

A serene sunset scene over a body of water. The sun is a bright, glowing orb in the upper left, casting a long, shimmering reflection down the center of the water. The sky is a gradient of warm orange and yellow. In the foreground, the silhouettes of two people are visible in a small boat, positioned in the lower right. The background shows a dark silhouette of a forest line.

**LESSONS
FROM THE
LIFE OF**

Jesus

Practical Insights from the Gospels

R. Herbert

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Practical Insights
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By R. Herbert

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INTRODUCTION

“No one can read the Gospels without feeling the actual presence of Jesus. His personality pulsates in every word. No myth is filled with such life.” – Albert Einstein

Einstein’s words summarize well why the four gospels are the most read books of the Christian Bible – they give us the closest and most life-filled view of the Son of God that we have. As a result, no other New Testament books come close to being so well-known as the four accounts of the life of Jesus. Many Christians have read one or more of the gospels multiple times and may even have read other summaries of the life of Jesus.

So why another book – this book – on a story that everyone knows? Rather than retelling the story, this book looks at some of the things recorded in the gospels that are often overlooked or that go unseen. These are things you might not have thought about – details you may have missed or connections that may not have been clear to you in five important themes: the sonship of Jesus, his service, signs, sermons and sacrifice. This focus on details is important because sometimes even a minor fact in the narrative can provide a window for us to see things we have not seen before, enriching our understanding of the overall story.

So in the following chapters we focus on some of the details of the gospel narratives that are easy to miss, but which can help us to better understand the life and teachings of Jesus. In each case there are lessons we can learn and apply – sometimes with the potential for an effect on our lives that is well out of proportion to the seemingly small detail that conveys the lesson.

By looking at the gospel accounts a little more closely than we might have done before, we can gain insights that help us see more clearly the One the gospels are all about so that we might better follow his example. We hope this book will help you to do that.

PART ONE: SONSHIP

The four gospels constantly show the life and work of Jesus from the perspective of sonship. We are told that Jesus was not only the Son of God, but also the Son of David, the Son of Abraham, and even more generally, the Son of Man. The allusions to sonship – and the lessons we can draw from them – begin with the birth of Jesus and continue throughout the story of his life...

1. WHY BETHLEHEM?

Every Christian knows that Jesus Christ was born in Bethlehem (Matthew 2, Luke 2), but many do not know why. The Scriptures actually record two specific reasons why Jesus was born in that tiny Judean village. First, it was foretold that the Messiah was to come from the house of David – to be a “son” or descendant of the young shepherd from Bethlehem who became king of Israel 1,000 years before the time of Christ. This was promised to David himself:

When your days are over and you rest with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, your own flesh and blood, and I will establish his kingdom ... and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his father, and he will be my son (2 Samuel 7:12-14).

This prophecy could not have been completely fulfilled by David’s physical descendants, but only by a Messianic king who could rule “forever” (vss. 13, 16). That is why in the New Testament it was foretold of Jesus: “He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David” (Luke 1:32), and why, of course, Jesus is called the “Son of David” throughout the gospels.

So the Davidic sonship of the Messiah was one reason for Jesus’ eventual birth in Bethlehem – the ancestral home of David (1 Samuel 17:12). As a descendant of David, Joseph, the husband of Jesus’ mother Mary, was required to travel to Bethlehem for a Roman census – and so Jesus was born there:

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world ... And everyone went to their own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem

the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David (Luke 2:1-4).

But there is another reason for the Bethlehem Nativity. The Old Testament Book of Micah contains a fascinating prophecy of what was to occur in the fulfillment of God's promise of the Messiah:

And you, O tower of the flock, hill of the daughter of Zion, to you shall it come, the former dominion shall come, kingship for the daughter of Jerusalem ... O Bethlehem Ephratha, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days ... And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And ... he shall be great to the ends of the earth (Micah 4:8; 5:2-5 ESV).

This prophecy tells us that the Messianic ruler who would shepherd his people was, like David, to come from Bethlehem, and that he would eventually reign "to the ends of the earth." But notice a detail of this prophecy – how it begins: "And you, O tower of the flock." In Hebrew, the "tower of the flock" is *migdal eder*, literally "Tower of Eder." This tower is first mentioned in the book of Genesis as being on the outskirts of Bethlehem (Genesis 35:18, 21). In New Testament times, the tower was a watchtower used to guard flocks of sheep that were pastured in that area.

Born for Sacrifice

Jewish tradition (Mishna: Shekalim vii. 4) indicates that sheep in the fields around Migdal Eder were controlled by the temple in Jerusalem and were used to provide the animals sacrificed in the ritual temple offerings. A number of biblical scholars have pointed out that if the prophecy of Micah 4:8 was fulfilled literally, then Jesus may well have been born in some building in this general part

of the outskirts of Bethlehem. The word translated “manger” where the infant Jesus was placed (Luke 2:7) could also be translated as “stall” or any holding area for animals.

Have you ever wondered why Luke tells us that at Christ’s birth, angels appeared to shepherds? The heavenly host could have appeared to a group of soldiers, priests, travelers, or any other individuals, but we are told that they appeared to shepherds who were grazing their flocks in the area where Jesus was born (Luke 2:8-15). If Jesus was born in the area of Migdol Eder, the area where the sacrificial lambs were born and raised, the shepherds would naturally have been the people present in that area.

But regardless of the details of its fulfillment, the intent of the prophecy of Micah is clear. The promised Messiah would be both the Shepherd of his people (Matthew 2:6) and the Lamb who would be sacrificed for them (John 1:29). The symbolism of this aspect of the Nativity is profound. In the quiet of the Bethlehem night where his story began, the promised Son of David was born to be the humble, self-sacrificing Lamb as well as the powerful guiding Shepherd who would eventually be “great to the ends of the earth.”

We can learn lessons in the story of Jesus that unfolds in the gospels in regard to our own identity as adopted sons and daughters of God. The birth of Jesus was the beginning of a story of sonship that finds its dignity and purpose not in its setting – where a shepherd’s pen may be more important than a kingly palace – but in its calling. It is often said that Jesus was born in a “manger” to relate to the poor of the world, but Jesus could have been born in humble circumstances in any location. His birth in Bethlehem was for a purpose – and perhaps where we find ourselves has purpose, too. Have we thoroughly explored that possibility? As we will see in the following chapters, we can profitably think about the purpose and events of our lives as we meditate on the purpose and events of his. His birth was not only the beginning of his human story, but, to the degree we follow him, it is also the beginning of ours.

2. THE GIFTS THE WISE MEN GAVE

Although many give gifts to each other each Christmas season, supposedly in honor of the gifts the Magi or “wise men” gave to the young Jesus, we can find a reminder in that story of the true focus of those individuals who gave gifts to the child who was the promised King.

We don't know how many wise men brought gifts to the young Jesus (it's only tradition that there were three of them), who they were (they may have been ambassadors of distant royal courts), where they came from (other than “the East”), or even when they came (the New Testament shows it could have been up to two years after the actual birth of Jesus when they arrived at the house in which his family was living). The one thing we do know for sure is what the gifts were that they gave to the young Jesus:

On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh (Matthew 2:11).

The three types of gift (the origin of the tradition that there were three wise men) were all costly ones, and perhaps the most expensive, by weight, that could be given in that ancient culture. It's easy to understand that gold was considered a gift fit for kings. Frankincense was an expensive fragrance used in the making of incense offered in the temple (Exodus 30:7-9) and was thus a fitting gift to be given to a priest (Hebrews 4:14-16). Myrrh was another expensive fragrance that was often used in embalming the dead – as it was for Jesus (John 19:39-40). In that sense it was an appropriate gift to one destined to die for humankind. Whether these symbolic aspects were realized by the wise men or not, the three gifts were all certainly suitable for the King and Priest who was born to give himself as a sacrifice.

Although those physical gifts are not ones that we can give directly, the New Testament does show that just as the gold, frankincense and myrrh had symbolic associations, if we choose, we too can offer things in our own lives that are associated with the same gifts.

Faith: 1 Peter 1:7 tells us: “These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.” Rather than gold, we can give the better gift of faith.

Relationship with God: The book of Revelation refers to the prayers of the saints as fragrant incense before God: “Another angel, who had a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense to offer, with the prayers of all God’s people, on the golden altar in front of the throne” (Revelation 8:3). The incense offered to God on the heavenly altar is directly associated with the prayers that we can offer, and rather than giving physical incense, we can give the gift of a prayerful relationship with God.

Relationship with others: 2 Corinthians 2:15-16 says, “For we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are an aroma that brings death; to the other, an aroma that brings life.” Just as the pleasing fragrance of myrrh could be used in contexts of life and death, our walk before others can be a pleasing fragrance to those who can appreciate it – a fitting gift to the One who calls us to be an example of godly life to others.

So we can give, if we choose to do so, the symbolic equivalents of the gifts the wise men gave to Christ. If we let it, the story of their gift-giving can inspire us to develop, through God’s grace, our underlying faith, our relationship with God himself, and our relationships with others. Even those of us who might feel we have little to give physically have the opportunity to give even better gifts – that may please the Son of God even more – than the gifts the wise men gave.

3. THE BOY IN THE TEMPLE

We begin this chapter with the story of a young Jewish woman who journeyed to the temple in Jerusalem with her husband for a great festival, only to end up leaving their son in the temple when they traveled back home. You may be thinking that we are discussing the story of how Mary and Joseph went to Jerusalem and did not realize that the boy Jesus had stayed behind in the temple when they started the journey home (Luke 2:43-46). But we are not discussing Jesus yet – we are thinking of the young Samuel who the Old Testament tells us was brought to the temple by his parents Hannah and Elkanah (1 Samuel 1:24-28; 2:18-19).

Patterns

If we look carefully, we can recognize in the story given to us in Luke's Gospel a clear pattern established in the earlier story of Samuel. Mary's song, when she became pregnant (Luke 1:46-55), is similar to the song of Hannah regarding her pregnancy (1 Samuel 2:1-10). Mary and her husband devoutly made yearly trips to the temple (Luke 2:41), just as Hannah and her husband did (1 Samuel 1:3, 7). The young Jesus may have come to understand his calling in the house of God (Luke 2:46-47) just as the young Samuel did (1 Samuel 3), and Jesus is said to have been busy doing his Father's work in the temple (Luke 2:49 NKJV), just as the young Samuel also was doing God's work in God's house (1 Samuel 2:18). Finally, it is not coincidence that Luke tells us directly after this story that "Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man" (Luke 2:52), just as we are told "the boy Samuel continued to grow in stature and in favor with the Lord and with people" (1 Samuel 2:26).

This does not mean that the story of the boy Jesus in the temple is the same as that of the young Samuel, of course, but that Luke tells his story in such a way as to show us that the young Jesus, like

Samuel, was someone set apart to do a special work for God. Luke also shows another similarity between the young Jesus and the young Samuel in the way the stories of both individuals show how they learned in the house of God.

The temple in Jerusalem was not only a place of sacrifices and prayer, but also a center of scriptural learning. Scribes copied the word of God there, and scholars discussed its meaning in the temple precincts (Luke 2:46). Those who went to the temple to sacrifice or pray might also stay longer to hear the Scriptures expounded and to learn – which is exactly what the young Jesus had done – and we see a parallel once again with the young Samuel: “The LORD continued to appear at Shiloh, and there he revealed himself to Samuel through his word” (1 Samuel 3:21).

Seeking Instruction

Luke’s account is the only gospel that adds this story of the transition between the childhood and ministry of Jesus, but the detailed nature of the narrative indicates that it was a significant event from which we can learn something.

