth gaining the whole world and yet to lose the glory because you refused the price.*

I am in Pittsburgh PA as I write this while speaking at a missionary conference. Last night I had the opportunity to speak to about 100 fairly attentive school age children, and I spoke to them on the cost of following Jesus. I spoke of the need to give their life completely to Jesus and how valuable it was to take this step when they were young. I cited the example of my son Travis who only weeks ago went forward at the end of a missionary conference rally to give his life to be a missionary, should that be what God wanted of him. There was a wonderful stillness in the room as I also related to them the events in Travis's life that led up to this. I knew the Holy Spirit was asking me to challenge these young hearts to similar commitment. I asked those who wanted to respond to raise their hands. Almost every hand shot up into the air. I quickly stopped them from responding any further and added, *wait just a minute. Do you realize what you are saying to God? By raising your hands you are saying to Jesus "I am completely yours. You can do whatever you want with my life. I am willing to suffer, to face loss even to die for you".* A second

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call to respond led to only a handful raising their hands, as they now understood the cost. They are learning young that there can be no glory without the cross. I hope you see it this way too and are willing to give up all to ultimately gain more.

I owe more to the fire and the hammer and the file than to anything else in my Lord's workshop. I sometimes question whether I have ever learned anything except through the rod. When my schoolroom is darkened, I see most. -CHARLES HADDON SPURGEON (1834-1892)

## **Lesson Thirty: THE CLEARING OF THE FOG! (9:1-13)**

*"There he was transfigured before them." (vs.2)*

*"Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; but then we shall see face to face." (1Cor. 13:12)* I have shared often with people that in the months when I felt the weight of suffering over my family situation that I have been able to know the reality of God's presence more than ever before. It is as though suffering lifts the veil, and the things of Christ become so much clearer. Even such momentary activities as sports and entertainment fade to the background, as that image of Jesus fills those spaces in my life. In short, God becomes more important to us when we suffer.

We come to that climactic moment at what is called the Mount of Transfiguration. Here Jesus gives to the disciples a rare glimpse of his glory. Philippians 2:7 informs us that when Jesus came to *take on the form of a servant* that he essentially laid aside his majesty. *He made himself nothing, was found in the appearance of man, he humbled himself.* This means that during those years on earth there was something about who he is eternally that was not evident. His glory was not visible to the naked eye. But here on top of that mountain that day *"his divine majesty shone gloriously through his human nature."* (New Commentary on the Whole Bible)

I don't believe Jesus changed who he was that day, or what he was like. The change was in his disciples. Jesus permitted them to see something otherwise denied to ordinary human beings, a glimpse of his divine glory. Many other scenes from the Bible tell us that viewing God's glory, or visibly seeing God for who he really is, was something humans would not be able to handle. Later in Revelation 1, John would fall as though dead when he saw Jesus in his glory. Peter

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would later refer to this place as the *sacred mountain* in 2 Peter 1:17, because here the glory of God was viewed as a token for what lay ahead in eternity.

A day will come when we will all have the privilege of seeing him as he truly is. In our own glorified bodies, free from sin and corruption, nothing will keep us from seeing the fullness of his glory. He will not have to hide his glory because of our sinfulness. While that moment on the mountain was a rare exception, what we will experience then will be the norm. We shall see him face to face.

The road to glory is not strewn with flowers. -JEAN DE LA FONTAINE (1621–1695)

## **Lesson Thirty-one: LASTING IMPRESSIONS! (9:14-32)**

*“I do believe, help me overcome my unbelief” (vs.24)*

Some years ago standing in a high school car park in England I was accosted by a group of teenagers who had heard me speak during the morning worship assembly that day. I approached them despite the fact that one of them had just called me a Bible basher. Feeling this was an unfair label to place on me I asked if any of them had ever read the Bible for themselves. None had! Rather than call for fire from heaven to consume them for their disrespect of my Lord (and me), I chose instead to encourage them to defer their opinions on the Christian faith until they had investigated it personally.

It amazes me that many can form impressions of Christianity by what they observe from a distance. Unfortunately those impressions are sometimes formed by what they see in us.

The man who eventually stands before Jesus that day and says *“I do believe help me in my unbelief”* is a confused man. His most recent impression of Christ has been shaped by the disciples’ inability to cast demons out from his son. What should have been a powerful display of God’s power turned instead into a disappointing squabble between the disciples, the crowd and the teachers of the law. I can picture the man standing in the

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middle of the crowd with his head shaking in disbelief and deep disappointment. The argument probably concerned the issue that this Jesus, whom the disciples followed, could do no more than they had just done. Their failure reflected badly on him.

As Jesus approaches the crowd, having just returned from the transfiguration, there was something still of his *glorious radiance* that lingered. Mark tells us that upon seeing him the crowd rushed toward him and “*they were overwhelmed with wonder*” (vs.15). When Jesus asks what they are arguing about it is the man who steps forward and explains what has happened (vs.17). The disciples having acted in their own strength, failed to deliver the boy from his oppression. The boy is then brought to Jesus and immediately the presence of divine glory brings those tormenting demons rushing in subjection before that holy presence. Others doubted who Jesus was but it was not hidden from them. “*When the spirit saw Jesus it immediately threw the boy into convulsions*” (vs.20). Jesus patiently requests of the father some information about the boy. The loving manner in which Jesus asks this of the father must have touched him deeply. The father in response pleads with Jesus as he had previously done to the disciples to heal the boy. The tone of his requests must certainly have made the disciples feel like failures. “*But if you can do anything, take pity on us, and help us*” (vs.21). The father stands before the one who can do anything. In fact anything is possible for the one who believes.(vs.23)

Here we discover the man’s core struggle. He believes in his mind but his hearts is deeply confused, as a result of the disciples’ failure. “*I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief*” (vs.24). Jesus sees this expression of honesty as sufficient faith and as only he can do, he heals the boy.

There are many around us like this father who struggle with what Jesus can do for them because of what the church is unable to do. While they believe it in their minds, the greater struggle is one that takes place in the corridor of their heart. You know what that is like. You believe something because the Bible says it is so, but your heart wavers. Impressions of God are often formed by what we see in others and by what others see in

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us. What should be a powerful display of God’s power often turns into a squabble where we try to convince people that God can when it is quite obvious that he hasn’t through us. It at moments like this that we need to join this father as he steps away from the crowd and comes, accompanied by his unbelief, face to face with Jesus.

Later Jesus admonishes the disciples for their failure. They failed in one key area. It is often our failure. *“This kind can come only by prayer”* (vs.29). Jesus does not speak here about the quality or intensity of prayer. He simply tells us that prayer is the only pure and right way to place the issue directly into his hands. We cannot handle some situations in life. Jack Taylor, a Baptist minister, says *the devil hates prayer because it throws the battle to God*. Prayer works because it calls God to work. When we pray we do nothing else. It is impossible to act in your own strength when you are praying. Try it next time. You’ll be happy with the results.

I have been driven many times to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go. My own wisdom, and that of all about me, seemed insufficient for the day.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN (1809–1865)

## **Lesson Thirty-two: SORRY I ASKED! (10:17-31)**

*“At this the man’s face fell”* (vs.22)

*“How hard it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven”* (vs.23). State and national lotteries have become an obsession in our country. Recently a winning ticket holder beat the odds and claimed the highest winnings yet of over \$160 million. Just last week an Argentinean nanny put down her broom, removed her apron for the last time and claimed her prize of several million dollars. Now, if someone ever offered me even a million dollars, I think I would refuse and for two reasons. (If anyone reading this would like to take me up on this challenge I am willing to reconsider my position!) First I

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would refuse because such a sudden increase to my bank account would dominate my thoughts and preoccupy all my attention. That money would easily consume me. What would I do with it, how much should I invest, what should I give some of it to? It would be too much for me. Secondly, I would refuse because I expect that it would easily distract from some of my spiritual priorities. My daily dependence on God to be my daily bread, my joy in giving thanks for small gifts, the unexpected increase in what little I have invested would all be robbed. I think this money would stand in the way of my following Christ. That is I, you might respond differently. These are however the struggles the man in our story lived with.

It is hard to know the man's motives in falling to his knees before Christ asking him what he must do to inherit eternal life (vs.17). We do know he was rich. Luke in his gospel tells us he was a ruler, probably filling some government post. Matthew (chapter 19 verse 20) informs us he was young. We know also in vs.18-20 that this man was very religious. He had kept the law since his childhood and had done so faithfully. *"Teacher...all these I have kept since I was a boy."* Something in the young man's theology suggests that it was one of salvation by works. Having kept the law and being rich he really believed that somehow he could merit more favor from God by his wealth. Money had so consumed his life he was deluded into thinking that he could actually purchase his place in eternity. This is why I believe Jesus raised this issue of his wealth. He was so completely dominated by it that no one could separate who the man was from his money. It was Jesus' desire to see the man delivered from such dominance. *"Jesus looked at him and loved him."* (vs.21)

As we follow the dialogue between Jesus and the man we observe that the Lord does not directly answer the man's question of what he must do to inherit eternal life. What Jesus addresses is what the man must do to become his follower. This becomes an invitation to discipleship not salvation. Selling his goods could not earn the man salvation, but keeping his goods stood in the way of his following Jesus. This was the issue that had to be settled first before salvation entered the picture. There was nothing that he could do to

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earn salvation. This matter would be settled at the cross. Having eternal life is a prize that is claimed through the death and resurrection of our Lord.

You and I can do nothing to earn salvation. This was purchased for us at the cross. There are however many things we must do if we are going to follow Jesus. While salvation is a free gift, discipleship is not; it costs us everything we have. *“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me”* (Mark 8:34). Jesus expects nothing short of total abandonment if we are going to follow him. This is the path the disciples had taken, one that would eventually take each of them to the cross of martyrdom. Moved by what Peter hears Christ say, he reflects honestly on his own commitment. *“We have left everything you follow you.”* (vs.28)

This was a demand Jesus placed on the young man that seemed too much for him. *“At this the man’s face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth”* (vs.22). The man had been given a simple choice between two options. Great wealth, or Jesus. Knowing the man’s heart Jesus knew he would be mastered by money as long as he had it. There was only one recourse. *“Go and sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasures in heaven”* (vs.21). What a tragic loss this man experienced!. He left sad, when he could have followed happily. Heavenly treasures were his if he would only give up the one thing that dominated his life and consequently made him poor in the eyes of God.

Only Jesus can expose what keeps any of us from wholehearted commitment. Fall on your knees and ask him what you must do and he will tell you. Are you ready to obey no matter what is asked? Wouldn’t it be wonderful to be able to say like Peter, *“We have left everything to follow you.”* Do it, and you will find yourself a rich person indeed.

Few people have the spiritual resources needed to be both wealthy and godly. -ERWIN W. LUTZER

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A great fortune is a great slavery. - Luciu Seneca

## **Lesson Thirty-three: YOU ARE IMPORTANT TO GOD! (10:46-52)**

*“CHEER UP! ON YOUR FEET! HE IS CALLING YOU!” (vs.49)*

Have you ever noticed that when you talk to your pastor after a service it may seem at times that he isn't giving you his full attention? Now before you get too hasty in agreeing with me, try to appreciate his role for just a minute. The expectation placed on a pastor to be everything to everyone can sometimes make him useless to anyone. He can fall into a pattern of speaking to someone while looking around for others to whom he needs to speak, and in the process he absorbs only bits and pieces of your conversation with him. He would hate to appear that he is leaving anyone out. So next time he is speaking to you and you notice his eyes glancing this way and that, keep in mind the pressure he is under. I know because I have been there. For this reason when someone would approach me with what would turn out to be more than a casual conversation I would either move to a more private corner or suggest that we arrange a meeting sometime during the week.

It was Charles Swindoll that gave this good advice for those moments our eyes wander when they should be fixed on the person in front of us. He gave this tip. Keep in mind that the person you are talking to right then is to you at that moment the most important person in the world. This bit of godly advice has helped me to be far more attentive to the person I am speaking to. It is also the way our Lord approached individuals.