Although the account of the young Jesus in the Temple is brief, it shows us the intense awareness of his mission the Son of God already had at the age of twelve. The evidence of later Jewish tradition indicates that in a devout family such as his, religious instruction for a boy would have become more intense at age twelve. But Luke shows this was Jesus seeking instruction rather than passively accepting it, and his questioning and answering of the temple scholars had evidently been going on for several days before his parents found him.

We should notice as well that when Luke tells us Jesus said he “had to be” in his Father’s house, the Greek word *dei* he used means “to be under necessity” or “to be compelled” – it denotes not that he likely would be in the temple, but as an obedient son he must be there of necessity. The context shows us the compelling reason was that he might learn (Luke 2:46-47).

So Luke's story shows us that even by the age of twelve, Jesus knew there was a necessity to learn in order to do his Father's will. When we understand this, we see the connection between that need to learn and what Luke tells us next in his gospel – “Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man” (Luke 2:52).

It is so easy for us to read the gospels and to see the amazing understanding Jesus had of God's word – displayed time and again when people questioned him – and to somehow think of that as just a result of divine power or wisdom Jesus was given. But Luke's story of the boy in the temple shows us that Jesus, like all of us, had to learn, and that Jesus knew he must learn in order to fulfill his Father's will. Luke's story invites us to ask if we, as Christians, learn for that same reason. It prompts us to ask ourselves if we feel that we are also compelled to learn – in order to grow in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man.

4. WHY WAS JESUS BAPTIZED?

In reading the gospel accounts of the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist (or the Baptizer, as he is sometimes called), Christians sometimes wonder why Jesus, being sinless (2 Corinthians 5:21; etc.), would undergo a ritual that was specifically meant to symbolize and affirm repentance from sin (Matthew 3:11). Readers of the gospel accounts may also wonder what Jesus meant in telling John – who was at first reluctant to baptize him – that it would be a “fulfillment of all righteousness” (Matthew 3:15). Jesus’ expression “all righteousness” indicates a plurality, and there were indeed a number of reasons his baptism by John fulfilled various aspects of God’s will. We can summarize those reasons by saying that in undergoing baptism, Jesus fulfilled seven significant purposes:

1) He endorsed the baptism of John who was rejected by the religious authorities of that day: “the Pharisees and the experts in the law rejected God’s purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptized by John” (Luke 7:30). This was important as John’s ministry fulfilled a number of Old Testament prophecies.

2) He submitted himself to the call and command of a servant of God regarding personal behavior. As part of his overall perfect obedience, Jesus obeyed and taught others to obey what God’s appointed servants decreed: “The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. So you must be careful to do everything they tell you” (Matthew 23:2-3).

3) He identified directly with the sinful people of Israel, and of the world, for whom he would act as their sin-bearer: “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us” (2 Corinthians 5:21), and the lamb of God who would be sacrificed in a substitutionary death: “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29).

4) He fulfilled the ritual requirement of washing placed on all the priests before beginning his own ministry. This was also necessary to serve as a perfect high priest for humanity: “We do have such a high priest ... who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by a

mere human being ... that is a copy and shadow of what is in heaven” (Hebrews 8:1-5).

5) He showed the important link between baptism and the receipt of the Spirit of God. On the Day of Pentecost, when the Spirit was made freely available, the apostle Peter stressed this same link: “Repent and be baptized ... in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38).

6) He gave an example regarding the practice of baptism for future Christians to follow: “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). This truth lay beneath the commission Jesus gave his disciples directly before his ascension: “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28: 19-20).

7) Perhaps above all, Jesus provided an opportunity for God to publicly reveal and confirm him as his Son – the climax of the whole baptismal event: “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:17).

A Many-Faceted Event

There were thus at least seven reasons why Jesus underwent baptism: to support John, to teach us the link between baptism and receipt of the Spirit of God, to display obedience, to serve as an example for us, to be counted as if he were a sinner and thus identified *with* sinners – while fulfilling the ritual requirements of the law in order to serve as a purified high priest *for* sinners, and not least to provide an opportunity for God to reveal his Son. Seen in this way, we realize that far from being a ritual footnote to his ministry, Jesus’ baptism was an event of the greatest significance. It was directly after his baptism, of course, that Jesus resisted Satan, called his first disciples, and began to publicly teach, heal the sick, and perform miracles. It is no exaggeration to say that the baptism of Jesus was the necessary preparation for everything that the Son of God would accomplish in his earthly ministry, as well as being the public announcement that his ministry was about to begin.

5. LESSONS FROM THE WILDERNESS

The first three gospels tell us that after he was baptized, Jesus fasted for forty days and nights in the Judean wilderness. At that time Satan appeared to him and tried to tempt him (Matthew 4:1-11; Mark 1:12-13; Luke 4:1-13). We should notice the sonship aspects of this story. Directly after Jesus' baptism, a voice was heard saying "This is my Son, whom I love" (Matthew 3:17; etc.), and we are told that in his temptation of Jesus Satan directly challenged this by saying "If you are the son of God" (Matthew 4:3, 6; etc.).

Three Temptations

The three temptations aimed at Christ (to turn stones to bread, to throw himself from the pinnacle of the temple, and to worship Satan) have been interpreted in various ways. But there is one way in which Jesus' wilderness temptations can be understood that is directly grounded in the biblical record – as a reflection of the temptations of ancient Israel in the wilderness. Just as the people of Israel went into the wilderness after their figurative baptism in the Red Sea (1 Corinthians 10:2) and were there forty years, Christ spent forty days in the wilderness (the Bible frequently uses the equivalency principle of a day for a year) and communed with God just as Moses (foreshadowing Christ – Deuteronomy 18:15) did during Israel's own time of wilderness wandering.

Notice the further specific parallels between the temptations in the two wilderness accounts. First, we see the Israelites gave into temptation regarding their physical desires in not trusting God for bread and their rebellious complaining in the incident where God supplied manna for them to eat because of their lack of faith (Exodus 16:2-3 and Deuteronomy 8:2-3). We also see the Israelites

giving in to the temptation to argue or try to work out God's plan for them in their own way, when they did not see evidence of God's presence despite what He had done for them. We see this sin of tempting God repeatedly (Exodus 17:1-7, notice particularly verses 2 and 7; and Deuteronomy 6:16). Finally, we see the Israelites falling to the temptation to worship something other than God in their bowing down to the golden calf and other idols and pagan gods (Exodus 32:1-4, Deuteronomy 6:13-15).

We know that these three failures of ancient Israel directly paralleled the temptations endured by Christ in the wilderness because Jesus quoted exactly the same stories from the book of Deuteronomy in response to each of the three temptations he underwent. Jesus resisted the temptation to turn stones to bread by quoting Deuteronomy 8:3 – “man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord” – which comes from the section of Deuteronomy talking about the Israelites' sin regarding food. He resisted the temptation to tempt God by throwing himself from the temple pinnacle by quoting from Deuteronomy 6:16, in which Moses rebukes the Israelites for putting God to the test. Finally, he resisted the temptation to worship Satan by quoting from Deuteronomy 6:13-15 – the section faulting the Israelites for worshiping other gods.

Temptation Resisted

In all his temptations in the wilderness, the responses of Jesus – in his words and actions – were directly opposite those of ancient Israel in their failure to handle temptation. In fact, we see in these verses from Deuteronomy the very core of what Jesus' testing was all about – that the temptation to push God and his way aside and to choose our own desires instead lies at the heart of all temptation. We see this in the temptation to not trust God with our physical needs, the urge to tempt God regarding the fulfillment of our emotional desires, and the temptation to elevate something other than God in fulfilling our psychological desires. Falling to these

three types of temptation was a mistake that ancient Israel made repeatedly. But through his knowledge of God's word, Jesus did not make these mistakes and overcame Satan's deliberate and carefully calculated attempts to destroy the Son of God.

Jesus overcame temptation in the Judean wilderness not only by knowing and quoting precisely relevant scriptures, but also through his desire to please God more than himself. We see this underlying truth in the words of Jesus: "I seek not to please myself but him who sent me" (John 5:30). And it is clear that Jesus did not try to prove he was the Son of God by any of the ways Satan suggested – instead, he demonstrated his sonship in his knowledge of God's will and his desire to fulfill it.

If, with God's help, we are to successfully overcome temptation in our own lives, we too must know God's word and must want to please God more than ourselves. In following Christ, we too demonstrate our sonship in coming to know God's will and in our increasing desire to fulfill it.

6. WHAT THE BLIND MAN SAW

Three of the gospels record an event relevant to the sonship of Jesus that occurred just prior to his triumphal yet humble entry into Jerusalem and before his betrayal and crucifixion (Matthew 20:29-34; Mark 10:46-52; Luke 18:35-43). Luke's account of the incident is the most detailed and tells us that on the way to Jerusalem:

As he drew near to Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging. And hearing a crowd going by, he inquired what this meant. They told him, "Jesus of Nazareth is passing by." And he cried out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" And those who were in front rebuked him, telling him to be silent. But he cried out all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" And Jesus stopped and commanded him to be brought to him. And when he came near, he asked him, "What do you want me to do for you?" He said, "Lord, let me recover my sight." And Jesus said to him, "Recover your sight; your faith has made you well." And immediately he recovered his sight and followed Jesus, praising God (Luke 18:35-43 ESV).

To understand the story of the blind man, we must remember that by this point in Jesus' ministry crowds formed wherever he went. Messianic excitement and expectation were building by the day. Luke tells us that when Jesus arrived in Jericho one man, Zachaeus, had to climb a tree to catch a glimpse of him because of the crowds waiting to see Jesus as he passed by. This was only a day before Jesus entered Jerusalem with crowds spreading their garments in the road before the colt on which he rode, and the "multitude" calling out: "Blessed be the king who comes in the name of the Lord" (Luke 19:35-38).

The messianic fervor of the crowds was doubtless at its height at this point, as many of the Jews longed for a king who would

overthrow the brutal Roman occupation and give them their independence again. This was the king the crowds came out to see. Yet far from being caught up in the adulation of the crowds, Christ's compassion (Matthew 20:34) was such that he focused on a blind man who saw his real role at that time: a man who had "seen" in his blindness not a regally aloof king, but the compassionate human Son of God.

Sight and Insight

The blind man, whose name was Bartimaeus (Mark 10:46-52), saw what few others saw: the real nature of Christ's role in his first coming. Yet before leaving on this trip to Jerusalem Jesus had openly explained to the disciples that he would humbly submit to shame and death and that now was not his time to rule (Luke 18:31-33); but they didn't get it. Luke stresses this fact for us not once, but *three times in the same verse*: "The disciples did not understand any of this. Its meaning was hidden from them, and they did not know what he was talking about" (vs. 34). The disciples, like the people, expected a king. It was in Jericho – where he healed the blind man – "because he was near Jerusalem and the people thought that the kingdom of God was going to appear at once" (Luke 19:11-12) that Jesus gave the people the parable of the nobleman who went away to receive the kingdom and did not establish it until he returned later.

Given this background and the lack of understanding of the people and of the disciples themselves at this time, it is amazing that the blind man in the crowd saw the true nature of the Son of David. What the blind man "saw" with his mind was the basis of his faith. Jesus commented on the faith of this man and people like him when they appealed to his mercy. While Jesus frequently said to his disciples "You of little faith," the blind man and others like him were commended for theirs.

Perhaps the blind man and many of the others who were sick and disabled who came to Christ had been driven to their knees by their

illnesses and afflictions. Evidently they had developed a faith that the crowds and even the disciples had not. Whatever the case, it is clear that the blind man's faith enabled him to see something few others saw – an insight for which he was greatly rewarded.

Looking closely at Bartimaeus' example of faith, we can learn from other details of this story. Luke tells us that although the people told the blind beggar to keep quiet, he ignored them and continued to call on Jesus all the more fervently (Luke 18:39). How fervently? Matthew, in his account, uses the word *krazo* which means to shout very loudly or scream – a word that was often used of women in childbirth – that's how fervently Bartimaeus called. And we need to notice what he was shouting. Luke tells us that when he asked who was passing by, Bartimaeus was told it was "Jesus of Nazareth;" but he called out not to "Jesus of Nazareth," but to "Jesus Son of David" – he called out to the promised Son. He also called "Have mercy on me!" – the call of repentance and sincere asking for help. It was at this point that Jesus stopped and turned to him.

Alternative Realities

We might wonder what would have happened if Bartimaeus had not kept calling out, if he had not called so fervently, or if he had not called out what he did. Would Jesus not have heard him and, as a result, would nothing have happened to the blind man? We might see many lessons there for our own prayers – lessons of persistence, fervency and humility – things that Bartimaeus clearly exhibited as part of his faith.

PART TWO: SERVICE

Although the promised Messiah was destined to become a great king, one of the clearest hallmarks of his life was humble service. The first and last events we find recorded in the ministry of Jesus were, in fact, opportunities that he took to serve. Throughout his life, we find it was Christ's willingness and desire to serve others that guided what he said and did – a fact that shines through the gospel accounts continually. As his disciples we can find many lessons in the details of that service ...

7. HUMBLE SERVANT OR MIGHTY KING?

As we study the Old Testament it is sometimes easy to become confused regarding prophecies which speak of the promised Messiah. For example, in Isaiah 53:2 we read: “He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.” However, when we turn to the book of Psalms we find a seemingly conflicting statement with clearly messianic significance: “You are the most excellent of men and your lips have been anointed with grace, since God has blessed you forever... clothe yourself with splendor and majesty” (Psalm 45:2-3).

Resolving the Conflict

A number of explanations have been put forward for this apparent contradiction of majesty or no majesty, beauty or no beauty – such as the idea that these verses are speaking of different aspects of the Messiah’s appearance and Isaiah was speaking of “outward beauty,” while Psalm 45 speaks of “inward beauty.” That this is not the case can be seen by looking at the context of the verses surrounding Psalm 45:2-3 which are clearly speaking of the external appearance and attributes of the Messiah.

But in this and in similar scriptures, the apparent conflict is easily resolved when we separate the first coming of the Messiah from the second coming. The context of Isaiah 53 is clearly one of human life that fits the physical life of Christ: “he was pierced for our transgressions” (Isaiah 53:5; etc.). Isaiah was speaking of the physical appearance of the Messiah which also matches what we know from the gospels. We see that Jesus was able to slip through the crowds and avoid arrest on several occasions, indicating that he was probably of ordinary appearance and certainly did not stand out as a person of noticeable physical stature or beauty.

On the other hand, when we look at the context of Psalm 45, it has reference to the Messiah's coming as a conquering king with great majesty and with the nations falling beneath his feet (Psalm 45:4-5). While this description clearly does not fit the first coming of Jesus Christ, it certainly fits the second coming, as we see in the book of Revelation:

“I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and wages war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns ... The armies of heaven were following him ... Coming out of his mouth is a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations ... On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: king of kings and lord of lords” (Revelation 19:11-16).

When we also compare the description of the “bride” of Christ in Revelation 19:7 with that of the bride of the king in Psalm 45:9-15, we see a further connection between the king and the Messiah.

Applying the Principle

When we are careful to distinguish the humble servant role of the Messiah's first coming from his role as mighty king at his second coming, the apparent conflicts are resolved. Simple as this principle is, it can resolve many seeming difficulties as we read prophetic scriptures in the Bible.

We saw this principle in the birth of the One who was to be both the Lamb and the Shepherd, and we find it throughout the gospels which speak of Jesus in both his initial, humble, human roles and his later, greater, divine roles – as both the human servant and the future Divine King, the human who was judged by men and the future Divine Judge who will judge mankind (Matthew 25:32; etc.). In every case, at his first coming Jesus fulfilled the lesser role, and at his second coming he will fulfill the greater, opposite, role.

And there is a lesson in this for us. As we read the gospel accounts and reflect on the life of Jesus, we should look carefully at how he carried out the lesser, more humble roles of service he fulfilled. One of the reasons they are recorded in the gospels is so that our present lives may be modeled on his – just as he promises to eventually share his greater roles of leadership with us if we are faithful in the lesser roles of service we are given now (Luke 16:10).

8. WHAT SHEPHERDS DO

“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters... Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me” (Psalm 23:1-4 ESV).

It’s hard for modern Christians not to think of Psalm 23 when the word “shepherd” comes to mind. But that beautiful psalm reflects only some of the aspects of shepherding. Leading the sheep to pasture – providing for them – and leading them through the valley of darkness – protecting them – are certainly vital aspects of the job, but as a shepherd himself, David knew that there was more to the job than just feeding and protecting the sheep.

We find additional insights into the role of the shepherd in another of David’s psalms. Look, for example, at this verse in Psalm 28: “Save your people and bless your inheritance; be their shepherd and carry them forever” (Psalm 28:9). In the first half of this single verse we see the same aspects of protecting the sheep and providing for them, and in the second half David also mentions guiding the sheep (the Hebrew *urom* is a verb meaning to shepherd or guide, not to be a shepherd) and carrying them.

In this short but remarkable verse, David captures perhaps all the major aspects of the shepherd’s role in four verbs: to protect the sheep from death, to supply their needs, to guide them, and finally, to rescue and carry them when they are weak or injured and need the shepherd’s strength in addition to their own.

This picture meshes well with Christ’s role as shepherd, which we see in the prophecy quoted by Matthew: “But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah ... out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel” (Matthew 2:6). Jesus himself elaborated on the same four aspects of that role mentioned by David in Psalm 28. As the prophesied shepherd, Christ did all these things for his people:

- Protected them: “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (John 10:11).
- Provided for their needs: “I am the gate for the sheep ... whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture” (John 10:7-9).
- Guided them: “When Jesus ... saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things” (Mark 6:34).
- Rescued them: “Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn’t he... go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home” (Luke 15:4-6).

The people of ancient Israel in David’s day and those of Judea in Christ’s day knew well that these things were all involved in being a shepherd. That’s why Christ used that analogy often, and why his hearers may have understood more fully than we sometimes do what it means that the Lord is our shepherd. They knew, as we should come to know also, that the flock need never doubt that the shepherd will always do these things for the sheep – protecting, providing, guiding and rescuing. It’s what shepherds do. And if we are following the greatest Shepherd, it’s what we will be doing for those we serve as we have opportunity.

9. A SIGN OF SERVICE

The story of the first miracle of Jesus as it is told in the Gospel of John is a fascinating one. John tells us that the changing of water into wine at a wedding in Galilee (John 2:1-11) was the first of the signs through which the identity of Jesus was revealed (vs. 11). But John's account shows that this was more than simply one of a number of miraculous signs Jesus would perform in his ministry.

The information John gives us indicates that Mary, the mother of Jesus, was helping relatives or friends with the work of the wedding feast (she is mentioned separately from Jesus and his disciples who were invited to the wedding), and that as a result Mary knew when the hosts had run out of wine. This is when Mary asked for Jesus' help:

When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, "They have no more wine." ... and said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you" (John 2:3, 5).

The fact that Mary could command the household servants shows that she was not just a guest, but involved in the organization of the wedding feast. John's account continues by telling us that Jesus had the servants fill large jars of water and that the water was then miraculously turned into wine.

We might think that a wedding feast with a great many people present was a good setting for the first miraculous sign given by Jesus, but his own words make it clear that this was not his plan. When asked to help with the situation Jesus exclaimed "Woman, why do you involve me? ... My hour has not yet come" (vs. 4). Jesus' reply makes it clear that this was not a planned miracle – it was not a thought-out and prepared-for sign – and as such we must consider it separately from many of the miraculous signs Jesus was to give later.

In complying with his mother's request for his help, Jesus was able to use the power at his disposal as a sign of his true identity, but we must not lose sight of the fact that he complied not out of any urgent need to identify himself, to save someone's life, or to help someone in great distress – the usual reasons for his miracles. He helped simply because he was asked. Jesus used the miracle as a sign, but it was not given as a sign – rather it was given as an act of service. It was a sign of service.

When Serving Comes First

There is certainly a lesson in this for us. Jesus' response at the wedding in Cana teaches us that if we are to follow him successfully, we must learn to think as he did – to think outside of what we might call the “service box.” We know there are many different kinds of Christian service, as Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 12:5. Recognizing this, it is common for people to think of themselves as being servants in a particular context – usually where we feel our gifts are. (One need only look at a few Christian Twitter profiles to see this mindset of “serves in this organization” or “serves at that church”). But the first miracle of Jesus showed that we must always be willing to accept the need for service wherever we may find it – even if it might seem to conflict with our preconceived ideas of what our personal calling is.

We should notice that in this situation Jesus did not politely decline by saying “I was sent to preach” or “I have come to save those who are lost” (which he did stress on other occasions, as we will see), but simply that his time for miraculous deeds had not yet arrived (vs. 4). Even so, Jesus allowed himself to comply with his mother's request because the request had been made. His first miracle teaches us that we must never look at our personal Christian service as being only an expression of the gifts we were given. The New Testament clearly shows that while our gifts are preassigned, our opportunities for service are not!

10. WHAT DO YOU SEE?

Have you ever noticed, when reading the gospels, how often we are told that Jesus noticed something or saw something? We are frequently told that he observed those around him: “Seeing the woman...,” “seeing the man...,” “seeing the people...,” “seeing their faith...,”— even noticing small details of people’s expressions: “seeing he had become sad...” (Luke 18:23).

It is clear that Jesus was observant, and although his eyes took in no more than those of others, it is clear that rather than just looking at people Jesus saw them in a way that others did not – it is as if he thought about everyone he saw. Do we have that kind of focus, or do we go through each day so busy and absorbed in our own lives that we are conscious of others, but not clearly seeing them as we might? The truth is, we cannot love others without looking – seeing – comprehending. Perhaps part of the answer is that if we see ourselves as the servants of others, we will see them differently – as Christ did.

The apostle Paul put it this way: “In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who ... made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant...” (Philippians 2:5-7). Think of an attentive waiter in a fine restaurant or a rich person’s personal servant. A servant certainly watches those he is responsible for by staying aware and looking out for any need that may occur. And a person’s servant doesn’t just stop at noticing the need – the servant obviously acts swiftly to take care of it.

That’s what the gospels show was the natural corollary of Jesus seeing people the way he did – he didn’t stop at seeing them, he immediately responded to what he saw: “seeing the woman he said ...,” “seeing their faith he [healed]...,” “seeing the crowd he [asked] ‘Where are we to buy bread, so that these people may eat?’” (John 6:5 ESV). Jesus saw and then acted with compassion according to what he saw. So seeing people in a focused way was only the first

half of what he accomplished with his observant attitude. Always, the seeing led to acting in some manner in order to help those who needed help.

We too can accomplish so much more when we train our minds to really see the people around us, to focus on them and to ask ourselves what they need and if there is a way we can serve them. It's not just about physical things; it's just as much about seeing people's emotional and spiritual needs. But it takes a kind of awakening of the eyes and the mind to see like that – we won't do it unless we think about doing it. Perhaps that's part of what the prophet Isaiah meant when he wrote: "Then the eyes of those who see will no longer be closed" (Isaiah 32:3). He wasn't talking about the blind, but those with sight coming to really see. That may primarily mean coming to see spiritual truth, of course, but it can also mean coming to see others as we should see them – through the eyes of a servant.