On the particular day that forms the setting for our story in Mark's gospel, the blind man Bartimaeus was the most important person to the Lord Jesus Christ. It even appears from the details of the story that Jesus makes this trip specifically for Bartimaeus and no one else. Jericho is 14 miles from Jerusalem, which is Christ's destination on this journey (Mark 10:32). Jericho was a stopping point on a journey that would end at the cross.

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Mark does not tell us why Jesus goes to Jericho. No one person is mentioned and there is nothing said of what Jesus did while there. Mark merely picks up the story as Jesus leaves the city with a large crowd following (vs.49). The presence of a large crowd would suggest to us that what Jesus did in Jericho had impact, but we are given no details. It is as though this whole trip was planned solely to touch the life of one man, a blind beggar named Bartimaeus, the son of Timaeus. On that day and at that very moment Bartimaeus was the most important person in the world.

Jesus, the Messiah, the son of God, creator of heaven and earth stopped on a dirt path and changed forever the life of what others considered an insignificant person. Others called him a blind beggar, but to Jesus he was Bartimaeus son of Timaeus. And at that very moment in history Bartimaeus had the full and undivided attention of the Lord. Mark explains how this comes about.

Bartimaeus (vs.47) hearing the commotion of the crowd streaming out of Jericho is told that Jesus is there. Mark tells us that “he began to shout ‘Jesus son of David have mercy on me’”. This call reached the ears and the heart of Jesus. You will discover in your life that when you call on the Lord, when you appeal to who he is, he will not walk on. In fact, you could safely say that at that moment you become the most important person to him. Consider these words of encouragement in 2 Chronicles 30:9. *“For the Lord your God is gracious and compassionate. He will not turn his face from you if you return to him.”*

The scene that follows is a touching one. Jesus stops when he hears the persistent cry of this man. The crowd, who earlier rebuked him for calling Jesus, now upon seeing Jesus’ interest in him, instead cheer him on. *“On your feet. He is calling you.”* (vs.49) Motivated by this he throws his cloak aside and rushes to Jesus. And there before the creator, he receives his sight and becomes a follower. He joins the crowd but was far more than one of the crowd to the Lord. He was Bartimaeus, Son of Timaeus, no longer

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just a blind beggar. Now he followed as a valuable and significant person in the eyes of the master. And so are you. So cheer up! On your feet. He is calling you!

## **Lesson Thirty-four: FROM HOSANNA TO HALLELUJAH! (11:1-11)**

*"Hosanna" (vs.9)*

Join me for a few moments on a fictional journey that will help you appreciate the significance of Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem.

The Roman general had lived and trained for this very moment. The cheers of the crowd and the calling out of his name as his golden chariot moved on its way slowly through the crowded street filled his heart with unspeakable pride. Many lining the sides of the street had brought with them palm branches, and these they were waving giving the appearance of a forest of palms being swayed gently by blowing wind. Others risked a dash to the front of the chariot to lay down their coats as a symbol of honor for their latest Roman hero.

While these expressions of honor burst around every bend the general permitted his thoughts to wander back to the events that had led to this triumphant entry into Rome. They had said the enemy could not be conquered. Many had tried and many left in defeat and the losses were heavy. The general paused in his thoughts for just a moment to respond to a group of children who together were performing a cheer especially created for him and for this moment. Once his army had surrounded the rebellious city the general moved his army in with unprecedented force. The slaughter that ensued was fierce. The general was determined that this becomes a victory for the record book. In fact he had been reminded that if at least 5000 were killed the general would be personally honored with a procession through the streets of Rome.

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As the procession came to the final bend the general's eyes glowed with anticipation as he viewed the arena just ahead. "*This is where the fun would begin*", he thought to himself. The procession would end at the arena where the crowd could allow their adulation for the general to turn into cheers for the lions who would feed off the captives kept alive for that very moment.

Any Roman soldier observing Jesus entering Jerusalem on that day would not be blamed for noting similarities between what he saw and what often occurred down the streets of Rome. Those who lined the streets on this day however were not Roman but Galileans who were in Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. They knew of Christ from his time in Galilee and responded in this way because of the many miracles he performed while with them. (John 12:12-18) They had witnessed first hand what had never been possible before. Jesus had penetrated the forces of darkness and through healing and exorcisms had brought about an unprecedented slaughter. When they heard that he too was in Jerusalem they grabbed their cloaks, tore off palm branches and lined the streets of Jerusalem.

They had one song. There was a single cry in their hearts and it formed the content of their song. It was Hosanna! This was really a call for Jesus to achieve his latest victory right then, to vanquish once for all the Roman oppressors. Hosanna means SAVE NOW, and this is exactly what they expected him to do. The one they had seen conquer the powers of Satan could certainly crush the physical rule of Rome over God's people. The expectation was for an immediate act on the part of Christ to vanquish the enemy. How disappointed they must have been when they saw Christ enter the temple (vs.11) only to walk away having done nothing for them.

Yet they were wrong. He did come to do something about the oppression they were in, but it was a different oppression - the oppression of sin. Jesus would end that procession a week later at the cross. There he would be killed by the wild beasts of mankind's sinfulness. It would be there at the arena of Calvary that their cry of Hosanna would be

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answered. And to put a twist to their expectations Christ was to lead the procession only to die for the captives. Ephesians 4:8 tells us *"he led captives in his train..."* Israel had longed for this moment but when it came they were not ready for it. For centuries this song of David from what is called the Hallel Psalms was the anthem for each Passover. *"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Blessed is the coming Kingdom of our father David. Hosanna in the highest."* (vs.9,10) Here was the moment of fulfillment.

The cry Hosanna continues to be sung today from the lips of the hurting and the oppressed. That cry is not answered in anything other than the cross of Christ. There at Calvary the cry of Hosanna turns into Hallelujah. There he has saved us! There at the cross we have been set free. Hebrews 2:14,15 uses language normally used in a report of war victory and describes Jesus as our conquering hero. Let these words find a place of comfort and strength in your heart and give you endurance as you continue to fight the battles around you. *"He too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death - that is the devil - and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death."*

The triumphant Christian does not fight for victory; he celebrates a victory already won. The victorious life is Christ's business, not yours. -REGINALD WALLIS

## **Lesson Thirty-five: BARREN WORSHIP (11:12-19)**

*"My house will be called a house of prayer!"* (vs.17)

At first glance it is hard to see what connection Mark has in mind when he links the story of the cursing of the fig tree with the turning of the tables in the temple. We have become somewhat familiar with Mark's mind by now and have noted that his high speed recording of the life of Christ still result in sequences that do relate to each other. A careful study of the passage reveals that there are two separate narratives that are meant

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to be read together. We could say that the story of the fig tree serves to illustrate Jesus' reproach for the selling and trading that was taken place in what was meant to be a place of worship - the temple. Let's follow along this exciting journey again that takes us from Bethany to Jerusalem.

The previous day was a dramatic one for Christ and the disciples. He has been honored as a King but instead of vanquishing the enemy right then and there he strolls to the temple and there the curtain is lowered and the scene closes. The last words of that story are revealing and set the stage for what we are looking at now. In verse 11 Jesus looks around the temple "*at everything*", Mark tells us. What he saw as he looked at everything was disturbing to Christ, for that is where he observes and begins to react to the activities of selling and trading in God's house. He does nothing about it then but with his disciples moves out of the city for Bethany, the home of his friends Mary, Martha and Lazarus.

We can assume that the events of the previous day (primarily what he had observed in the temple) have left our Lord with a heavy heart. Thus, as they proceed back to Jerusalem, Jesus has not eaten (perhaps because of the heaviness of his heart) and when he approaches a fig tree for some relief he finds it barren instead. It is again the mood of the moment that shapes his response to this and Jesus curses the fig tree destining it to never produce again. The fact that it was "*not the season for figs*" (vs.13) reinforces our suspicions that Jesus permits all this to take place to make a point. He is wanting to illustrate something and that leads us to what transpires afterwards in the temple.

The scene that awaits Jesus at the temple is not as dissimilar from the fig tree as we might think. In both cases the subject of Jesus' anger did not function, or produce, as God had originally designed it. A fig tree was created by God to produce fruit and give pleasure to the hungry person who chose its product. The temple was meant to be place of worship and praise and was designed to give God pleasure. When Jesus arrives at the temple, he finds the activities that took place there of commerce and trade to be a far cry from what God meant for it. Consequently God can receive nothing from it. The area of the temple

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mentioned here was the court of the Gentiles. From the very beginning this court was meant to be a place where Gentiles could come and worship the God of Israel. It was intended to be a place for worship and praise for all people. *"My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations"* (vs.17). Like the fig tree this place which was meant to produce the fruit of worship and praise is barren. Rather than being a quiet place of reflection and worship the site is full of activity. To assist those in Jerusalem for the Passover this area became a market place for selling animals for sacrifice and trading money into the local currency. This was a departure from what God ever meant the outer court of the temple to be. Intended to bring God pleasure this place has instead become a *"den of robbers"*. (vs.17) The once fruitful temple has become barren.

It is sometime later that Jesus does put a curse of sorts on the temple similar to what he does to the fig tree. He prophesies in Mark 13:2 that the temple would soon become completely desolate. Speaking to his disciples who have just commented on the beauty of the temple Jesus says this; *"Do you see all these great buildings?... Not one stone here will be left on another; everything will be thrown down."*

It would be easier here in seeking for an application to point an accusing finger at the commercialization that has taken place in our churches. It does seem at times that the church, meant to be a quiet place of worship and praise, has instead become a busy market place for new methods and programs. Looking at the church today I get this vague unease that this isn't exactly what God meant for the church. Visiting some Churches I even wonder sometimes if God gets any enjoyment out of them. Lets allow that finger to point beyond the Church for just a moment until it pricks our own hearts. Is it not there where the problem lies?

As Jesus walks down the corridor of your heart toward that sacred inner sanctuary of worship what will he find waiting when he arrives there? Will it be a place of quiet holy worship? Does God receive the fruit of your praise and worship? Is that place reserved solely for God? I suspect that as Jesus approaches that place intended for worship and

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praise he finds a cluttered room. He hears the racket of a heart full of activities and distractions. What tables need to be turned in your life for God to receive the fruit of your worship and praise? Read prayerfully the following verse that I believe the Holy Spirit will use to restore a holy quite to your prayer life. As you consider them allow God by his Holy Spirit to root out all that does not belong so that he can plant this word deep into the soil of your heart.

*"Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose confidence is in him. He will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit." Jer. 17:8*

*"Take words with you and return to the LORD. Say to him; Forgive all our sins and receive us graciously, that we may offer the fruit of our lips." Hos.14:2*

*"Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise - the fruit of lips that confess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased." Heb. 13:15,16*

## **Lesson Thirty-six: A GOBSMACKING RESPONSE! (11:27-33)**

*"They feared the people" (vs.32)*

Have you ever wished you would have given a stunning comeback to something someone said to you but only thought of it afterwards? I mean the sort of response that leaves the other person speechless, or gobsmacked as the British would say? I can only boast of one such experience but one that I know the Lord was giving me the words to say. Colin was a friend of mine who worked as a newsagent at the local shop where we once lived in England. Colin was very religious. His religion was soccer and he attended his church faithfully every other Saturday afternoon - the soccer stadium. Having been open with my faith on many occasions Colin was also not shy to share about his faith; that is, his love for soccer. Neither was Colin hesitant to let me know what he thought of my God.

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One day tapping me on my shoulder Colin said, *"Mitch, you have your God and I have mine and it is soccer."* And here is the gobsmacking response the Lord led me to give. *"That may be so Colin! But I know the final score and in the end the Bible says that my God wins."* Please understand I did not reply in this way to win one over on Collin, but rather to get him to think about eternal issues.

Jesus' reply to the religious leaders in this story left them speechless. If this had been the script to a movie the audience would have burst out in cheers and applause. It was a stunning and perfect answer to people who were very narrow and temporal in their thinking. Let me quickly underline the main points of this interchange and follow that up by digesting some points for application as it relates to our lives.