11. NOT JUST A FACE IN THE CROWD

“When Jesus ... saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick” (Matthew 14:14).

It’s easy to read right over simple verses like this in the New Testament and not notice things.

First, it’s easy to miss what is actually said – that Jesus didn’t just have compassion on the sick in the multitude, he had compassion on the whole crowd, which led to his intervening wherever there was a need.

That means that Jesus didn’t just see and have compassion on the noticeable members of the crowd – the blind, the lame and those clearly afflicted with diseases and problems. It means he had compassion on the ones who were helping carry the lame, lead the blind and support the weak. It means he had compassion on the ones we might not notice as readily in a crowd – the shy, the grieving, the lonely, and the discouraged.

Second, it’s easy – of course – not to see what’s not said. When we read the accounts of Jesus’ works, we tend to read them in a vacuum; but we have to remember how much the gospel writers are summarizing each incident. When Jesus had compassion on the crowds, we get only the highlights of the healings – a kind of gospel triage in which the most important healings and significant signs were recorded. But in having compassion on the crowds – not just the sick in the crowds – would Jesus not have noticed people with less obvious problems and desired to help them, also?

Surely Jesus saw the loneliness in the eyes of some and, having compassion, offered them a warm and accepting smile. Surely he saw the discouragement in the faces of others (Luke 18:24) and offered a few words of encouragement. In every case in the New Testament where we are told Jesus had compassion on people, he followed it with action; and having compassion on the crowds

doubtless meant he interacted with and helped many more than the few people on whom he performed miracles of healing.

Perhaps we may feel we do not interact with crowds in the same way, but the totality of people we see and pass by as well as those we actually meet and with whom we interact in a day is often a small crowd, and for some of us a large one. If we are followers of Jesus, do we have compassion on that daily “crowd”? Do we seek to encourage and to smile, to check that people are all right? These may seem like small things and may seem hard to do in our overcrowded and impersonal world. But following in Christ’s footsteps means doing the things he did to the extent we can.

We know that God pays attention and knows the hairs on our heads, though we don’t tend to think of that in the perspective of the teeming world of billions in which we live. But God does see every face in the crowd, and in his physical life the Son of God doubtless did his best to do so, also. We are not just a face in the crowd to God, and no one in the crowd should be just a face to us.

12. CAESAR AND THE SERVANT

A number of ancient historians recorded the famous words of Julius Caesar “*Veni, vidi, vici*” – “I came, I saw, I conquered” – which typified the great Roman general’s career and life. Caesar’s achievements ultimately formed the foundation of the vast Roman Empire that controlled not only the land of Judea, but also a good part of the known world at that time.

If we look at the life of Jesus of Nazareth, who instituted a far greater kingdom – the Kingdom of God – do we find any parallel saying or expression that typifies the life and achievements of the Messiah in his human life? The answer is perhaps clearer than you may have realized.

I Have Come to ...

Time and again during his ministry Jesus told his disciples and those who heard him “I have come to ...” And then he added a specific task that he would accomplish. Notice an example from each of the gospels where Jesus said he had come to do certain things: “I have come ...

- to fulfill [the law]” (Matthew 5:17).
- so I can preach” (Mark 1:38).
- to call ... sinners to repentance” (Luke 5:32).
- to bear witness to the truth” (John 18:37 ESV).

When we look at these and other “I have come to ...” statements of Christ, we realize something regarding the range of tasks he would accomplish. All of these things involved action and are a far cry from the passive person Jesus is often believed to have been.

This active involvement is particularly clear in the metaphorical reasons he stated for his coming: “I have come ...

- to bring a sword” (Matthew 10:34).
- to bring fire on the earth” (Luke 12:49).

Whenever Jesus spoke literally of his purposes and what he would achieve, we find the same active approach. But Christ’s accomplishments were not simply actions that would elevate himself – they were, of course, for the good of others: “I have come ...

- to save [men’s lives]” (Luke 9:56 NKJV).
- that they may have life, and may have it more abundantly” (John 10:10 NKJV).

Ultimately, these purposes and accomplishments can be seen in Jesus’ statement: “I have come down from heaven ... to do the will of him that sent me” (John 6:38-39). That will can be summarized in only two words: “I have come ...

- to serve” (Matthew 20:28).

Caesar’s self-elevating “I came, I saw, I conquered” pales into insignificance compared to the future coming of Christ the King (Revelation 11:15). But even at the time of his first coming, under the shadow of self-glorying emperors, the Son of God showed that true glory is not to be found in self-elevation and self-service, but in the elevation of God’s purposes and the service of others. Caesar’s so-called immortal summary “I came, I saw, I conquered” is surpassed in the eternal significance of what would be a fitting summary for the life of Christ: “I came, I saw, I served.”

The lesson for us is obvious. Physical accomplishment is right and good. In his work as a human carpenter, Jesus of Nazareth doubtless accomplished many things that we are never told. Doubtless his work was of the finest quality. But at the end of our lives, our accomplishments are never as important as our service.

PART THREE: SIGNS

The miracles of Jesus are among the most distinctive aspects of his ministry, and we are all familiar with those stories from the gospels. Yet the reasons for many of the miracles are not always obvious. Some were primarily proofs of Jesus' Messiahship, but others – where he instructed the people he helped not to tell anyone – seem not to have been. As we focus on the details of the stories themselves, we find there were many reasons for the miracles and signs that Jesus performed, as well as lessons in them for us ...

13. HE COULD DO NO MIRACLES THERE

Mark's Gospel records the famous statement of Jesus near the beginning of his ministry that "A prophet is not without honor except in his own town, among his relatives and in his own home" (Mark 6:4). These words were spoken in a context which explains them, but which may seem puzzling: "He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them" (Mark 6:5).

Reading these words, "He could not do any miracles there," we might wonder if Mark meant that Jesus was unable to do miracles in his home area. That is not the case, as we will soon see, but there are lessons to be learned in the reason for Jesus' lack of miracles in his own home town.

Power without Limits

We should first understand that the power of Christ was not dependent upon man in any way and could not be limited by people (John 1:1-4). God can perform miracles in any circumstance, whether the onlookers believe or not, and Jesus sometimes chided the people around him for their lack of faith when he did perform miracles. So Mark must mean something other than that Jesus was unable to do the miraculous works he would have normally done. Remember, Mark does say Jesus performed some healings, and Matthew's account confirms that he "did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith" (Matthew 13:58).

The use of "He could not do any miracles there" in Mark can be understood in the same way that we use the expression "cannot" in situations where we should not, or feel constrained not to, do something. For example, if we are encouraged by someone to do something we know is wrong, we might say "I can't do that" – meaning that we are constrained by our beliefs or moral obligations not to do it. The Greek expression used in Mark 6:5, *ouk edunato* "he could not," is often used in the same way. It appears, for example, in Jesus' parable of the neighbor who is invited to a feast but says "I just got married so I can't [*ou dunatai*] come" (Luke

14:20). It is not that the invited man was physically unable to attend – just that he felt constrained not to do so.

Potential Power

The Son of God could certainly have performed many miracles in his home area had he chosen to do so, but he clearly felt constrained by the unbelief of the people there. Remember that the miracles Jesus performed were not just displays of power – they were often signs of his divine authority and a witness to people to repent and obey God. Jesus knew the people in his home town of Nazareth were not willing to accept his message at that time, and they would be judged more severely if they were given signs but still refused to obey God (Matthew 11:21, etc.). Doubtless it was with sorrow that Jesus withheld the power he could have used to help the people he knew in his home area.

But there may be an important lesson in this story for us personally. Perhaps there are times when God would be pleased to perform certain things in our own lives, but chooses not to do them because we lack the faith to receive them or we are not ready for the responsibility such things would bring. In fact, the story of Jesus' home area is a good reminder that this is the purpose of continuing spiritual growth – the more we grow, the less God constrains himself in what he can accomplish in and through us.

14. THE GENTILE HEALINGS

Three of the gospels tell how Jesus spoke in the synagogue in his home town of Nazareth, but was rejected by the people there. It is clear that the message Jesus took to these people was not welcomed by the Nazarenes, but his response to their rejection particularly enraged them. Luke tells us that as a result of the rejection by his own neighbors, Jesus said:

“Truly I tell you ... no prophet is accepted in his hometown. I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah’s time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed—only Naaman the Syrian” (Luke 4: 24-27).

When they heard this, the Nazarenes’ passive rejection turned to active rage, and they attempted to kill Jesus because he had said that God had chosen to send his servant Elijah to a widow in Sidon (a non-Jewish area) and had Elisha heal Naaman (another non-Jewish person) over people of Judah with the same problems.

It is easy to continue reading the gospel accounts without noticing the striking parallels between the examples Jesus gave and two of his own miracles in clearly similar circumstances. First, Matthew 15 and Mark 7 tell how Jesus travelled to the Phoenician area of Tyre and Sidon and there healed the daughter of a Syrophenician woman, just as Elijah had travelled to Phoenicia and raised up the son of a widow in the city of Sidon (1 Kings 17). In Luke 7 and Matthew 8, we find that Jesus also healed the servant of the Roman centurion at Capernaum. There it is the servant of the military leader who is healed rather than the military leader himself (as was the case in Elisha’s healing of Naaman the Syrian general – 2 Kings 5), but the parallels between the stories are clear.

Naaman was an officer of Israel’s enemy Syria just as the centurion was an officer of Judea’s enemy Rome – both were not only Gentiles, but also of the same hated profession. Both widows were Gentiles of Phoenicia – regarded by the Jews as religiously

and socially inferior in terms of both gender and ethnicity. There are further similarities: Naaman was a highly valued servant of the King of Syria who is told he need not go all the way to the prophet's house. In the centurion's case, the servant is said to be highly valued by his master, and the centurion sends word that Jesus need not go all the way to his house. Both the individuals involved in these two healings by Jesus – the only clearly Gentile individuals recorded as being healed by him – are directly parallel to the Old Testament examples he had cited earlier in Nazareth.

Where Faith Grows

But there is also a difference in the stories. In the Old Testament examples, both the widow of Sidon and Naaman the Syrian general showed an initial lack of faith – though they did make full expressions of belief after they were healed. In the case of the Syrophenician woman and the Roman centurion helped by Christ, Jesus commented specifically on the great faith these two individuals already had. While the Old Testament examples show God's concern for even despised individuals who were not of his people, the New Testament examples show not only Christ's concern for these same types of rejected individuals, but also their notable faith.

If the people of Nazareth were offended at Jesus' stress on the faith of the Gentiles helped by Elijah and Elisha, they would doubtless have been even more incensed at Jesus praising the Gentiles he himself helped as having greater faith than the Jews of that place and time (Luke 7:9). And there is perhaps a lesson for all of us in these parallel miracles. We understand that it was difficult for the ancient Jews to accept the idea that the Gentiles might actually have faith in God, but do we carry a similar bias in our own minds against those of other denominations or faith groups? Perhaps we should remember that Jesus chose to teach a lesson by replicating two great miracles of the Hebrew Scriptures – by helping Gentiles whose faith was greater than many of those who were sure they were of the “true” faith. We must always remember that God honors trust in him wherever he finds it, and perhaps that is a lesson for us, too.