The circle of opposition tightens around Jesus as he moves further into Jerusalem. Those holding hands to form the circle are not the Romans or Zealots but the spiritual leaders and shepherds of Israel. Mark tells us in verse 27 that while in the temple courts Jesus is confronted by *"the chief priests, teachers of the law and elders."* This group made up of 72 individuals formed what was called the Sanhedrin - Israel's ruling political and spiritual body. It is significant that they confront Jesus in the temple courts for this is where their authority had been undermined when the Lord turned the tables of the sellers and traders. So it is the issue of authority that they raise. *"By what authority are you doing these things?"* they ask. *"And who gave you the authority to do this?"* (vs.28) In other words, *what right do you have to come barging in here and acting like you can tell us how to live our lives.* Being the spiritual leaders it was they who were seen to have that authority and in the presence of the people Jesus had seriously undermined that authority.

Jesus' response to their arrogance leaves them speechless and more determined to kill him. *"I will tell you if you tell me one thing,"* he says. *"Where did John the Baptist get his authority to baptize? Was it from God or from man?"* As the leaders gather together to form a reply it becomes obvious that truth is not the measure used for their response.

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Pride was! *"If we say 'from heaven', he will say 'then why didn't you believe him'. But if we say 'from men' they feared the people."* (vs.31-32) Forced to say *"we don't know"* Jesus walks away, again unscathed, and you can picture the leaders shaken and left humiliated in the dust of this interchange.

Pride can often drive people to resist God and sometimes even to resist violently. We often do not want to acknowledge his authority over us. Like the leaders we will say *what right do you have to come here and tell me how to live my life?* In the end as spiritual as we might think we are (even if we are in positions of spiritual leadership), we would rather exercise authority over our own lives. I have chosen as my year verse for 1999 James 4:10 which would have been appropriate also for the Jewish leaders in their contention with our Lord. *"Humble yourself before the Lord and he will lift you up."* Humility is often best demonstrated when we have nothing left to say in response to Jesus except to say to him, *Lord I acknowledge your authority over my life and I will submit to it.*

This interchange with the spiritual leadership could have gone the other way and I wish it had. Had it, the gospels would have been written as a different story than the one we know. The opportunity to repent of their pride was given but sadly they cared more for themselves and for their reputations. Like stubborn horses refusing to be broken, they dig in their heels in resisting the authority of the almighty God. It does not have to be that way with you. If Jesus has entered the courts of your heart and turned some tables, don't argue. Don't fight it! Don't demand *what right does he have to come tell you how to live your life?* Rather submit to it. Say nothing! Let him have the last word! It will be the best response you could give to him.

## **Lesson Thirty seven: NO! IT'S MINE! (12:1-12)**

*"Come let's kill him and the inheritance will be ours." (vs.7)*

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Several weeks ago I overheard two of my children negotiating over the ownership of a toy. No, in reality they were arguing and grabbing it if truth were told. I usually permit these sort of situations to go some distance hoping that they will use their diplomatic skills to sort out some compromise. But alas, it was not to be so I was forced to intervene to play the peacemaker - a role that inevitably leaves me with one enemy - the one who did not get their way. As I cautiously approached the war zone the battle cry "*it's mine! no it's mine*" carried clearly through the air. When I finally managed to call for calm I discovered that one child had loaned something to the other while the other claimed it was given. I was tempted to play Solomon to end this dispute but concluded that cutting a stuffed animal in half could be quite messy.

This latest parable of our Lord's that Mark records is intended to settle a squabble between man and God. In this case Jesus has in mind particularly those religious leaders of Israel with whom he has been contending since his arrival to Jerusalem. The parable is about a vineyard, the vineyard owner and those left to tend the vineyard. From the very beginning God has left man in charge of his vineyard but the vineyard has always been his. Psalm 24:1 proclaims, "*The earth is the Lord's and everything in it, the world and all who live in it.*" Despite the earth being God's, man in his sinfulness claims what is God's and seeks to rule in his place. In the Old Testament God sent his envoys to remind and warn his people that he was the owner. These messengers, like the servants sent in the parable (the prophets) were rejected, beaten and many were killed. God finally goes the distance and sends his own Son but the true extent of their wickedness emerges when it becomes apparent that they are willing to even kill God in order to rule in his place.

The vineyard Jesus makes reference to here is a familiar image to Israel. (See Psalm 80:8-16 and Isaiah 5:1-7.) Warren Wiersbe in his commentary on Mark makes a particular link to Leviticus 19:23-25. He says, "a farmer would not use the fruit until the fifth year... In order to retain the legal right to the property, the owner had to receive

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produce from the tenant, even it was only some of the vegetables that grew. This explains why the tenant refused to give him anything; they wanted to claim the vineyard for themselves."

We assume in Jesus' parable that the son is sent in the fourth year. By killing him the tenants not only sought to reject God but also reject his claim of ownership over the vineyard. This sort of anarchy is what one writer calls "*the deep aim of the depraved heart.*" To reject God and even to kill him to be one's own god shows how horrible and despicable we really are.

It would be tempting here to allow the use of this parable to settle permanently on these religious leaders in their contention with Christ and never to touch us. There are several things we will need to consider before we assume that we can exempt ourselves from any application from the story.

Firstly I want to comment on God's grace as it is demonstrated so clearly in this story. Think for a moment of how good God has been to you. He has placed you upon this earth and has given you the privilege and honor of living in and caring for his vineyard. God in his grace and love has first created you and then placed you in his wonderful world. Look around you for a moment. Consider what you have and who you are. See what I mean? Isn't God good? We do not deserve to be here, yet because he loves us and wants us to enjoy him, he has given us the pleasure of living in his world.

Secondly, let me ask you a probing question. In what way does your life show that you are owned by God? If someone were assigned to watch you for a week what would they conclude? Does your life demonstrate that you are the tenant, or does it reveal a rebel who is wresting control from God? Often it might appear to others that we are squabbling with God. Rather than sacrificially saying "*Here Lord it is all yours*", we can be overheard crying out, "*No it's mine*". What is your attitude of ownership regarding your children? Your job? Your house? Your car? I am not asking you if you say it is

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God's. I am asking something more probing. Does your life demonstrate that it all belongs to God? If you have truly allowed God to have control, it will show itself in certain ways.

God went the distance when he sent his Son to this world. When he sent Jesus there was nothing more he could give. There was nothing more he could do to demonstrate his love. *"Yet the Stone the builders rejected has become the capstone."* (vs.10 and Psalm 118;22). Those who reject Christ will find they have rejected the one who is central to all that is God's; the corner stone himself. Those who reject God's rule will one day in sorrow realize they have rejected God's final offer for reconciliation. He can do nothing more.

What is the lesson of this parable? Simply this. To reject Christ is to reject God. How do we know if we are rejecting him? It is not in our words alone but in how we treat what is rightfully his. May these thoughts find a corner in our stubborn hearts and may the Holy Spirit, our peace maker, cause us to not rest until we stop screaming "it's mine" and happily say "here, Lord it is all yours."

## **Lesson Thirty-eight: GOD EVEN OWNS MY BAR-B-Q GRILL! 12:13-17**

*"Give to God what is God's." (vs.17)*

The following three narratives focus in on a series of press conferences held in the busy squares of Jerusalem only days before the circle tightens completely around Christ. In each case, Jesus' opponents try to trap him in his words so the accusations against him can be proven. Yet we see again that the Lord's schedule is in his father's hands and he will only permit himself to be taken when that time is right. What strange irony to think that mere man can trap God in his words. Jesus is after all the WORD made flesh. How

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futile of these men to think he would inadvertently say something that would put him in their hands.

In the first press conference two opposing groups temporarily put aside their differences and strengthen their resolve against the Lord. The Pharisees are legalists who adhere strictly to the law and long for Israel's freedom to live out that law. The Herodians, out of love for their country, sought union with Rome as their means to obtaining their freedom; they hoped for this by bringing the Herod family into prominence again. The Herodians compromise with Rome repulsed the Pharisees but a temporary treaty to put greater pressure against Jesus seemed wo In passing, I wonder sometimes if the aims of ecumenism - that is to lay aside differences between religious groups - is a subtle attempt to strengthen the resolve to oppose the truth of God's word. Is it not also an attempt to undermine the uniqueness of Christ as the eternal and divine Son of God?

The two groups challenge Jesus with what is obviously a well-planned question. Should Israel pay taxes to Caesar? It would seem that whatever answer Jesus gave would put him against one of the two groups and he stood to declare his allegiance for either Rome or Israel .Jesus' answer to this question cannot satisfy either party but it does silence them. *"Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's"* Jesus says. (vs.17) The coin that provoked this debate had Caesar's image on it. Similarly in England the emblem HM supported by a picture of a crown can be seen everywhere from coins, government buildings and vehicles. These signify the ownership of HER MAJESTY the queen.

Give to Caesar what has Caesar's image on it. Give to God what has his image stamped on it. And what is that? Is not God's image stamped upon the whole of creation? There is far more to give to God than we are to give to Caesar. Consider the following statements from the Psalms as you meditate on what is his. *"The heavens declare the glory of God. The skies proclaim the work of his hands."* (Ps.19:1) *"In the beginning your laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the works of your*

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*hands.*"(102: 25) *"The highest heavens belong to the LORD"* (115: 16) Even our lives carry the deep marks of his ownership stamped with his image. *"For you created my inmost being..."* (Ps.139:13)

So yes, we give to government what bears it's image, but what are we to do with what is God's? God owns far more than we think. Even those things you have assumed belong to you, which you have earned with your hard work, if you think long enough about it, you will see they do not really belong to you. They have been loaned to you.

Does anything exist apart from God? What about the mineral used to form the substance of the coin with Caesar's image impressed on it? Did it not come from the earth? Did not God put that mineral there? What about the hammer used to give that coin shape? Was it not made from iron? And does iron not come from the earth and did God not put it there? You bought your car with your money. But follow through the process of how that car was made? Strip it down to it's frame and consider each piece of that car and you will find no part that does not in some way or other find it's origin with God. Your house? Yes, the trees and sand from God's earth were used to form the frame and make the bricks.

I challenge you to find anything that does not have its source and purpose in the very will of God. Even my Bar-B-Q grill for which I proudly claim ownership does not belong to me. When we look at life and the things in life in this way it is almost impossible to separate the material from the spiritual. Remember again what Psalm 102:5 says: *"the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the works of your hands."* Nothing in all creation from the very furthest galaxy to the tiniest little atom that makes up my lap top screen exist apart from God. *"For from him and to him and through him are all things."* (Rom. 11:36) *"For by him all things were created; things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones are powers or rules or authorities; all things were created by him and for him."* (Col.1:16) He is the source of life, for all of life bears his image.

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How does this impact you right now? Allow that statement Jesus made to be directed your way for just a moment. *Give to God what is God's.* Have you been holding for your self what belongs to God? This story is far more about what we should do with our taxes. Jesus stretches our understanding and appreciation of what is really God's, leaving literally nothing that is not in his dominion. Give to God what is God's. That means everything. Yes, even your Bar-B-Q Grill!

## **Lesson thirty-nine MARRIAGE MADE IN HEAVEN! (12:18-27)**

*"They will be like the angels in heaven." (vs.25)*

When I pastored in Texas some years back a friend of mine who was an airline pilot would often return from a trip to tell me of some interesting experiences he had in witnessing to people. On this one occasion he told me of a fascinating discussion he had with one of his flight attendants who gave him a rather unorthodox view of what heaven would be like. My friend was completely taken back when she said this; *"I have no interest whatsoever in heaven. In fact it sounds downright boring. I have no desire to go to a place where all people will do is stand around and praise God all the time."* My friend was very tempted to ask her what it was about the alternative that was more appealing.

The story Mark leads us to next is one of those passages of scripture that force me to feel something I know I should not. It is not praising God I mind. That prospect excites me. What gives me a slight uneasiness about heaven is that my wife and I will apparently not enjoy the unique relationship of husband and wife as we do here - or will we? It bothers me slightly, right now, that there she will not be considered "my wife".