15. DO YOU WANT TO BE WELL?

The Gospel of John gives detailed accounts of a number of the healings performed by Jesus, and in one of them – in John 5 – we find that Jesus asked a question which seems odd if we think about it.

John records the healing by Jesus of a disabled man at the pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem, a pool called in Aramaic *beth hesda* or “House of Mercy,” probably because of the healing associated with its waters. Many sick and disabled individuals came to this area and literally lived by the sides of the pool waiting for an opportunity to be healed by the water’s occasional, but seemingly miraculous action.

It was one such individual – a man lame in his feet for a great many years – whom Jesus asked, “Do you want to get well?” (John 5:6). If we simply continue the story from that point, we see the man affirmed his desire by explaining why he had not been healed after many years – because of his lameness he was never able to get to the waters quickly enough when the transient healing conditions occurred.

But if we go back to Jesus’ question, it bears thinking about. On the surface, it doesn’t make a lot of sense. If you were very ill and I came to see you and said “Do you want to get well?” you might think I was being sarcastic, exhibiting a strange sense of humor, or at the very least, had a poor bedside manner. Obviously, when Jesus asked the question, none of these things applied. So what did he mean?

The Difficulty of Change

We should remember that the man Jesus healed was not alone at the pool of Bethesda. A great many sick and handicapped individuals were there. For some of these people their illness or disability had likely become a means of earning a living by way of the alms of passers-by. Their illnesses had perhaps become a way of life which they ultimately saw as being not as bad as what some people face. They were not starving and did not even have to work, though naturally, their illnesses may have precluded many or most of these unfortunate people from working. But the point is that, for

many, their illnesses had become a lifestyle to which they had become accustomed (Jeremiah 10:19) and perhaps in some cases with which they were even reasonably comfortable. This is not in any way to try to gloss over the illnesses or deny the physical hardships these people may have suffered; but perhaps there is an answer to Jesus' question.

Keep in mind that in most cases people who had heard about his healings came to Jesus and asked for help – Jesus knew they wanted to get well. In this instance it was a Sabbath and it appears that Jesus purposely went to an area where he knew there would be a number of ill and disabled individuals in order to choose someone to heal as an example that it is not wrong to do healing and helping work on the Sabbath day (John 5:8-10, 16). Now look at this from the perspective of human psychology. Some of the people at the pool of Bethesda, including the man Jesus healed, had been there for many years. Their lives may well have been bleak and seemingly hopeless. But in those circumstances the human mind often tries at least to grasp on to what it can. Perhaps some of these people had become resigned to the fact that this was their life, and that it could perhaps have been worse. Few people gladly embrace drastic change in their lives – sometimes not even from bad situations.

Wanting to Be Well

Could this possibly have been the reason Jesus asked the man if he wanted to get well? Jesus did not go around asking all the sick at the pool this question. What drew him to this man and caused him to ask a seemingly redundant question? Could it be that Jesus could read the hearts of these people, or was guided by God to do so, and could it be that this man was unusual in his group – a man who did fervently want to be well? If Jesus had compassion on this individual for this very reason, perhaps his question was as much for his disciples' hearing, and for ours, as for the hearing of the man himself. Perhaps Jesus was not only acknowledging that not everyone at the pool deeply wanted to be well - and let his question single out this individual who truly did – but also he was asking a question that applies to all of us.

The moral of this story is larger than that small pool in Bethesda, and even larger than physical sickness. Before God calls us, we live in spiritual sickness. We are spiritually blind, deaf and lame. Due to

the results of sin our lives may be bleak indeed, yet we still cling to them, often justifying the causes and effects of which we are victims, sometimes longing for something better, yet all too often comfortable in our spiritual sickness or at least accepting of it. When God calls us, he gives us the opportunity to be free from our spiritual illnesses and disabilities, but that opportunity is based on an acceptance of real change in our lives – as Jesus told the lame man: “See, you are well! Sin no more” (John 5:14 ESV). That is a huge change for our human minds and when the call comes, God does not just reach down and heal us from sin. He asks us, in effect, “Do you want to get well?” – then we must confirm that we do. We must choose the responsibility as well as the gift.

Just as the man healed of his physical ailment at Bethesda had to choose to begin a new life with responsibilities and work that had not been there before, so we have to count the cost and make the decision that we want to start a new life of spiritual health. Then, just as Jesus told the man he healed, we must act to keep sin out of our lives in order to stay spiritually healthy and not revert to spiritual sickness.

That is doubtless why Jesus asked the lame man if he wanted to be well – he wanted to ascertain that the man would be receptive to his message of the need to change from that point onwards, that he would be willing to do what was necessary for the miracle to continue. The question was originally given to that one individual, but it was recorded for our benefit. It’s a question that applies to all of us as much as it did to the man at the pool of Bethesda!

16. WHY THE HEALINGS WITH MUD AND SPIT?

Three accounts in the New Testament tell us how, on different occasions, Jesus healed individuals in a very strange way. In the first case, near Decapolis Jesus healed a man who was deaf and near-mute by putting his fingers into the man's ears, then spitting and touching the man's tongue (Mark 7:31-37). Later, in Bethsaida, he healed a blind man by spitting on the man's eyes and putting his hands on him (Mark 8:22-26). On another occasion, in Jerusalem Jesus healed a man born blind by spitting on the ground, making mud with the saliva, and putting it on the man's eyes (John 9:6).

Numerous suggestions have been made to explain why Jesus utilized such strange actions in the course of these healings. Perhaps the most common explanation is that he was "recreating" the person's hearing or sight using mud as a symbol of the original creation of man from the "dust of the earth" (Genesis 2:7). This might account for the possible reference to creation made by those who witnessed the miracle recorded in John: "Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a man born blind" (John 9:32 ESV). But this may be no more than an expression (Acts 3:21, etc.), and the idea does not explain the use of saliva alone in the two accounts that do not mention mud.

Another explanation is that just as he rejected human religious traditions in other cases, Jesus used mud in direct contradiction of Jewish traditions that prohibited healing on the Sabbath by mixing mud with spittle. This idea is based on the fact that the Mishnah specifically states "To heal a blind man on the Sabbath it is prohibited to inject wine in his eyes. It is also prohibited to make mud with spittle and smear it on his eyes" (Shabbat 108:20), but apart from the fact that, again, only one of the three recorded miracles involved making mud, the Mishnah dates to after the time of Jesus. It is even possible that the prohibition against healing with mud and spittle came about as a result of Christ's miracle.

A better understanding of these miracles is gained by considering the evidence we find in the book of John. It is important to remember that John's Gospel does not simply follow the pattern of the other three gospels which were written much earlier. Instead,

John – who doubtless had seen the other gospels – went to lengths to supplement their accounts with additional information that he remembered, but which the other gospels did not include.

Keeping this in mind, it is important to note the context of John's account. In John chapter 8 the apostle carefully records an extended argument between Jesus and the Jews who opposed him. Throughout this account we see that Jesus repeatedly stressed his Sonship and relationship with the Father: "Then they asked him, "Where is your father?" "You do not know me or my Father," Jesus replied. "If you knew me, you would know my Father also" (John 8:19), "They did not understand that he was telling them about his Father" (John 8:27, etc.). At one point in this chapter the Jews even made a thinly veiled accusation against Jesus "...We are not illegitimate children..." (John 8:41), and Jesus' response was to stress, once again, his true Sonship: "... If God were your Father, you would love me, for I have come here from God. I have not come on my own; God sent me ... My Father, whom you claim as your God, is the one who glorifies me" (John 8:42, 54).

Beliefs of the Time

Now, getting back to the mud and spit miracles, we should note that saliva was widely believed to have healing properties in the ancient world. For example, the classical writers Celsus, Galen, and Pliny all mention its medicinal properties – especially the saliva of distinguished persons – and it is even said that the Emperor Vespasian was urged to spit in the eyes of a blind man in order to heal him. So it is perhaps not surprising that the Jews of the First Century seem to have had a tradition that the saliva of a legitimate, firstborn heir could have healing properties against several infirmities – including blindness (Talmud, Bava Batra 126b).

So given the widespread beliefs in its medicinal properties, it is possible that Jesus used saliva in some of his healings as a physical sign that he was healing the person involved. But the background of Jesus' legitimacy and Sonship found throughout John chapter 8 suggests that it was this issue that was the specific context for the healing in John 9 – and perhaps the other, related situations. By using saliva in these healings, Jesus demonstrated not only his ability to perform miracles, but also that he was indeed a legitimate and firstborn son – the Firstborn Son of God.

17. NOTHING LOST

Those who try to find errors in the Bible sometimes claim that similar-sounding stories – such as the miracles of the feeding of the five thousand and of the feeding of four thousand by Jesus – are examples of varying traditions where no one knew exactly what had happened. But the two stories of the miracles of feeding the crowds provide a good example of the fallacy in such thinking and how it completely misses the underlying message the Bible is giving us.

The “feeding of the five thousand” is mentioned in all four gospels (Matthew 14:13-21; Mark 6:31-44; Luke 9:10-17; and John 6:5-15). The story tells us that Jesus fed the hungry crowd that followed him by dividing five loaves of bread and two fish. After the miraculous feeding was completed, it is recorded that the disciples collected twelve baskets full of broken pieces that were left over. The “feeding of the four thousand” is recounted in the gospels of Mark and Matthew (Matthew 15:32-38 and Mark 8:1-9) and tells us that seven loaves and several fish were divided among a crowd. After this miracle the disciples picked up seven basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over.

Those who claim these are garbled accounts of the same story miss an essential piece of information. Mark and John tell us that the first miracle occurred on the western – Jewish – side of the Sea of Galilee and that Jesus and the disciples then crossed over to the eastern – Gentile – side of Galilee where the second miracle was performed.

The Other Side of the Sea

The people of the primarily Gentile Decapolis on the eastern side of the Sea of Galilee were notorious to the Jews for their pagan beliefs and practices (Mark 5:11; etc.). It is clear, for example, that these people kept swine (Mark 5:13) and doubtless ate and sacrificed them – both abominations in biblical Jewish culture (see Isaiah 65:3-4; 66:3). Both the Jewish Talmud and some of the Christian church fathers record the tradition that the pagan inhabitants of that area were believed to be the descendants of the seven ancient Canaanite nations driven out of the Promised Land in the time of Joshua (Joshua 3:10; Acts 13:19). Nevertheless, Matthew and Mark

both make it clear that Jesus went to these people, preached to them and compassionately healed their sick. His miracles on Galilee's far side show God's desire to also include the people of that region in his outreaching mercy.

Just as we are told that twelve baskets of leftover food were picked up on the western side of Galilee (doubtless suggesting the spiritual food available for all the twelve tribes of Israel), so seven baskets of food were picked up on the eastern side of Galilee (doubtless symbolizing the seven groups of people of the Gentile Decapolis). So a careful reading of the gospel narratives shows that the details of the two similar miracles were likely not garbled, but completely meaningful in what they individually symbolized.

We can perhaps find a lesson of great personal value in these stories also. In his account of the feeding of the five thousand with the bread and fish, the apostle John tells us:

Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish. When they had all had enough to eat, he said to his disciples, "Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted." So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten (John 6:11-13).

Notice also that Christ's command to gather up the remaining pieces of bread included the careful instruction "let nothing be wasted" or, as we might say today "don't lose any of it!" Clearly, there was no shortage of food, so the stress on not losing any of the fragments of food must have had another reason behind it. In fact, soon afterward Jesus began to teach the people a spiritual lesson based on what they had seen in the miraculous feeding.

Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst. But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe... All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out... *And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day*" (John 6:35-39 ESV, emphasis added).

Living Lessons

First, Christ stressed that he is the Bread of Life and that those in him become, as it were, pieces or crumbs of that same bread. But while Jesus could have just verbally stressed the idea that "... your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish" (Matthew 18:14), this point was apparently important enough that he drove it home by means of these miracles which were not only signs of Jesus' messianic identity (John 6:14), but also living lessons in God's intent to save all of his human family.

We may know intellectually that our Father is not willing that anyone be lost, but in our times of failure or discouragement we should remember the extent to which Christ made that point for us. The work of picking up twelve, then later seven more baskets of small fragments of food must have made a deep impression on the disciples. We too can be sure that if we had helped to pick up nineteen baskets of bread crumbs, the point that God does not want to lose even the least of us would be a lesson we doubtless would never forget.

18. THE LAST MIRACLE

Unlike Jesus' first miracle when he changed many large jars of water into wine, or the succeeding miracles and signs he performed such as the feeding of the huge crowds that followed him, his last miracle may seem small by comparison; yet it is just as indicative of his nature as any of the acts of compassion carried out during his ministry. In some ways, this small miracle may show his nature even more than the others.

All the gospels describe the arrest of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane before his crucifixion, and all of them describe the fact that in the tense moments of the arrest one of Jesus' followers drew a sword and struck a servant of the high priest, a man named Malchus, severing his ear. John's Gospel reveals that it was the impetuous Peter who did this, and who was stopped from further violence by Jesus (John 18:10).

It is unlikely that Peter was aiming specifically at the servant's ear, and the injury was probably sustained when Peter swung the sword at the man's head and Malchus ducked – narrowly avoiding death, but sustaining the loss or partial loss of his ear.

It would not be surprising if this non-life-threatening injury had been ignored in the turmoil that must have accompanied Jesus' arrest, but Luke adds a detail in this regard which none of the other gospel writers has. Luke tells us that Jesus "...touched the man's ear and healed him" (Luke 22:51).

Miracles Have Contexts

We must see this miracle in context. Jesus knew the terrible death that awaited him and had only just finished the agonizing prayer in which his sweat was "like drops of blood" (Luke 22:44). When the soldiers and officers of the high priest came upon him in the dark and tumult of the arrest, Jesus' mind must have been full of what was happening and what was about to happen to him. Humanly, anyone in this situation would hardly be thinking about one of the arresting group being hurt in the disturbance.

Yet the mind of Christ was such that even within that dark and emotionally tumultuous night, despite the shouting, running and confusion that clearly ensued, Jesus noticed the one who had been

injured, focused on that and sought the man out, using his last miracle to help an enemy before he chose to forgo any further use of the divine power at his disposal in order to endure the things he knew he must suffer.

The many miracles and signs wrought by Jesus during his human ministry showed his compassion and care for others, but these were done in times of relative quiet and security. In Jesus' last miracle, even as he was led away to his death, he still showed the love that placed his own needs, his own self, not first, but last.

The miracle of Malchus is one which teaches all of us a lesson. To truly walk in the footsteps of the One we follow we must remember that important opportunities to help others may occur when it is natural for our minds to be on our own problems rather than on the problems of others. But at times like that, if we can still keep others foremost in our minds, we too can serve with the same spirit that guided the last miracle of Jesus.

PART FOUR: SERMONS

Even more characteristically associated with the life of Jesus than the miracles he performed, his teachings form the very basis of the Christian faith. Some of these teachings were given in the course of everyday life, but the majority that have been preserved for us were given in the form of sermons (or “discourses” as theologians often call them) which included announcements, stories, parables, and discussions of the law. These sermons were delivered in both formal settings such as synagogues and informal ones such as open mountainsides, but all contain details that can help us better understand the message of Jesus ...

19. WHAT JESUS SAID

Have you ever wondered what it must have been like to have had the opportunity to listen to Jesus as he preached and taught? It is clear from the size of the crowds he drew that people loved to listen to him, but did he repeat the same sermon in different locations, or did he always have something new to talk about? What was the focus of his teaching? Was it always the same?

We can get some idea of what Jesus spoke about from the four gospels, of course, but even the gospel writers admit that they only scratched the surface in recording what they did. John tells us: “Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written” (John 21:25). While John speaks specifically of Jesus’ deeds, the same could doubtless be said of the words Christ spoke.

But we can certainly get a good idea of what Jesus preached about from the gospels. If we try to count the verses on specific subjects, the exact results depend, of course, on which translation we use. If we use the New International Version as an example and add up the verses on the different subjects Jesus spoke on, we come up with some interesting facts.

Counting Verses

Actually, the New International Version has done some of the work for us. The NIV “QuickView Bible” includes an infographic that summarizes some of the teachings of Jesus as they were recorded in the gospels. According to this list, there are 717 verses in the NIV New Testament on the subject of “Spiritual Life” in the words of Jesus, but this is so broad as to not be very helpful – most of what Jesus spoke about had some relation to spiritual life! It’s more illuminating to realize, as the graphic also shows, that the next largest category of Jesus’ teaching (with 323 verses) was the “Last days and Judgment.” That’s something to think about in itself. Next is “Sin and Forgiveness” (198 verses) – again worth thinking about – and the “Kingdom of God” (123 verses).

Some of the smaller categories are interesting, too. The NIV statistics show that Jesus spoke of his own divinity in only 23

verses, though we should remember these words were spoken mainly to his disciples, privately, rather than in his public teaching. Forty-four verses show Jesus speaking about marriage and the family, and these were often answering questions people brought to him rather than being the subject of sermons – and that is actually fewer verses than on the subject of money and treasure (52 verses).

But this last fact should alert us to something. A great many of those verses on money and treasure were part of parables speaking of the kingdom of God – so those verses could be added to that category. In a similar manner, a great many of the 323 verses that show Jesus speaking of the “Last days and Judgment” could be added to the kingdom category as well. So, when we pull all the verses together where Jesus was speaking about the kingdom, this actually becomes by far the largest category.

Centrality of the Kingdom

We probably should not be surprised by this finding. All of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) show that the kingdom was central to the teaching of Jesus:

- Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness (Matthew 9:35).
- After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. “The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!” (Mark 1:14-15).
- But he said, “I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent” (Luke 4:43).

These and many other verses make it clear that the kingdom of God really was the main subject that Jesus preached about. Matthew tells us that Jesus commanded his disciples to preach the same message: “And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the

whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come” (Matthew 24:14).

The Gospel of John, which was written after the others, does not need to repeat many of these things, but it often clarifies details about the kingdom – as when John records for us:

Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again ... Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit” (John 3:3-5).

Today, most sermons about Jesus concentrate on his person and redeeming work, which is a vital part of the gospel, of course. But thinking about the subjects Jesus actually preached on the most should remind us that the message of the kingdom of God is still at the core of the gospel and something that we should not neglect. It’s certainly a lesson we can all keep in mind as we read the four gospels – so that we do not miss the actual focus of what Jesus taught in his sermons.

20. WHY THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT?

The “Sermon on the Mount” is only one of the many sermons or discourses of Jesus recorded in the four gospels, but it is a central part of the teaching of Jesus that we all know and love – probably because it demonstrates the essential nature of the Christian way of life as much as any part of Scripture. Many of us have memorized parts of the sermon as found in Matthew’s Gospel (chapters 5-7), but how much time have we spent thinking about the setting of the sermon as opposed to the sermon itself?

We tend to take for granted that the sermon was given on a mountain because we know that Jesus frequently climbed mountains (Luke 6:12; John 6:15; etc.) – but he usually did this to get away from people, to be alone and to pray. In this case we are told he atypically went up on a mountain with his disciples.

Going to the Mountain

The New International Version tells us: “Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them” (Matthew 5:1-2). This gives the impression that Jesus simply went up on the side of a mountain – the lower slopes. But “side” is not in the original Greek (or in most translations), and the Greek *anebē eis to oros* “he went up into a mountain” conveys the sense that he ascended onto the mountain – certainly well up toward, or to, its summit.

This wording is interesting, because when we compare it with the Old Testament account of how Moses went up onto Mt. Sinai to receive the law from God, we find “When Moses went up on the mountain ...” (Exodus 19:3; 24:12), and the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures which many of the writers of the New Testament used) translates this with exactly the same words used of Jesus ascending the mountain: *anebē eis to oros*.

Many Jewish readers of the first century would have recognized the beginning of this story of the Sermon on the Mount as being identical to the beginning of the story of Moses receiving God’s law. This would have struck a deep chord for those readers because

every devout Jew knew that God had told Moses: “I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their fellow Israelites, and I will put my words in his mouth. He will tell them everything I command him” (Deuteronomy 18:18). Every devout Jew expected this prophet like Moses, and the similarities between Jesus and Moses were clear for those ancient readers who knew the Hebrew Scriptures.

The Prophet Like Moses

For example, the infant Moses and Jesus both escaped death when a ruler attempted to kill all the male Jewish children in the area, both hid in Egypt as children, both gave up life in a kingly home to lead a humble life of service, both fasted forty days and nights, both communicated directly with God, both performed miracles, both provided the people with bread to eat, both sent out 12 individuals, both chose 70 individuals, both taught with authority – and both ascended a mountain for the giving of commands and instruction from God. With that background in mind, we can see the significance of the fact that throughout the first third of the Sermon on the Mount the law of Moses is mentioned repeatedly, using the formula “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago But I tell you” For example:

You have heard that it was said to the people long ago ‘You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment (Matthew 5:21-22, and see also verses 27, 31, 33, 38, 43).

Within the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus made it clear to his followers that he was not doing away with or replacing the law given through Moses (Matthew 5:17-19). Instead, in this pivotal sermon – the longest connected teaching of Jesus in the New Testament – he gave us new insight into God’s spiritual laws, increasing our understanding of their intent and raising the keeping of those laws to a higher level. As we will see in the next chapter, it is a level that we perhaps cannot attain without God’s help, but the Sermon on the Mount clearly shows that it nevertheless represents a higher level to which we are called.

21. BLESSED ARE ...

As Jesus gathered his disciples and began his Sermon on the Mount, he gave his disciples a list of “Beatitudes” – things that make us blessed or happy, as we read in Matthew 5:3-11:

- Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
- Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
- Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
- Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.
- Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
- Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.
- Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
- Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.

Just as Moses gave Israel first the Ten Commandments and then the various minor laws that showed the application of the broader, underlying laws, so the Beatitudes present us with attitudes or states of being that underlie much of what Christ gave in his Sermon on the Mount.

The Beatitudes do not fall into easily recognizable groups, as the Ten Commandments do (in having laws relating to God and laws relating to our fellow human beings). But the Beatitudes are principles that do reflect the outcome of our proper attitudes toward or relationships with both God and others.

The Poor in Spirit

Although we can find great depth of meaning in all of the Beatitudes, they are all straightforward and simple to understand – except perhaps for one. It is only the first – “Blessed are the poor in spirit” – that requires some thought as to what exactly the attitude is that is being described. Although being “poor in spirit” is often understood as a kind of meekness, this is unlikely to be its meaning as “Blessed are the meek ...” is mentioned as a separate Beatitude. So what exactly does it mean to be “poor in spirit,” and why is this the first of all the Beatitudes?

Basically, being “poor in spirit” means being humble, but in a specific spiritual sense. To be poor in spirit means that we recognize our total spiritual bankruptcy before God. It means that we understand not only that we have nothing we can offer God in terms of our own salvation, but also that we are totally dependent upon his Spirit to properly fulfill his law. This reality has seldom been better expressed than by Mother Teresa, who explained spiritual poverty in one of her letters:

God cannot fill what is full. He can fill only emptiness – deep poverty – and your “yes” [to God’s call] is the beginning of being or becoming empty. It is not how much we really “have” to give – but how empty we are – so that we can receive fully in our life and let him live his life in us ... Take away your eyes from yourself and rejoice that you have nothing.