Now I realize the point of the story is not at all about marriage in the after life. The point of the story is about the Sadducees, who did not believe in the after life, use this

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analogy of marriage in heaven as a way of trapping Jesus in his own words. The Sadducees were a funny bunch. As members of the ruling class of that day, their denial of the after life left them with a very limited faith and theology, one that existed only for the here and now. They adhered strongly to the laws of the Pentateuch but nothing more.

Presented with this riddle about marriage in heaven Jesus quickly exposes the cracks in their beliefs. Utilizing the only authority they accepted, Jesus uses the Pentateuch to sufficiently argue that these five books had the marks of eternity written all over them. *"Are you not in error, because you do not know the scriptures, or the power of God."* (vs.24) Their own scriptures gave ample evidence to make a denial of eternity impossible. Moses, Abraham and all the Patriarchs have not been annihilated. They live. *"Have you not read in the book of Moses, in the account of the bush, how God said to him, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'. He is not the God of the dead, but of the living. You are badly mistaken."* (vs.26,27)

So I know this is the real point of the story but there is still that nagging uneasiness that I will not have a distinct relationship with my wife in heaven. How do I reconcile this while maintaining the belief that heaven will far surpass anything we enjoy here? I suspect the answer lies somewhere with my relationship to the Lord Jesus. It is important that at this present time in our life here that the relationship most important to us is not that our marriage but that union that we have with him.

I recently shared my concern with my wife, bemoaning the fact that we might not enjoy in heaven the unique bond of marriage we enjoy here. The twinkle in her eye led me to believe there was some humor intended in her response when she said, *"Oh, that counts for everyone else, not us."* My suspicion about relationships in heaven, in particularly that one relationship with my wife, is that it will far surpass in the absence of marriage what we have enjoyed here in marriage. Why? Because that relationship will be defined by my relationship with Jesus. It is the complete union with Christ that will give full depth and meaning to all our relationships in a way that far exceeds what we enjoyed

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here. Marriage will not be necessary to define that intimacy. So my conclusion is that my wife and I will enjoy something better than we have here because we will be in the fullness of the presence of Jesus. So will it also be with all relationships.

The power of this realization provides something important for the present. I do not need to wait till heaven for my relationship with Jesus to define and give meaning to my earthly relationships. The key to such depth in marriage and family is in our putting that union with Jesus first above all other relationships and, when we do, we will enjoy a new depth in these relationships. Our pastor, Les Morgan, put all this in perspective when he preached these words about the priorities of relationships. He said about his own marriage, *"My wife is a great wife, but she makes a lousy God."* The point is succinct. As much as I cherish my wife she can not take the place of the Lord Jesus in my life. I do not need her, although I do love her deeply. My existence does not depend on the quality or the longevity of our relationship. The relationship that matters is that one that will move on into the afterlife and it is the one with my Lord Jesus. In the next passage the Lord explains to us how we come to this level of intimacy with the Lord.

There's no marrying in heaven; that's why it's heaven. - Anon.

When will there be an end of marrying? I suppose, when there is an end of living.

- TERTULLIAN (C. 160—AFTER 220)

## **Lesson Forty: LOVE IS IN THE AIR! (12:28-34)**

*"You are not far from the kingdom of God."* (vs.34)

Bear with me for just another moment as I linger with this theme of marriage. When my wife and I began our courtship I lived with the agonizing frustration of her refusing to pledge her love to me until she was ready to mean it. Now keep in mind that I was a

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young man determined to gain her love by all means possible. So with chivalry and romantic determination I sought every possible way to win her love. It did not matter how creative I was, she stood her ground, and would not say those three simple words, "*I love you.*"

You see, my wife had made a pledge to God that she would never tell a man she loved him until she meant it and knew she could continue to say it for life. You can only imagine how frustrating this was for me in those first months. The scenario would be something like this. We would be walking together, I would clear my throat, place my arms around her and say something like "*You know Elaine, I really love you!*" Each time I would be deflated by her simple but determined response, "*Yes, Mitch and I like you too.*" The day she finally broke down settled our relationship. In fact at that very moment I knew and she knew that God brought us together. When she finally uttered those words I stood up where I was (we were camping with her family at the time) and screamed for everyone to hear, SHE LOVES ME!

This particular experience with love has helped me to better appreciate the depth and value of the love of God. The word *love* is so easily spoken nowadays that little consequence is attached to it. The point of the story before us in Mark's gospel, is that love far surpasses all other commands because once it is pledged nothing more is needed to define the relationship. Loving God is the greatest command because it is a response to God's acceptance of us. I love God with all my being (heart, soul, mind and strength) because there is nothing I need to do to earn God's favor. The only thing I am asked to do in response is to pledge my love to him. There is only one command God asks me to keep and it is that I love him in response to his love for me.

This puts a high value on love. We are not to express our love for God until we are really prepared to mean it. It is the highest expression. The scribe who comes to Jesus has studied the law with intense detail. He is the one who has spent hours translating the scriptures and preserving them on new parchments. Because he, and his colleagues,

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knew the scriptures well they also served as lawyers in Israel, applying the law to the various situations that would arise. Armed with this great knowledge of the scriptures this man came to Christ to see which of all the commands Jesus believed to be the most important. Christ's response touches the man deeply. *"Hear O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength."* (vs.29,30)

All other commands seek God's favor but fail to satisfy God. Love meets God because it is a response to his mercy and redemption. Love is often a word hard to define but here Jesus gives it a shape that helps us to visualize it clearly. Consider the components that make up this word before you ever express your love to God again. Consider the following in your pledge to God.

1. The object of love must be God and him only. *"Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord, is one."* This is a call to make God the sole object of our love, the one toward whom we pour our praise and adoration. In modern terms we need to say about God, *he is it!* My wife would not pledge her love to me until she could be satisfied that she would never want anyone else. Similarly my pledge for God will only mean something to him when that love is uncontested. He has to become the sole object of my love. Psalm 23 begins with a similar expression of solitary love for God. *"The LORD is my Shepherd I shall not be in want."* Since he is my shepherd and I have pledged my love to him, there is nothing else I need, or want. He is it!

2. This love must begin in the seat of my emotions, the center of my being. Further, nothing and no one else must occupy this place, the heart. We are to *"Love the Lord, your God, with all our heart."* (vs.30) Look at that place for just a moment. You will need to reflect deeply and prayerfully. Does a love for God, a passion for him sit alone on that throne of your being? You can only love God with passion if he is the only one you truly love. Your love for others can only be real when it flows from this love. Is

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your deepest desire and emotion for God? Is there a "reserved for God" sign at that place declaring that your greatest love is for him?

3. This love deepens only through a growing knowledge of him. We are to increase that love when our understanding is engaged. (*With all your mind.*) Knowing God is the impetus of love. It is that which gives love its nourishment. Jamieson, Fausset and Brown, in their classic commentary on the Bible, make this comment; *"God made us with minds so that we could put all our intellectual capacities to work in loving him."* The more we understand God, the more we learn about his character, attributes and nature, and the more we will love him. I cannot but love him more when I increase my understanding of him. Sadly, many attempts at loving God depend more on the emotion than the intellect. Love however, is not a show. Love is a rational response to what we have learned about God. It can be carried by the emotion but not determined by it. This is why solid teaching will draw us to God quicker than a worship experience. It is a lesson the Church had better learn. What is it about God that will inspire such love? Consider Paul's words from Ephesians 1:7; *"In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and (are you ready for this?) understanding."*

4. Finally, we are urged to allow that love to consume all our energy. The greatest command calls us to love God with all our hearts, soul, mind, and now with all our strength. This does not mean I work hard for his love but rather I work from his love, or, because of his love. What I do I do because I love him, not in order to be loved by him. This consuming response to God is what shapes servants of the Lord Jesus Christ. My love for God, and his pledge to love me shapes all that I do, say and am! Such love also defines my love for my neighbor, the second command given by our Lord. Consider these words from Ephesians 3:16-19 *"I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints to grasp how wide and long and high*

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*and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge - that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God."*

I trust I have helped you to understand something valuable about love. Love, like a diamond, is something so precious, we only give it to the one we are willing to give our life to. Are you ready for such love?

Love is like a friendship caught on fire. In the beginning a flame, very pretty, often hot and fierce but still only light and flickering. As love grows older, our hearts mature and our love becomes as coals, deep burning and unquenchable.

BRUCE LEE

There is nothing so loyal as love.  
ALICE CARY (1820–1871)

## **Lesson Forty One: A DELIGHTFUL SERMON! (12:35-40)**

*"The large crowd listened with delight". (vs.37)*

Something happened to me in my Bible College preaching class I hope never happens again to me or to anyone for that matter. In the middle of expounding what I thought to be a profound point, my professor stopped me in mid-sentence. Sensing he was quenching the Holy Spirit by this rude interruption I nevertheless waited patiently to gain some understanding of what he had in mind. Here was his instruction to me: "*Mitch, I want you to take that last sentence you just said and I want you to repeat it over and over... Louder now...Now I want you to put your arms straight out as you say this...*" I don't know if I managed to bring the Spirit back into my sermon but I did learn to yell a bit louder and use my arms to bring greater emphasis my points.

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There was something about the preaching of Jesus on this particular day in the temple which reflected remarkable ability, and evidence of the Holy Spirit. Jesus needed no preaching tips and no one would have dared stop him in mid-sentence to offer any pointers. So wonderful was his exposition and so passionate was his style that Mark tells us the audience listened with rapt attention. *"They listened with delight."* (vs.37)

I want to use this space to review what it was that made this particular sermon so delightful to the audience in Jesus' presence. What are the qualities that exist here that could perhaps serve as a model for the eager bible student who desires to communicate the word of God to others? Here are some ways you can delight your audience and in the process of doing this I want to examine the content of the sermon itself.

**1. Jesus raised one issue and stuck with it.** The subject of his sermon became his opening question. As every good sermon should this one began by raising an issue with particular focus on a life problem. With the problem established, Jesus then addressed it from a scriptural perspective. Up until now the people who filled the pews in the synagogue accepted that the Messiah would come from David's line. *"How is it the teachers of the law say that the Christ is the Son of David?"* This was agreed and uncontested. However, no-one seemed to consider the fact that the Messiah would have to also have divine as well as human origin. It was one thing for Jesus to claim his lineage to David. Few would be unwilling to accept this. His humanity alone though did not make up who Christ was. He was also divine.

Jesus then needed to raise the question of his divinity. If he had stood before them and claimed to be the Messiah from the line of David he might have been accepted. Unless people accepted both his humanity and his divinity they could not accept him at all. This was the aim of his preaching - to present himself as God's son, fully God and fully man.

Be sure in your preaching (if you do preach that is; if not this should be just as helpful in sharpening your bible study skills) to begin with one issue and stick with it. Address it

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from the scripture. More importantly, keep in mind your responsibility to preach about the whole nature of Christ, his humanity and his divinity.

**2. Jesus intrigued his audience with his use of the scriptures.** A good sermon should keep people at the edge of their seat. You should have them saying, *"I never saw that before; Wow, this is really for me."* A good sermon brings the scriptures to life, scratching people where they are itching.

Notice Jesus intrigues his audience by allowing the scriptures alone to address the central issue of his message. He needed nothing else, for the scriptures have the power to convince and speak for itself. The teachers of the law were correct in presenting the Messiah as being from the line of David. In other words they did well in presenting the human side of the Messiah, but this was only half the gospel. Using the scriptures, Jesus shows from the words of David that one would come from his (David's) own line who would also be his Lord. Referring to Psalm 111:1, Jesus concludes, *"David himself called him Lord. How then can he be his Son?"* David obviously spoke of one from his human line who he would recognize as Lord. Why? Because that one would also be divine. The scriptures had done the work for Jesus.

It is the scriptures alone that unlock the mysteries of God, unfolding his purposes and revealing the singular theme of Jesus as the basis of all God's plans. From the Old to the New Testament the story is about Christ. No preacher ever needs to leave the pages of scriptures to present the full nature of Christ. If you preach, be sure to dip your pen into the deep inkwell of scriptures. *"Let me understand the teaching of your precepts; then I will meditate on your wonders."* (Ps.119:27) It was Amy Carmichael who challenged Bible students with these penetrating words; *Drink from the well, not from streams that run from the well.* Stick with the scriptures and you will never cease to intrigue your listener.