When we understand the meaning of spiritual poverty, we see that it stands in total contrast to an attitude that is condemned in the Church of Laodicea mentioned in the book of Revelation: “You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked” (Revelation 3:17). The spiritual poverty of the Laodiceans is not the same as being poor in spirit – it is a poverty that is empty, and not being filled by God.

Proceeding from Poverty

Many scholars feel that the Beatitudes are not simply randomly ordered; rather, they show a progression through the Christian life

from its foundational first steps of humble repentance to the point where our lives become active forces for good, even ultimately drawing persecution from those who hate God's way of life that has become evident in us. Whether this understanding of the order of the Beatitudes is correct or not, being "poor in spirit" is listed first and can certainly be seen as necessary for all the qualities that follow it.

Just as the first Commandment – to have no other God – ultimately forms the foundation of all the Ten Commandments, so the first Beatitude, that we be poor in spirit, ultimately forms the foundation for Christian lives in which we live the law of God at the level of its spiritual intent – while realizing our own poverty in our inability to do this ourselves and our need for the help of God.

Can you imagine the revolutionary nature of that thought as Jesus delivered it in his sermon on the mountain? Nothing like that is to be found in the Old Testament. Nevertheless, Jesus made it clear that we are blessed not to the degree we do things for God, but to the degree we allow him to act in our lives.

22. ANOTHER LOOK AT THE LORD'S PRAYER

The “Lord’s Prayer” is a profound outline or guide for prayer. Although the guide Jesus gave his disciples is short, it provides a framework for every necessary topic of prayer. Beyond telling us WHAT to pray, the Lord’s Prayer also shows us in at least three ways HOW to pray!

The prayer is found in two places in the gospels – in Matthew 6: 9-13 in its fuller form in the Sermon on the Mount, and in Luke 11: 2-4 in an abbreviated form. This fact alone seems to prove that the prayer is a guide on essential topics to pray about, rather than a prayer with specific words to be learned and repeated by rote as some believe.

Looking at the longer form of the prayer in Matthew, there are seven specific petitions or requests directed to God; but rather than looking at those petitions individually, as is often done, let’s look at some of the overall aspects of the prayer outline Jesus included in his sermon that can be helpful in teaching us how to pray.

The Prayer and the Commandments

The overall structure of the Lord’s Prayer is actually similar to the structure of the Ten Commandments. The first section relates more directly to our relationship with God, and the second section to our relationships with others. There are even some basic but noticeable points of similarity: “I am the Lord Your God ...” - “Father in Heaven”; “You shall not take my name in vain” - “Hallowed be your name,” etc. This is not surprising, of course, because in both the Commandments and the Lord’s Prayer we are looking at the same things - our relationship with God and with others.

When we understand this, we begin to see that the Lord’s Prayer is not about asking for the things that we think will make us happy or that we want, but for qualities that show our love for God and others. If the Ten Commandments show us how to love God and others (Matthew 22:37-40), the Lord’s Prayer teaches us how to ask for help to do that properly.

Remembering this dual stress of the Commandments and the Lord's Prayer is truly important. Rather than seeing the prayer as an unrelated list of requests, we begin to see it as a prayerful "walk through" of key areas of our relationship with God and with others. That fact in itself gives us an important clue as to how Jesus' prayer outline can be expanded, as we use it, to include all kinds of things relating to our spiritual relationship with God and the rest of his family.

Humanly it may be easy to expand "Give us today our daily bread" by mentioning our many physical needs, but how much do we expand on requests such as "hallowed be your name"? Realizing the dual stress of the prayer helps us to better balance the things for which we pray.

First Person Plural

Another basic thing to remember as we look at the model we are given is that there isn't a single "I" or "my" in this prayer – only "us" and "our" in the plural. Considering how obvious this fact is, there seems to be a clear lesson – once again to focus our prayers on our relationship with God and with others.

Seen this way, the Lord's Prayer is very different from the individual list of personal wants and needs we are often tempted to offer given the problems of everyday life that we all face. There is certainly nothing wrong in praying for ourselves, and the prayer outline does not deny us the ability to ask for the needs we have. It just puts our personal requests in the context of "our" communal needs, helping us to keep our minds on the fact that the problems of others are just as real – and sometimes much more serious – than those we face.

Prayer Triage

When we kneel before God dozens of things come into our minds – the many needs and concerns of our own lives and those of family, friends, and others. These many individual-level needs are in addition to things God shows us are even bigger needs – of worldwide scale. Sometimes it's hard to know where to start and where to end. That fact underscores one of the great purposes of

the model we have been given – putting things in the right context and priority. Think of the Lord’s Prayer as prayer triage.

Jesus’ guide to communication with our Father sorts through all those clamoring thoughts and needs and puts our concerns and requests in the right order. Matthew 6:7-8 tells us that “your Father knows what you need before you ask him;” but even though God already knows what our most urgent needs are, the prayer outline puts things in perspective for us.

Putting It All Together

None of the recorded prayers of Jesus or the disciples after the time the outline was given follow the wording of the Lord’s Prayer (showing again that it is not a prescribed set of specific words to be prayed), although each recorded prayer in the New Testament stresses some aspect found within the guide. Perhaps we could say that while spontaneous - and especially urgent - prayers will often take their own form, the Lord’s Prayer provides a guide for those occasions when we wish to seek God in regular and more extensive prayer.

Although God is doubtless more concerned with the content rather than the form of our prayers, the guide Jesus gave us covers all the main aspects of our relationship with God and with others; it constantly directs our focus outward to include the needs of others; and it helps us to bring order and priority to the requests we make. Seeing these things helps us to keep in mind what regular prayer should be all about.

23. DID JESUS REALLY MEAN THAT?

“If your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into life lame or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet, to be cast into the everlasting fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into hell fire” (Matthew 18:8-9 NKJV).

These verses have sometimes been taken literally and, sadly in extreme cases, used as a reason for bodily mutilation or removal of a hand, foot or eye. But is this what Jesus meant for his followers to do?

Figuratively Speaking

First, we must remember that Jesus often used figurative language in the sermons he gave instructing his disciples and the crowds he taught. In fact, Jesus specifically used the eye and the hand with clear figurative intent on other occasions.

Consider two other examples we also find in the Gospel of Matthew: “The eye is the lamp of the body” (Matthew 6:22), and “when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing” (Matthew 6:3). Clearly neither of these statements is meant to be understood literally. The eye is not really a “lamp” and the hand cannot really “know” anything – so Jesus was using ideas he associated with these body parts to teach a lesson that was easy to visualize and remember.

Secondly, it is clear that sin is caused by the mind and not by any bodily part or organ (James 1:14-15), and it is not possible for a hand or eye to sin of itself. For example, if our eye is involved in lusting, taking it out does not remove the sin because the mind can still continue to lust. If our hand is involved in stealing, removing the hand does not remove the temptation to steal from the mind and it is still possible to steal with the other hand or in some other manner. The only way we can actually remove a sin is to effect an inward change of the mind, as Jesus himself taught (for example, Matthew 23:25-27).

When People Are Problems

When we remember that Jesus often spoke figuratively using metaphors, similes, and parables, we can understand that in speaking of a hand, foot, or eye that causes us to sin, he was really referring to someone or something in life that might be instrumental in causing us to sin.

In fact, there is good indication that in Matthew 18:8-9 and in Mark 9:43-47 Jesus was actually referring to people in our lives who might cause us to sin. Mark 9:43-47 appears directly after the statement that “If anyone causes one of these little ones – those who believe in me – to stumble, it would be better for them if a large millstone were hung around their neck and they were thrown into the sea” (Mark 9:42).

The context would seem to indicate, then, that Jesus was referring to individuals who might cause sin to occur and who must be “cut off” even if they are as close to us as a part of our own body.

In Matthew 5:29 a similar figure of speech regarding removing a hand or eye is used in a different context, that of adultery, but once again there is no reason not to conclude that it is the person involved in the adulterous behavior that we must remove from our life, not a physical body part.

In fact, this principle of Matthew 18:8-9 was applied directly by the early Church in removing or “cutting off” any individual who was part of the “body” of Christ (Romans 12:5) and who caused others in the Church to sin (1 Corinthians 5:1-13; etc.).

Finally, we must remember that the law of God forbade self-mutilation or disfigurement (Leviticus 19:28; etc.) and that Jesus never taught against the principles of that law (Matthew 5:17).

So the lesson for us is to always be sure to look at the direct context of the sayings of Jesus in the teachings he gave rather than taking single thoughts or verses out of that context. We must remember that Christ often taught using analogies and parables that convey important lessons rather than literal directives. We also must remember that in considering all his sermons and teachings together, Jesus never gave his followers instructions that would be contrary to the spirit of the law of God as it was expressed in the Scriptures. Keeping these basic principles in mind will help us to understand many of the seemingly difficult parts of the sermons Jesus gave that are recorded for our benefit.

24. THE HIGH COST OF LOVE

In his book *The Cost of Discipleship*, the theologian and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer famously distinguishes between what he called “cheap grace” and “costly grace.” While Bonhoeffer defined cheap grace as requiring nothing from us and being ultimately meaningless, he characterized costly grace, on the other hand, as something that takes something from us, something that hurts, something that costs: “the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him.”

Exactly the same can be said of Christian love. Love that does not cost us anything ultimately accomplishes little and has little depth. It is so often only costly love that makes a real difference in the lives of others. There is a wonderful example of this principle in the Gospel of Luke – though it is one that we often read over – in the story of Zacchaeus the tax collector:

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way. When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.” So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly. All the people saw this and began to mutter, “He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.” But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, “Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.” Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham” (Luke 19:1-9).

By way of back-story to this account, Luke tells us that as Jesus approached Jericho he healed a blind man at which the people praised God (Luke 18:35-42). As he entered Jericho then, Jesus was a hero – beloved of the city’s inhabitants who had gone out to meet him as he approached. But in Chapter 19 Luke tells us that Jesus was only passing through the town and that he declined to stay overnight. This doubtless disappointed many citizens, especially as Middle Eastern culture meant that as a teacher of God’s word (to say nothing of the fact that he was regarded as a famous prophet who healed by the power of God), Jesus doubtless would have been offered hospitality and would normally have accepted it.

But as Jesus left Jericho, a strange scene unfolded. Zacchaeus, the chief regional tax collector for the Roman occupation, desired to see Jesus and so he ran down the road a little way and climbed up a sycamore tree to get a better view. The fact that it is mentioned that it was a sycamore-fig tree is interesting as those trees usually have a profuse covering of large leaves and it is very possible that Zacchaeus chose the tree as one from which he could see Jesus as he passed by, but not be seen by crowds that thronged around the Teacher.

As the local tax collector and thus a “collaborator” in the eyes of many, Zacchaeus may well have been the most disliked individual in the city. Tax collectors often charged far more than the actual Roman tax rates and pocketed the extra cash – as Luke tells us was true in this case (Luke 19:8). So positioning himself in the leafy tree might well have been a conscious and prudent decision on the part of Zacchaeus. A hated tax collector caught in the swirl of a large crowd could easily come to harm.