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**3. Jesus spoke with conviction leaving his audience both challenged and restless.** A good sermon leaves the listener restless as it challenges the duplicity of their lives. A good sermon leaves no one off the hook. Intrigued, the listener will also conclude that their life does not match the counsel of God.

You would be on safe ground if you thought that every person listening to the word of God could be struggling with honesty and living at the edge of hypocrisy. A good sermon fires convicting arrows at the double standards in our lives and seeks to bring our lives into line with the life God calls us to live. The word of God like good medicine, must often sting before it can heal.

Jesus' example shows that there is nothing wrong with some rough treatment in preaching the word of God. God's word is like a sword that cuts and divides. (Heb.4:12) It is like a spear that when thrust pierces the conscience, convicting sin and provoking repentance. The goal of preaching is that *"everything is laid bare before him to whom we must give account."* (Heb.4:13) Good preaching exposes sin and shows the way to righteous living. Jesus minces no words in calling all who hear him to live lives that seek to please God, not the crowd. Some in the crowd needed that exposure. What he says would hurt but it would also heal. *"Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted in the market places, and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets. They devour widow's houses and for a show make lengthy prayers"*. (vs.38-39)

**4. Finally, Jesus illustrates by using an everyday example.** A good sermon without illustrations is like a house without a frame. A convincing sermon needs to include ways in which people can be shown how to live differently. Illustrations offer that how, giving substance to what is said and fitting it into the realm of reality in people's lives. God's truth must find a place to settle in the lives of people.

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Having just exposed duplicity, he illustrates the sort of righteousness God looks for by directing his listener to a poor obscure widow who drops all she has into the offering plate. He sits down (vs.41) *"opposite where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury."* While his lanced words continued to pierce and echo in the minds of his audience, the crowd silently watched Jesus observe the group making their offerings. Jesus breaks the silence by pointing to the lone figure of the widow. *"You see,"* Jesus concludes, *"that is what I am talking about. That is the sort of life God wants. Someone whose life is not lived out in conflict and hypocrisy. She lives simply, honest before God. That is righteousness."*

That real life illustration was the final hammer blow, locking into place a picture of the sort of life he wants of us. While his words would ricochet in the walls of people's minds - about his divinity and his purpose, about honest living and righteousness, they would also remember that widow. That illustration had the powerful affect of visualizing holiness. It brought his words to life.

Why not look carefully at the preaching of Jesus? You might learn some valuable tips.

A preacher is one who leads men from what they want to what they need.

RALPH WASHINGTON SOCKMAN (1889–1970)

A preacher must be both a soldier and a shepherd. He must nourish, defend, and teach; he must have teeth in his mouth and be able to bite and to fight.

MARTIN LUTHER (1483–1546)

**Lesson Forty-Two: PEOPLE GET READY! (13:1-36)**

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*"Do not let him find you sleeping." (vs.36)*

The words of a popular contemporary Christian song by Crystal Lewis have become like a drum beat reverberating in my mind. It concerns the return of the Lord. I know God is using the song as a wake up call to the Church to be ready for this one key moment in history. The song is called People Get Ready, and the words are as follows -.

*"Lord, I am ready now. I'm waiting for your triumphant return. You're coming so soon, This world has nothing for me. I find my peace and joy solely in you. Only in you. I want the world to see that you're alive and living well in me. Let me be a part of the harvest.*

*For the days are few. He's coming soon. (chorus) So people get ready, Jesus is coming soon. Soon we'll be going home. People get ready, Jesus is coming to take from the world his own."*

Jesus is leaving the temple with his disciples when one of them makes a passing comment about the beauty of the temple's structure. Wanting to keep his disciples focused on his spiritual not temporal mission, the Lord reminds the disciples that a day will come when there will be nothing but rubble to admire about the temple. *"Not one stone will be left on another."* (vs.2)

Later, in private, three of Jesus' closer disciples ask him what signs they should look for that will accompany these last days. For the bulk of this chapter Mark narrates for us the five major signs that will precede the return of the Lord. While some argue these signs were fulfilled at the destruction of the temple in AD 70, it is self-evident that the full extent of these prophecies has not yet reached fulfillment. Some of these signs are in process of unfolding, but all of them will climax to bring about the return of the Lord. So here are a few things people who get ready should look out for.

People who get ready should **protect themselves from deception**. *"Watch out that no one deceives you."* (vs.5) Sadly, the devil is already succeeding in quenching peoples'

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anticipation of Christ's return through many distractions. Materialism, false doctrines and other ploys are at his disposal as tools of deception. People who get ready need to be sure they are living holy and godly lives so that the return of Christ does not take them by surprise. *"The end of all things is near. Therefore be clear minded and self controlled so that you can pray."* (1 Peter 4:7)

People who get ready accept that they **live in an unstable world**. (vs.7,8) People who get ready are realists, who accept the fact that the world is in a mess and the situation will worsen before it ever gets better. Wars, rumors of war, natural disasters all serve as reminders that our efforts at global stability lead to failure. Politicians put out one fire only to move to another. While people long for peace, we await the peacemaker himself who will bring all things under his authority. Even personal pain and tragedies are accepted as part of the lot of this life. Imagine a day when there will be no news about famines, genocide, ethnic cleansing and earthquakes. Imagine a day when you will not hurt. Your heart will not ache over the illness of a child. You will not be torn over the tension in a relationship. What a day that will be.

People who get ready **accept personal** pain if it means the gospel can be spread. (vs.9-13) *"You will be handed over to the local councils and flogged... And the gospel must first be preached to all nations.... do not worry about what to say. Just say whatever is given you at the time, for it is not you speaking but the Holy Spirit."* Persecution is the result of the proclamation of the gospel, but it is also the means by which the gospel message is carried. A world that hates Christ will react harshly to those who proclaim him. Throughout history the road of the gospel has been paved with the blood of God's servants. The further the gospel is preached the more intense the persecution. People who get ready even make their own pain available for God to use to spread the message of God's love and grace.

People who get ready are burdened over the **increased idolatry** around them. (vs.14) The *"abomination that causes desolation"* that Jesus speaks about will be the most

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blatant form of idolatry. This image in honor of the devil in what used to be the sanctuary for God will expose without any subtleties the real intent of the enemy and that is to direct peoples' allegiance completely away from God. People who get ready notice the way that is already being paved for such a day. People all around us are abandoning God for self-love, worship of the supernatural and materialism. Observing such perversion of worship drives people who get ready to their knees in worship and honor of the One True God.

People who get ready have an **increased longing for the return of the Lord Jesus.** (vs.26,27) He will come with "*Power and Glory.*" All who have waited, who have not been deceived, who have endured persecution for the sake of the gospel and have not bowed their knee to an idol shall receive the reward of being taken to be with him. The promise of Christ's return lives as reason for endurance for every believer. We can live with pain, we can put up with rejection and disappointment because someday he is coming back. Such is the value of this promise, we live every day as though he is coming anytime.

It is Christ's exhortation in verse 36 I find most significant to fuel my anticipation for his return. "*If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to everyone: Watch!*" Let us be careful that in our appetite to study the end times that we give equal time in preparing for it. Literally Christ exhorts us here to not be caught off guard when he comes. I believe it was DL Moody who when asked what he would do if he knew Christ would return the next day replied; "*Oh I would get up at five, meditate on God's word for an hour in bible study and prayer. I would then have breakfast, go for a walk and return to study further God's word. Then after lunch I would visit my parishioners...*" (My paraphrase). His point is simple. He was living in so prepared a state that there would be nothing he would change. He would not be caught sleeping when Christ returned. Are you a person getting ready? I hope you are! "*What kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the*

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*day of God and speed it's coming... make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him." (2 Peter 3:11-12,14)*

The only way to wait for the Second Coming is to watch that you do what you should do, so that when he comes is a matter of indifference.. It is the attitude of a child, certain that God knows what he is about. When the Lord does come, it will be as natural as breathing. God never does anything hysterical, and he never produces hysterics. -OSWALD CHAMBERS (1874–1917)

## **Lesson Forty-Three: THE VALUE OF BROKENNESS! (14:1-11)**

*"She broke the jar and poured the perfume on his head." (vs.3)*

These last chapters of Mark's gospel trace the dark scenes of Jesus' last week on earth. Mark makes no attempt to soften the hammer blow as he constructs the narrative of each scene. Reading these chapters is like a walk through a dark valley, one called death, as the realization of Jesus' imminent brokenness becomes more and more vivid. To the disciples the dawning of this realization became a heavy burden and thus inescapably real.

The occasion should have been festive. The disciples had been anticipating the Passover and reveling in what could have been Jesus' public claim to be the Messiah. Jesus, however, had made clear to them that he had come to Jerusalem not to be celebrated but to die. His constant reference to this had made the atmosphere heavy with the expectation of death. Now with two days to go before the Passover the disciples felt the net tighten around them as the *"chief priests and teachers of the law were looking for some sly way to arrest Jesus and kill him."* (vs.1)

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It would take a dramatic incident at a friend's house to both prepare and reassure the disciples that death was inevitable and necessary for God's purposes to be carried through. It would take a woman with a flask of perfume to illustrate this sense of purpose and destiny in the death of Christ.

Jesus is eating with his disciples when Mary, the sister of Lazarus (see John 12:3), takes a bottle of "pure nard" and breaks the jar to allow the full contents to spill completely over Christ. Nard was an expensive perfume extracted from plants found only in India. It was customary at the Passover to help the poor and this nard would have gone a long way had it been sold and distributed. Mary chose instead to "waste" the contents on Christ by anointing him with it. Once this act was complete there would be none left to give pleasure to anyone else, or to sell for benevolent purposes. This act was reserved solely to give pleasure to her Lord. This was her way of recognizing and proclaiming him as her Lord.

The disciples rebuked her for this, in particular Judas, but Jesus commended her. To the disciples what she did was a waste, but to Christ "*she has done a beautiful thing for me. The poor you will always have with you ... but you will not always have me. She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial.*" (vs.6-8)

What Mary did for Christ was immeasurable and spoke volumes of her love and devotion for Christ. This would foreshadow what Christ came to do in surrendering his life completely for his father. Her one act would serve as an object lesson for history speaking over and over of the sacrifice of Christ. Like that jar his life was broken and poured out for all that will receive him. It was an act of complete sacrifice that would give pleasure to his father. Likewise each of us who are willing to pour out everything that we are on him, do our part in rehearsing the work of brokenness carried out on the cross. And consecrating all that we are in this way for him does not go unnoticed by the Lord. It is a beautiful thing for him.

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Recently the value of full surrender and brokenness rested on me as the Lord responded dramatically to my cry and submission. The saga related to my son has been a long and painful one and one mixed with the joy of progress but most recently the agony of setbacks. Recovered completely from the symptoms related to his brain tumor he enjoyed three full months of good normal boyish activities. Only a few weeks ago however his symptoms have all returned. My son is again struggling with walking, balance and severe weakness on the right side of his body.

My response to this latest struggle was to wrestle with God and for three agonizing days wrestle I did. I could not understand why he would shatter our hopes by presenting us with further anxieties and uncertainties. I have to confess it seemed unkind for God to take us through more. To work through my desperation I decided one afternoon to go for a walk and in those moments of solitude I realized I could no longer hold back from God. My emotions and pain, my confusion and fears were like bottled oil that needed to be poured out. Right there as I was crossing the yard of a neighbor's house my alabaster jar broke under the pressure and I allowed the full contents of my heart to be poured out on my lord. Within minutes the Lord by his Holy Spirit flooded me with peace and acceptance and a deep sense of reassurance of his love for me.

What I did at that moment gave him the right to have his way in my life. That moment of full surrender was like a personal coronation ceremony where like Mary I honored him as my king. That is what I believe Mary meant to do that day. Her act symbolized her declaration that he is King and it would be in brokenness that she would declare it.

Are there some "Alabaster Jars" you are selfishly holding on to that need to be broken? Perhaps you are hoarding the contents out of pride or perhaps even anger and bitterness. Perhaps you have selfish plans of receiving for yourself from the contents of that jar. Let it break and allow the contents to be poured over the Lord Jesus. What you do will be spoken of for eternity in the same breath as the story of the ultimate act of devotion - the death of Jesus on the cross.

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God is a Specialist at making something useful and beautiful out of something broken and confused.

- CHARLES R. SWINDOLL

God will never plant the seed of his life upon the soil of a hard, unbroken spirit. He will only plant that seed where the conviction of his Spirit has brought brokenness, where the soil has been watered with the tears of repentance as well as the tears of joy.

ALAN REDPATH (1907–1989)

## **Lesson Forty-Four: FELLOWSHIP THROUGH SUFFERING! (14:21-31)**

*“Where may I eat the Passover with my disciples.” (vs.14)*

My mother grew up in a small village in the French speaking part of southern Belgium. Her father, a rough, hardworking but quiet man, made his living in the back breaking business of coal mining. Black lung from over exposure to coal dust is what finally took his life in 1972.

My mother has related the following story to us. Her grandfather, when her father was younger, wanted more than anything for his son to enter the ministry. This desire however was not rooted in any spiritual ambition but in the fact that at that time the ministry paid well. It was a good life, secure without the uncertainty that characterized many occupations at that time. Lacking such a call my grandfather chose instead to serve Jesus under the much harsher conditions of the coal mines.

My grandfather wisely understood that ministry was far more than a career option but a life call that involved both the privilege of service and the responsibility to suffer for the name of Christ.

No disciple of Jesus should ever think that the privilege of service will not come without this responsibility of identifying with the suffering of Jesus. If you want intimacy with Jesus and to desire to sit at the table to fellowship with him, you must understand the call to share in the fellowship of his suffering. This reality is I believe at the heart of the Lord’s Supper.

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The Passover would involve Jesus and the twelve - those who had walked most closely with him and knew him best. They were his friends. Luke in his record of this occasion explains how Jesus longed deeply to have this meal with them. *“I am eager to eat this Passover with you before I suffer.”* (Luke 22:15) Through fellowship Jesus planned on preparing his disciples to suffer with him. Rich with symbolism, this meal would fulfill the Passover of Exodus 12. Jesus invites his friends to this intimate event of preparation for the slaughter of the lamb. It was a rare and exclusive privilege to share his burden and passion of being the burnt offering that once for all would satisfy God. (The word *Passion* is the root word for the words *Passover* and *suffer*. Whenever we speak of the passion of Christ we are speaking of his suffering.) This then was no ordinary meal. The disciples joined in what would turn out to be the most intimate moment with their Lord. Intimate, not just because they sat and ate with the creator himself, but intimate because they were being invited to share in the most agonizing event in the life of Christ. David prophetically referred to this as the *“table set before my enemies.”* (Psalm 23:5) Paul called it *“the fellowship of sharing in his suffering becoming like him in his death.”* (Phil. 3:10)

There was something heavy on Christ’s heart though, that must have made this less intimate than it could have been. None of his disciples were willing to completely share in his passion. The meal contained the heavy atmosphere of inevitable desertion. To the dismay of his disciples, Jesus also increases the heaviness of this mood by suggesting that one of them would betray him. Then adding further confusion as they left for a garden praying meeting, he announces that all of them would desert him. By deserting him, their unwillingness to follow to death would be exposed. They were really not yet ready to share completely in the fellowship of his suffering. Peter resisted this with every ounce of his being. Even if everyone else left he would face death to protect Christ if it came down to that. Yet the sound of his denial of Christ would carry louder than all the rest and would ultimately turn him into a broken man.

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Jesus' invitation to share his passion was poignantly symbolized in the ritual of the Passover meal. Eating the bread and drinking the cup would be to the disciples a visual aid symbolizing their identification with his work of redemption. When we celebrate communion today that invitation is extended to us. We join that exclusive group of disciples who were asked to share the passion of our Lord Jesus. Yet how many of us like Paul can say "*yes I am willing to share fully in the fellowship of sharing in his suffering*"? Most Christians want to share fellowship with him in comfort through praise and joy - but not in suffering.

When we suffer we find we are being invited to join Jesus in his suffering. Right there in our darkest moment the deepest fellowship can occur with God himself. Imagine that! It is often only in our suffering that a friendship with God can mean the most. Peter failed miserably, but later in John 21:15 over a fish breakfast that intimacy is extended again and this time he is ready for it. When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, '*Simon... Do you truly love me more than these?*'" Simon does and later he willingly gives his life as an act of love for his Lord. "*To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.*" (1 Peter 2:21)

I can look back at my darkest periods and realize that these were the times when the Lord was holding me closest. But I couldn't see his face because my face was in his breast—crying.  
JOHN MICHAEL TALBOT

## **Lesson Forty-Five: NOT ALONE! (Mark 14:32-42)**

*"They did not know what to say." (vs.39)*

Yesterday our family faced the overwhelming realization that our son Travis, outside of God's intervention, might have only some months to live. The surgeon who met with us earlier that day was tender but firm in telling us there was nothing further that could be

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done for Travis. Travis' tumor has begun to expand further into the brain stem and will in time begin to shut down his system.

My wife and I sat on our swinging bench facing the driveway absorbing all that this meant. Wiping tears from our eyes I looked up to see car pulling into the driveway. As it came to a stop our daughter and youngest son ran toward us. They knew something was not right. My daughter, Breanna, sat on my lap and asked how it had gone that day. Not well, I told her. Travis' symptoms will get worse because the tumor is growing again. Brett our five-year-old asked if this meant Travis will die. Yes, I replied, Travis will die unless Jesus changes what is happening in his body.

We all wept together on that swinging bench and for some minutes just held each other. I was touched to see a nine year old and a five year old so full of emotion and able to cry so easily. This will help them. Then, with tears streaming down my face and with a heavy lump in my throat, I looked at each of them and together we pledged to each other that we would face this. We will be a happy family I told them. And we will serve Jesus together. God will use this pain to achieve what he wants and we want to be exactly the family that he wants. We then prayed together and the kids ran into the house to find Travis.

Coming to this section in Mark's gospel has given me a surge of courage. I find myself standing here longer than I have anywhere on this journey with Christ to the cross. This section records the loneliest and most agonizing moment in the life of our Lord Jesus. All sufferers, anyone faced with illness or loss, need to come here to the garden and allow the tears of Jesus to wash the pain.

The Lord Jesus needed to be at the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. His heart was heavy and he needed a place to pour out his pain to his father. He takes his closest three friends with him so that they might support him in this moment of human agony. Mark picks up the mood with such a vivid phrase; "*He began to be deeply distressed and troubled.*"

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(vs.33). The presence of Peter, James and John allows Jesus to share the depth of his pain. He tells them, “*my soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death.*” (vs.34)

The presence of the three friends with Jesus was valuable but we find that it was insufficient. There was something about all this that the disciples could not fully share and Jesus would have to carry it alone. He asks of them that they might stay where they are and “*keep watch*”, or pray with him and, no doubt, for him. He goes further ahead as though to suggest that the full agony of this moment is one that he can only experience on his own. The weight of his burden is so heavy, Mark explains, that Jesus fell to the ground. (vs.35) There in this posture of helplessness he speaks to his father and if there could be some way out of this and still accomplish God’s purpose, then at that moment that is what he would prefer. “*Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.*” (vs.36)

Years ago, I completely surrendered my life to the Lord Jesus Christ and in doing so gave him the right to do whatever he wanted with me and through me. I have, in that time, also dedicated my children to God and accepted that they too are his to do as he wants. In these last months I have agonized over my son’s illness and have cried out to God that if there could be some other way for him to accomplish his purposes, then right now that is what I would prefer. My cry is an echo from the Garden of Gethsemane. “*O God, is there not some other way for you to do what you have in mind? Does it have to involve the sickness and possible death of my son? O Lord, could you not take this cup from me? I plead with you Lord that it would be another way. But Lord, not my will but yours, is what I ultimately want to subject myself to!*” You see, we endure pain and the worst trial when we accept that this particular trial is necessary for God to achieve what he has in mind. Hebrews 12:2 tells us that Jesus “*for the joy set before him endured the cross scorning its shame*” because he accepted that it was the only way for God to carry out his purpose of bringing salvation to mankind.

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Jesus returns perhaps to share with his disciples his new found courage but he finds them sleeping. Disappointed with them he again returns to be alone with his father. He pours out his heart again to the one whom “*does not sleep or slumber.*” (Psalm 121:4). It is Abba Father who lifts from Jesus the unbearable pain of what he must go through. Christ now has the courage to face the cross.

Finding the disciples sleeping again, Jesus with perhaps a sigh of disappointment says, “*enough, the hour has come.*” (vs.41) The word *enough* to some commentators, implies “*it is settled*”, “*the matter is dealt with*”. Jesus has come to terms with what he must go through and he is ready for it. In that moment of solitary outpouring of pain through prayer, God has granted him the grace to face what was now inevitable.

Those of you who have suffered know that there is only place where that grace to endure can be received. That deep well belongs to our Abba father and what he provides can only come in solitary moments where we have poured out our agony before him.

I am overwhelmed with the support and presence of so many that have *stayed awake* and are *watching* with us. In this trial, I have had many to lean on when the pain seems unbearable. Yet, many have confessed that they can not fully share the trial to the extent we as a family will have to experience it. There are certain aspects to family pain that must be experienced only by the family. Having said this, it is God alone who provides the grace reserved especially for the moments of our deepest agony. This grace enables us to go back to those who want to be our pillars of support and declare, *enough, it's settled. I will go through with this because it is from God and necessary for God to achieve what he has in mind.*

If God has made your cup sweet, drink it with grace.; If he has made it bitter; drink it in communion with him. -OSWALD CHAMBERS (1874–1917)

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## **Lesson Forty-Six: EXPOSED! (14:43-51)**

*“He fled naked...” (vs.52)*

We just learned that Jesus had to experience the agony of his passion alone. Not even his three closest friends could completely share the full depth of his pain. Jesus, we saw, would draw his courage for endurance from his Abba Father.

Left alone in his agony, it would take his arrest for him to be completely abandoned. His disciples slept when he needed them to pray but they ran when he was arrested. It was here that discipleship fell apart and in the crunch their weakness to die for Jesus was exposed.

I heard a gripping story recently of a pastor whose true loyalty to Christ only emerged when his life was in danger. I believe the setting was North Korea where freedom to live out ones faith is severely tested. Pastoring a house church this pastor and his family were one day betrayed and brought before the authorities. Taken to a remote field the authorities offered the pastor a tempting ultimatum, which if accepted would spare his life but would cost the lives of his wife and two daughters. All he would need to do was take the pistol offered him and execute the three people he loved most. If he accepted, he would be offered his freedom. A bullet in each head and he can just walk away. Just like that. As I read the story I did not expect the pastor to do it. I thought this would be one of those rich testimonies of a man who bravely faced death for the love of his Lord and family. But I was sorely disappointed. The pastor calmly took the gun and served as the executioner of his wife and two daughters. *“You are a weak man”* one of his captors snarled. *“You do not deserve to live for such weakness.”* And with that the fourth bullet found it’s lodging place in the pastor’s head.

There were no disciples who stood with Christ when it came to the time of his arrest. Peter had vowed that he would die with Christ (14:29) but they would turn out to be

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hollow words and later would haunt him. Judas, we know, deliberately calculated his betrayal of Christ, but what about the disciples who meant so well and never planned on running out on him? What happened to them? They had declared their allegiance to Jesus and promised to die with him, but when the time came they ran.

One of the disciples who was there is described to us a young man “*wearing nothing but a linen garment following Jesus.*” (vs.51) At the moment of Jesus’ arrest the Roman authorities grabbed the young man but he managed to struggle away but without his clothing. “*He fled naked, leaving his garments behind.*” Many believe that this young man was Mark the author of this gospel. He was not one of the twelve but was one of the committed followers of Jesus. However, at this moment when his commitment to Jesus would mean the most he ran. His true allegiance was exposed. He did more than leave his physical garments behind, he also allowed his loyalty to Jesus to fall to the ground. He ran not only physically exposed, but also showing to all his spiritual nakedness.

I am sure it would take Mark years to get over his betrayal. It was the same Mark who later drew severe criticism from Paul for abandoning the team at Pamphylia in Acts 15:38. Paul's reaction must have been formed some by his knowledge of what Mark did at the garden. “*Paul did not think it was wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphlia and had not continued with them in the work.*” If this is the same young man referred to in Mark's gospel then we most conclude that Mark had a tendency of running when he felt the pressure. The threat of death would expose his true spiritual allegiance.

Peter, who would blatantly abandon Jesus in the next section of Mark's gospel would later refer to Mark as “*my son.*” (1 Peter 5:13) Tradition suggests that Mark drew his information to write his gospel from Peter. It was perhaps in this setting that Mark would find through his relationship with Peter the forgiveness of Christ for his own abandonment. Having been forgiven and restored by Christ, Peter knew the grace Mark

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needed to be restored. Perhaps it was out of gratitude for Christ's forgiveness to Peter that formed the rich content of Mark's gospel.

The call to discipleship is not a whimper, but a firm demand to follow Jesus to the end. I have commented several times that the map Mark draws of the road Jesus takes to Jerusalem begins as a broad road in Galilee but narrows as it reaches the city. As it narrows two things happen. Less people walk the road and the cross becomes more visible. Up till this point most of the disciples looked good in their commitment to Jesus and their loyalty to Jesus could not be questioned. Remember what Mark said early on; *"They left their nets and followed him."* (1:18) Many rejected Jesus as that road narrowed and the cross became more visible, but not the twelve. Yet in this first test of sacrificial love they all failed. They were left exposed and shamefully naked when their life was demanded of them.

Few of us like Mark or the Korean pastor will ever have to make such a dramatic choice between life and death, but nevertheless the demand is there on us daily. Look at your life this last week and what does it say of your commitment to Jesus Christ? Let the outward garment fall to the ground for a moment and what do you see? What do others see? Sold out commitment? Or desertion when the pressure is too great? Thankfully Jesus, as we will see, is in the restoring business and he does forgive and helps us when we are weak.

I understand that discipleship is a process. God is patient and merciful with us when we do fail. He restored Peter and Mark, and would have gladly restored even Judas had he asked for it. May the Lord help you to be real in your commitment to follow him. May his word shape you into a solid disciple who will not run when the pressure is greatest.

Jesus did not say, "Come to me and get it over with." He said, "If any man would come after me, let him take up his cross daily and follow me." *Daily* is the key word. Our commitment to Christ, however genuine and wholehearted it may be today, must be renewed tomorrow . . . and the day after that . . . and the day after that . . . until the path comes at last to the river. - LOUIS CASSELS (1922–1974)

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## **Lesson Forty-Seven: THE SILENCE OF GOD! (14:53-72)**

*"Jesus remained silent and gave no answer".(vs.61)*

Jesus stood before the Sanhedrin like a lamb before the slaughter. Peter gazes through the courtyard window and watches as the false accusations turn into violent mockery. In all this, the Son of God, the creator himself, he who with a single word created all there is - stood in silence. God was on trial and said nothing in his defense. Mark says, *"Jesus remained silent and gave no answer."* (vs.61) The Old Testament prophet Isaiah offered the picture of a lamb that would not resist the inevitable slaughter. *"As a sheep before her shearers is silent so he did not open his mouth."* (Is.53:7)

There is only one time Jesus gives a reply and that is when asked if he is *"the Christ the son of the Blessed one."* His response only gives more fuel to increase the rage of his accuser but it also fans a spark of hope to Peter's dying passion. *"I am"*, said Jesus, *"and you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming in the clouds of heaven."* (vs.63) I can picture Peter with his forehead and eyes barely visible over the sill of the window screaming a silent "YES" in his heart. *Certainly this was the moment Jesus was waiting for. What high drama! Oh this will be good,* thought Peter. But the moment never comes and Peter's hope dies again as he watches Jesus return to his silent subjection to these cruel haters of God. Peter perhaps returned then to the fire, suddenly aware of how cold it has become. Dying fires in one's soul will do that. Someone perhaps looks up as a quick flicker of the fire reflects Peter's angry face and it is a servant girl who recognizes this rugged face as belonging to Peter. Peter becomes enraged at her discovery. *"You also were with the Nazarene Jesus, she said."* (vs.67) *"But he denied it. 'I don't understand what you're talking about' and went out into the entrance."*

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I believe that Peter's outburst was out of anger for Christ's silence and unnecessary toleration of the abuse at the hands of his captors. Peter had stood tall for Jesus, even willing to defend him with the sword at his arrest in the garden. And here when the pressure was really on, it was Jesus who had weakened. *Why does he just stand there and put up with all this? Jesus, why? You who could with a single word could wipe them all out, why don't you act? I don't understand it. Lord you just stand there and say nothing. They spit on you. Hit you!* This is what I believe led to Peter's denial. It was his silence that angered Peter. Peter did not want to have anything to do with a God who just stood there and put up with such injustice. A few moments later when identified again, he was even vehement in his denial. *"I don't know or understand what you are talking about. I don't know this man you are talking about."* (vs.71) Every impulse in Peter's being cried out against the silence of God. God should have acted in power and demonstrated his might - but he didn't. He said nothing. Peter was willing to die to defend Jesus. He was not afraid. He was the only one of the twelve willing to go this far for Christ. He did not deny knowing Jesus for fear of his own life, he denied him because he expected more from God.

Elie Weisel in his book Night describes a scene in the concentration camp where as a teenager he spent four merciless years of his life. The guards had gathered the whole camp to the center to hang a young boy of only twelve for a crime the authorities considered worthy of death. It was painful for Elie Weisel to witness this injustice but they were all forced to look. Hiding behind several well-respected Rabbis, Weisel overheard their conversations that helped shape his view of God to this day. One Rabbi muttered as the gallows held the lifeless frame of the young boy, *"where is God now?"* *"He is there! Hanging on the gallows"*, replied the other Rabbi.

Peter and these Rabbis were not the only ones who stood marveling at God's silence. I am currently looking over that windowsill with Peter and wondering *why is God not doing more?* Many join me there wondering why God does not do something about the condition of my twelve-year-old son. *God I know you can do more, but it just seems that*

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*you are standing there. You could with one word completely change this situation but you aren't. Why Lord?*

We have one advantage over Peter and that is that we know how the story ends. I have the comfort of knowing the full story. Jesus allowed the forces of darkness to overcome him to prove that they could not destroy him. What Peter saw was strength not weakness. Jesus' silence and willingness to absorb the abuse and hatred was a statement that nothing, not even death, can defeat God. *"He too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death."* (Heb.2:14) Even the cross could not defeat him for it was there that death was vanquished. And do you know what that says to you? It says that nothing, even the worst circumstance - even death - can defeat you. Peter was to later reflect on this, understanding that the silence of God was for the benefit of our salvation. *"When they hurled their insults at him he did not retaliate; when he suffered he made no threats. Instead he entrusted himself to him who judges justly."* And then it is here that it all makes sense to Peter as he comes to terms with why Jesus endured the abuse. *"He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to our sin and live for righteousness; by his wounds we are healed."* (1 Peter 2:24)

There will be times when God will seem silent, not because he is unable to respond but because he has already responded. I trust this will give you strength in whatever trial you are experiencing. You too can stand and take the abuse if you will only lean on Jesus' strength. In him, nothing can defeat you! There will be times when you will need to say nothing. God will give you the courage too. Your silence against the onslaught can be a testimony to others of God's enduring strength. Let the example of Jesus give you that courage. *"Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart."* (Heb.12:3)

If man is not ready to risk his life, where is his dignity?—ANDRÉ MALRAUX (1901–1976)

With silence one irritates the devil. —BULGARIAN PROVERB

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Great souls suffer in silence. –JOHANN FRIEDRICH VON SCHILLER (1759–1805)

## **Lesson Forty-Eight: DEATH! (15:21-41)**

*"With a loud cry Jesus breathed his last." (vs.37)*

The path we have been traveling with our tour guide Mark, ends here, at the cross. Jesus completed his earthly ministry and fulfilled God's purpose by dying. It has been a journey filled with miracles, dramatic lessons, personal encounters with hurting people, and the increasing pressure of discipleship. But it all ends here. This is where Jesus said his disciples would find themselves if they chose to endure. We are at the final destination - the cross!

I don't like death! I have tried to avoid it most of my life and when I have crossed its path I have managed to safely walk around it. Death, up till now, has been something that happens to other people and involves other families. Oh, I have attended and even officiated at a number of funerals and seen one or two dead bodies . But in each case I have been able to walk away, close the door to my house and enjoy the good health with which God has blessed my family. I can no longer avoid death. It now looms over our home, threatening the safety and security we have enjoyed these many years together. Like the children of Israel, our family huddles close together finding a shelter under the blood of Jesus as the angel of death stretches out his claws to claim my first born. We talk about death now in our home, not because we are finally comfortable with it but because it is happening to us. Each day we see the vivid signs of dying as our son becomes weaker and the symptoms become more pronounced. Unless God intervenes our son will die. As I write this he can no longer walk or stand. He can only see through the narrow slit of eyelids whose muscles have become too weak to open properly. His

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nervous system is failing and his body tremors mildly like you would see in an old man who is fighting Parkinson's disease.

The Holy Spirit is preparing Travis, and us, for death. I am finding it is easier for the person dying to prepare for death than it is for those who are left behind. The other day Travis woke up with an unbearable headache and between gasps of pain he cried out, "*Oh, I just want to die.*" I asked him if he was prepared for death and he looked up at me and said, "*Daddy, I am totally ready to die. In fact I don't want to live because I want to be with Jesus.*" Since that day we have had many other conversations about death. Sometimes humorous. We were discussing together how long he might have to suffer. Travis joked, "*Daddy, let's make a bet on it and see who wins.*" On a recent walk with the family, Travis was seated comfortably in his wheel chair. I felt a freedom to remind all of them that Travis would be the first one of us it seems, to see Jesus. We then all began to make our requests of what we would want him to tell our Lord.

Death is the most common event of life but it is without doubt the one thing we think about the least. Until it happens to us that is! If it were not for the death of Jesus - his crucifixion - death for us, or for the one we love, would be intolerable. The death of Jesus turns death on its head. The death of Jesus served as a crossroads of it's own from this life to the next. Up till now a "Dead End" sign marked this journey with no further hope beyond the grave. The death of Jesus, and his subsequent resurrection, swung open a new gate revealing a new road, this one paved with gold and leading directly into the presence of God himself. All who have responded to that open-air call at the shores of Galilee and choose to follow Jesus are invited to enter this presence. "*But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life...*" (Matt.7:14) We have said all along that this is a *Crossroads*. You can not get there without coming face to face with death. Christ's death and your death. They merge at the cross. I was deeply moved recently in reviewing the words of the great hymn, The Way of the Cross Leads Home. Listen to these lyrics.

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*I must needs go home by the way of the cross. There is no other way but this. I shall never get sight of the gates of light if the way of the cross I miss. The way of the cross leads home. It is sweet to know as I onward go, the way to the cross leads home.*

The very fact that it was God himself, the giver of life, who hung there on that cross should cause us much grief. He chose to die - we do not. He could have avoided death but chose not to. Neither did he allow himself to be exempt of the full agony of death, choosing instead the worst form of death. On that final leg of his journey he could not carry his own cross so painful it became. A bystander, Simon (vs.21), was "*forced to carry the cross.*" On the cross when the agony of death was greatest, he did not accept "*wine mixed with Myrrh*" because he would not allow his senses to be numbed by the drug. The giver of life was to experience death at it's worst. It would do no good for God to die for us if he did not experience the complete horror of it himself. God was to relate fully with death. The soldiers made a sport of his death, oblivious to it's significance even to each of them personally. They "*cast lots to see what each would get.*" (vs.24) The death of God was exploited by man for personal gain.

A sarcastic sign reading "the King of the Jews" mocked him. One of the robbers condemned next to him joined the mob in "*hurling insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, 'come down from the cross and save yourself ... he saved others but he can not save himself. ' Those crucified with him also heaped insults at him.*" (vs.31-32) There was to be no *death with dignity* or attempt at *preserving quality of life* in the last moments of Jesus. To add to what is already a painfully dark scene, Mark reminds us that Jesus even found himself abandoned by his father. "*My God, My God why have you forsaken me.*" (vs.34) You remember the journey began in Mark 1:11 with God proudly announcing that this was his son "*whom I love; with you I am well pleased.*" There are no such expressions of personal love from God now. God seems to be deathly silent. The sin of humanity laid on the shoulders of Jesus has forced God to turn his back on his precious Son. God has "*laid on him the iniquity of us all*", (Is.53:6) and "*it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer...*" (vs.10) No man ever died so alone. "*With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last*" (vs.37) and God died! Mark fails to add what

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Matthew considers worth mentioning that *"darkness came over the whole land."* (Matt.27:45) Graham Kendrick's song Servant King has this fitting line; *"Hands that flung stars into space, to cruel nails surrendered"*

Many fail to realize though that what opens that gate for us is not the intensity of this particular death but who it was who died on that day. God died as perfect humanity and became the only one to conquer death. What satisfied God that day was not that the suffering was finally bad enough, but that a perfect lamb was given on behalf of man as a penalty for sin. Jesus took away the finality of death by declaring victory over it. *"Death has been swallowed up in victory; 'Where O death is your victory? Where O death is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God. He gives us victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."* (1 Cor.15:54-57) Praise be to God. I still don't like death. Neither do I like the cross. But I like what I see beyond it, for there I see a clear path that leads to the arms of Jesus. My son will be the first of us to take this path and he will be better off for it. I take courage from this!

As the mother's womb holds us for nine months, making us ready, not for the womb itself, but for life, just so, through our lives, we are making ourselves ready for another birth. . . . Therefore, look forward without fear to that appointed hour—the last hour of the body, but not of the soul. . . . That day, which you fear as being the end of all things, is the birthday of your eternity.

—LUCIUS ANNAEUS SENECA (C. 4 B.C.—A.D. 65)

At death we cross from one territory to another, but we'll have no trouble with visas. Our is already there, preparing for our arrival. As citizens of heaven, our entrance is incontestable. —ERWIN W. LUTZER (1941—)

## **Lesson Forty-Nine: BURIAL! (15:42-47)**

*"Joseph took down the body and wrapped it in linen." (vs.46)*

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Last week in the same way as for the death of Diana Princess of Wales, many were shocked by the sudden death in a plane crash of John F. Kennedy Jr. On his way to Martha's Vineyard and flying in poor weather conditions the plane nose-dived into the ocean and was not recovered for three days. Yesterday they buried him at sea. It was a burial with full military honors. The Navy decided that he had lived an exemplary life, qualifying him for this special honor.

There were no such honors planned for the body of Jesus. Considered a common criminal his body would be dumped like rubbish becoming food for the scavenging birds and the worms. God, however, laid it on the hearts of two men to prepare the body for a proper burial. A burial in a sealed tomb and the certainty of a dead body would add drama to what God had in mind.

Joseph was from Arimathea and served as a "*prominent member of the Jewish Council.*" (vs.43) According to Luke he was a "*good and upright man*" (23:50) who fought courageously against the Sanhedrin's decision to condemn Jesus. He, along with Jesus' old friend Nicodemus from John 3, now obviously born again, had perhaps studied the scriptures enough to know that Jesus died as the Lamb of God on the Passover. Both men loved Jesus deeply, and it was they, interestingly, not the disciples, who had the courage to request for Jesus body from Pilate. The other disciples were apparently still in hiding. On this day of Preparation (for the Sabbath) God was directing these men to prepare the body, not for a burial but for his resurrection.

The burial of Christ would be significant for a number of reasons. As stated already the activity surrounding his burial, such as embalming, would confirm without any shadow of a doubt that he was dead. There would have been enough people involved in the moving of the body from the cross to see that he was dead. It would have certainly confirmed his death to his followers. His burial would also fulfill the scriptures. We go to Isaiah 53 again from where we have drawn so much already and we read that "*he was assigned a grave with the wicked and the rich in his death...*" (vs.9)

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The burial of Jesus body would bring a closure to the problem of sin. His physical burial then would have spiritual significance. It was not only his body that was buried that day but also the sin for which he had died on the cross. In fact, I was buried with him on that day, joining him in his death. In God's eyes the penalty for sin is complete, the debt has been paid and the punishment taken. *"We were therefore buried with him through baptism into his death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new Life."* (Or. 6:4)

There is something else very significant about the burial of Jesus and it has to do with darkness. Prior to his last cry you remember the world was plunged into a black cloud of darkness as though to say *"this is the condition of mankind."* The separation of man from God because of sin and the depth of that gulf was clearly felt that day. David Shroedder in his study on Mark, The Broken God, captures the mood well when he says, *"from noon until three p.m.. God turned out the lights on the world."* For three hours and then for a subsequent three days the world was sucked into an overwhelming and unbearable darkness as the distance between man and God was more vivid than ever. God is dead, and for three days it seems that Satan has triumphed. We celebrate his death today because we know about the resurrection, but for those who loved Jesus this darkness was like a thick blanket upon the soul. They mourned his death. That is why it was with a deep heaviness of heart that the Mary's watched him buried (vs.47) and the disciples hid in fear behind locked doors. (John 20:19) Every ounce of hope now lay buried with Christ in that tomb and all expectations of great things expired. Death seemed to rule.

For those who do not yet know the hope of Jesus' resurrection, the description of darkness that I just gave is their daily existence. Many do not realize how dark this existence is. Spend long enough in the dark and you'll understand what I am saying. You easily get used to the dark. Without Christ and without the hope of the resurrection death is a loud bell seeking to warn people to the reality of their lostness. Many sadly, ignore the sound of that bell.

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I attended the funeral of a young teenager several months before we left England and the lights never came on during that service. I mean spiritual lights. In the darkness the liberal minister and the pagan family groped for words to explain away the overwhelming sense of gloom that hovered in the sanctuary. It was the only funeral I ever attended where God was absent. The young boy had died a tragic and needless death. A bus driver ejected the boy from his bus when he became overly disruptive, and as he stepped from the bus, he began to hurl insults at the bus driver. This continued as the boy crossed in front of the bus to cross the street. An oncoming car hit him while he was still shaking his fist at the bus driver.

As one who knew the hope of Jesus I stood alone in the room as hollow words continued to come from empty people and the chill from that darkness made me shiver. My sense of the lostness of people has never been so strong as that moment. What these people did not know is that God himself has been plunged into this darkness with them and he has conquered it. He has been there and he longs to remove people from the darkness and make sense of death. Death does not need to be seen the way I saw it that day. It could have been a great opportunity to speak of the one who came to give his life to save people from a greater death and how he has provided a way out. *"Since the children have flesh and blood he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death -that is, the devil - and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death."* (Heb.2:14,15)

## **Lesson Fifty: RESSURECTION! (16:1-20)**

*"The stone had been rolled away". (vs.4)*

My son's condition is today very poor. It is clearer than ever that he is dying and what is now certain is if God doesn't intervene, he will not live long. Many have called and some

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have visited and the concern for our family has been overwhelming. I could never collapse even if I tried under the strength of the love and support that has been shown.

A good number of people have commented that they do could not imagine what we are going through. *"It must be agonizing"*, one person groans. *"I don't know how I would handle this,"* another laments. I too would have said this. But my sense is that we are in an eye of a hurricane and while viewers on the outside can only see the tumult, we who are on the inside are experiencing the peace of God, which yes, in times like this is incomprehensible. I told Travis during one of our talks on death about this serenity. I said to him, *"Travis, do you know what is strange? I feel OK about all that is happening to you."* His reply again revealed the faith of one who is being refined by the fire. He said in response, *"That is God, dad. God is working in your heart to make you feel that way."*

Through these months and with the assistance of our tour guide, Mark, my eyes have been opened to new spiritual realities never before visible on this side of the cross. Peer with me again over the crossbeams where Christ died to release man and the view is stunningly clear. You see from here a tomb. For three days you observe there has been a hustle of activity around that burial site ever since Joseph and Nicodemus brought the body there. A group of specialists from the Roman army came to seal the tomb and left satisfied that no person could possibly break in. Soldiers are placed to guard the tomb. You notice as the sunrise begins to illuminate the scene, three women prepared with embalming material arrive, wondering how they will coax the soldiers into rolling the stone back so that they might enter. But when they see the tomb, it is empty. You notice what appears to be something angelic. The women look frightened and run from the scene in terror and confusion. You hear later that they ran to a group of disciples in hiding who are unconvinced by their tale.

What I see over these cross beams is clear as crystal and I do not want to move from here. This has been the best part of the journey because from here it all fits together.

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Jesus has called us to follow him. He's talked about dying and our needing to die with him. It was all so we could inherit new life. From the cross I see that now. In fact all Christians need to view their lives from here, particularly those of us who have found the journey difficult. My son will die, but because of that empty tomb he will immediately be placed into the loving and waiting arms of Jesus. Like he did for Stephen, Jesus will also stand to receive my boy. So how can I move from here? Oh, I know there will be moments of loneliness. The pain of memories from pictures and places will always be there. I will no doubt call out his name only to be reminded that he is no longer here. At moments like this I will need to run back to the cross. I'll again see that empty tomb and remember how real it all really is. My loss has been his gain. As I linger there I will reflect on all the promises God has made of how Jesus is preparing a place there in heaven for me too. My day will come. The resurrection was not the final act in that story. He ascended into heaven and there at the right hand of the father, he took his place as the faithful and perfect high priest. There he speaks to God about me. But as certain as the sun will set tonight he will return. I can handle the pain of loss knowing this.

From the cross I am also reminded of my calling to serve Jesus on earth. I need to keep serving. My loss can not hold me back although I know the loss of motivation will be there. The cross, the empty tomb and that occupied throne refreshes my call and gives me courage to return to my world for which Christ died. When the Lord Jesus instilled this call early on in my adult life he knew the trials I would face and he would use every one of them to shape me into a more faithful servant. The death of my son should not be allowed to blow out the flame of my passion to serve Jesus. Jesus is alive! He rose from the dead and has commissioned all that have followed him to continue the work. But it will continue to be a journey paved with suffering. It has been thus throughout history. There has been little success with the gospel apart from persecution. The suffering of Jesus in order to "*bring many sons to glory*" (Heb.2:10) is our prototype for this. There is no gain without the pain. Christians who suffer must never buckle under the pressure but rather make that suffering available to him to be used for his glory. Christians should count it joy to be found worth enough to suffer for the name of Jesus. "*But rejoice that*

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*you participate in the suffering of Christ so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.*” (1 Peter 4:13) What Peter is referring to here as *his glory* is our resurrection - when Jesus returns to receive us to himself. Before we get to our empty tomb there is the cross. We first, like Christ, must suffer. A day will come when we will have completed the journey. For those who have heard the call and have been faithful, accepting the cost and willing to carry the cross, there will be the reward of eternity with him. For those who deemed the cost too high and chose the easy road the price that they will pay in eternity is high.

Right now the path we take is paved with pain. There will be times when the pain can be so great that even tying your shoes let alone sharing the gospel with others will seem too much. Well press on my friend. Don't give up. Run to the cross and take another look. Look again if you need to. The journey does not end with your pain. Beyond the cross is an empty tomb. Beyond the cross stands a resurrected savior who commissions his disciples. Beyond the cross is our Lord seated at the right hand of the Father. Beyond the cross is a home being prepared for us where someday we will spend eternity with him. The path, as we have seen in Mark's gospel, is not smooth but we have seen that its destiny is certain and sticking with it is ultimately worth it. Call others to join you on that path. You are commissioned to. Remain on the path and you will arrive.

See you there!