Yet Luke tells us that when Jesus drew near to where the collaborator was, he called out and not only greeted the man, but openly stated that he would like to spend the night in his home. We have to concentrate on this situation to really understand the effect of this behavior on the inhabitants of Jericho. Not only had the teacher declined the hospitality of "decent" citizens, but now, after

indicating he would not stay the night, he changed his mind in order to stay in the home of the most hated man in town. Not only was Zacchaeus hated, but as a tax collector he was “unclean” and anyone who entered his home, ate there, or stayed the night, would automatically also be made unclean.

The reaction of the crowd as recorded by Luke is understandable in these circumstances: “All the people saw this and began to mutter, ‘He has gone to be the guest of a sinner’” (Luke 19:7). Because of his reaching out to Zacchaeus in love, Jesus incurred the total displeasure of not just a few, but of “all the people.” The famous prophet and teacher, the beloved healer of one of their own citizens, instantly became an object of local displeasure and perhaps even anger and scorn.

A Sermon Without Words

Nevertheless, as Luke shows, the love that Jesus extended to the hated individual was repaid by the man’s true and thorough repentance and his promise to more than restore all of the excess money he had taken from his neighbors (Luke 19:8). We must remember that Zacchaeus already knew the law of Moses, already knew that it was wrong to cheat and steal. It was not hearing an exposition of the law that changed the tax collector, but seeing the “living sermon” demonstration of love that Jesus made to him. Zacchaeus was moved and transformed by that love, but it was not free. Jesus immediately paid a price for the expression of his love, but he did so knowing full well that the cost of real love is often high – a fact we must also be willing to accept.

PART FIVE: SACRIFICE

Although the four gospels tell their stories in their own unique ways, all of them show the life of Jesus proceeding inexorably to its great goal – the sacrifice of the Son of God for mankind. That sacrifice was foretold in amazing detail in the prophecies of the Old Testament, and some of the smallest events, actions, and words of Jesus' final week can be seen to have fulfilled those prophecies. In many of these details there are lessons we can learn regarding the attitude that made the supreme sacrifice possible, and the faith we need to have to make sacrifice a part of our lives, too ...

25. A SACRIFICE FORETOLD

It is often said that the New Testament is concealed in the Old, and that the Old Testament is revealed in the New. That is nowhere truer than in the prophecies regarding the promised Messiah found in the Hebrew Scriptures. The writers of the four gospels all point out some of these prophecies, and if we put them all together we find there are dozens of Old Testament predictions that were fulfilled in the life of Jesus.

We have looked at some of those prophecies in the course of this book. When we come to the climactic sacrifice of Christ in his betrayal and execution, we find that more – and more detailed – predictions were fulfilled in the last days of his earthly ministry than in any other part of his life.

Looking at the final week of Jesus' life, beginning with his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, we find amazingly detailed prophecies being fulfilled regarding the Messiah's sacrifice. Here are just *some* of those prophecies and some of the fulfillments recorded in the gospels:

Zechariah 9:9	He would ride on a donkey in a triumphal entry into Jerusalem.	John 12:12-16
Psalms 8:2	He would be praised by little children.	Matthew 21:16
Isaiah 53:3	He would be rejected by his own people.	John 1:11; 7:5
Psalms 41:9	He would be betrayed by a friend.	Matthew 26:20-23
Zechariah 11:12-13	His price would be 30 pieces of silver.	Matthew 27:9
Zechariah 11:13	His betrayal money would be used to buy a potter's field.	Matthew 27:10
Psalms 35:11	He would be falsely accused.	Mark 14:57-58
Isaiah 53:7	He would be silent before his accusers.	Mark 15:4-5

Isaiah 50:6	He would be struck and spit upon.	Matthew 26:67
Zechariah 9:9	He would be called King.	Matthew 27:37
Isaiah 53:12	He would be executed with criminals.	Matthew 27:38
Psalms 22:16	His hands and feet would be pierced.	John 20:25-27
Psalms 69:21	He would be given vinegar and gall to drink.	Matthew 27:34
Psalms 22:7-8	He would be mocked.	Luke 23:35
Psalms 22:18	His clothes would be gambled for.	Matthew 27:35-36
Psalms 109:4	He would pray for his enemies.	Luke 23:34
Psalms 22:1	He would appear to be forsaken by God.	Matthew 27:46
Zechariah 12:10	His side would be pierced.	John 19:34
Isaiah 53:9	He would be buried with the rich.	Matthew 27:57-60
Psalms 16:10	He would be raised from the dead.	Matthew 28:2-7

Looking through these examples from among the many prophecies fulfilled in the death of Christ, we cannot fail to realize the incredible degree of detail that was foretold regarding that sacrifice. But there are also lessons we can learn from many of these predicted events. In the following chapters we will look at some of these aspects of the sacrifice of Jesus and the lessons they have for us.

26. CELEBRATION BEFORE THE STORM

Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey (Zechariah 9:9).

The Gospel of Luke recounts how Jesus fulfilled the words spoken by the prophet Zechariah as he entered Jerusalem in a “triumphal entry” during the climactic week at the end of his ministry (Luke 19:28-44). Luke tells us how Jesus instructed two of his disciples to go to a nearby home where they would find a young donkey and to bring it to him. He told the disciples that if anyone challenged them, they were to simply say: “The Lord needs it” (Luke 19:31). The disciples did this – explaining to the donkey’s owners what Jesus had told them.

This initial part of the story is interesting in itself. Jesus was, in effect, invoking the ancient principle of *angaria* (from a Babylonian word meaning “mounted messenger”) by which kings, rulers and other individuals with official responsibilities could requisition property for official use. *Angaria* originated in the earliest postal systems in the ancient Persian, Greek and later Roman cultures where an animal could be “requisitioned” from its owner to carry the mail on the next stage of its multiple-staged journey, somewhat equivalent to the “Pony Express” of the American frontier. In the Judea of Jesus’ day, under Roman rule, animals could be commandeered in this way for the emperor’s service, and the right was also expanded to include the needs of the king, and even magistrates and rabbis.

A Messenger Received in Joy

This incident was, then, the prelude to the actual triumphal entry in which the crowds provided what we would call today a “red carpet” entry for Jesus by covering the road with their capes and the branches of trees to welcome him as he rode on the donkey into the city (Luke 19:35-37). The scene was not unlike a humbler version of the great Roman “Triumphs” in which the grateful citizens

celebrated the procession of heroes who had served the people. In fact, the similarity with a Roman Triumph is more than superficial, because the Triumph was a civil and religious ceremony which was held to publicly “celebrate and sanctify” the success of a commander who had led his forces to victory in the service of the people.

But Jesus rejected the aggrandizing nature of the pagan Triumphs which fed the cult of personalities in Roman and other cultures, and he did this by riding humbly on a young donkey – the antithesis of the great horses of conquering kings and heroes – while fulfilling the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9 in every detail. Yet Jesus did accept the people’s praise (Luke 19:40), and the details of the story from beginning to end show that a triumphal entry – a symbolic victory celebration – was intended.

The words of the crowds who welcomed Jesus in this triumphal entry are important. Luke tells us (Luke 19:38) that the crowds quoted from the great messianic Psalm 118 – which is why the Pharisees attempted to silence them (Luke 19:39). This is the same psalm that contains, in vs. 22, the statement so significantly quoted by Jesus (for example in Luke 20:17): “The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.” But also this psalm contains clear references to the triumphal entry of the Messiah:

- I look in triumph on my enemies (Psalm 118:7).
- I will not die but live, and will proclaim what the Lord has done (vs. 17).
- Open for me the gates of the righteous; I will enter and give thanks to the Lord (vs. 19).
- Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. From the house of the Lord we bless you. The Lord is God, and he has made his light shine on us. With boughs in hand, join in the festal procession up to the horns of the altar (vss. 26-27).

Although Luke only cites a few of the words from Psalm 118, the psalm is in fact a full prophetic description of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

What Was the Victory?

But if this was a triumph, what was the victory? Jesus had not yet defeated sin and death on the cross, and he had not yet completed the work he came to accomplish in this regard. Yet there was one way in which a victory was celebrated. The primary purpose of the angaria, by which Jesus obtained the donkey on which he rode, was to deliver a message. And at this point, at the end of his ministry, Jesus had successfully delivered the news of the kingdom of God to the point that it was now established and would continue to spread throughout the world. He had also lived the perfect life needed in order that he could give himself as a sacrifice for all humankind.

In that sense, Jesus had fully triumphed in his work when he came to Jerusalem as "... your king who comes to you, *righteous* and *victorious*, lowly and riding on a donkey" (Zechariah 9:9, emphases added). The entry of Jesus into Jerusalem prior to his death was indeed a triumph: it celebrated Jesus' righteous life and the fact that he had succeeded in delivering the message that he brought into the world.

There is surely a lesson in this for us. In following Christ as his disciples we do not attempt to mimic everything he did, of course, but we should certainly follow in many of his steps, as he commanded us. The dual nature of Christ's fulfilled mission – of living in obedience to God and carrying his message – is a dual opportunity and goal for every one of his followers, also. To focus only on our own obedience or only on the message we were commissioned to carry is not a complete fulfillment of the calling we have been given. To the extent that we are able, with God's help, to live lives pleasing to God and to serve him in carrying his message, we too participate in the victory of Jesus.

27. THIRTY PIECES OF SILVER

I told them, “If you think it best, give me my pay; but if not, keep it.” So they paid me thirty pieces of silver. And the Lord said to me, “Throw it to the potter”—the handsome price at which they valued me! So I took the thirty pieces of silver and threw them to the potter at the house of the Lord (Zechariah 11:12-13).

Then one of the Twelve—the one called Judas Iscariot—went to the chief priests and asked, “What are you willing to give me if I deliver him over to you?” So they counted out for him thirty pieces of silver ... Then what was spoken by ... the prophet was fulfilled: “They took the thirty pieces of silver, the price set on him by the people of Israel, and they used them to buy the potter’s field, as the Lord commanded me” (Matthew 26:14-15; 27:9-10).

This is certainly one of the most strikingly detailed prophecies fulfilled in the final week of Christ’s life. Had the prophecy foretold only the amount of money for which the Messiah would be betrayed, it would have been amazing enough, but the prediction of the specific purpose for which the money would be used makes it startling in its clarity and detail.

But think about the money itself. Have you ever wondered how much the amount for which Jesus was betrayed would be relative to our own time? Matthew, the tax collector, is the only gospel writer who mentions the exact amount. He tells us that it was enough to purchase a field in the time of Jesus, but we don’t know whether it was a very large or a very small field, so that information doesn’t help much.

We are also unsure as to exactly what the thirty pieces of silver were. They seem to have been silver coins – but we do not know which coins. There are several possibilities. All weighed about fourteen to fifteen grams (about half an ounce in weight), but the various possible coins ranged between twenty-five to ninety percent silver content, so it is impossible to determine their value without knowing which coins they were.

Yet the Bible does tell us the value of those thirty pieces of silver. We should remember that Matthew’s Gospel was written to a Jewish audience. His readers would have been well aware of the

biblical significance of the payment, as the Law of Moses prescribed exactly that amount as the compensation for the death of a slave (Exodus 21:32). We should see the added ironic significance here as thirty pieces of silver was not the price of a slave – as that would differ widely depending on age, health and other factors – but the normalized compensation for a slave’s *death*.

It is likely that the religious authorities to whom Judas betrayed Jesus had this price in mind as one they spitefully felt was appropriate. They certainly would have remembered the scripture in Exodus – though they may not have thought of the prophecy in Zechariah 11 they were unwittingly fulfilling. If they did have that scripture in mind, they would have remembered Zechariah’s sarcasm in calling thirty pieces of silver a “handsome amount.”

It is interesting that Matthew gives us two contrasting accounts a few verses apart of the value set on Jesus by different people. In Matthew 26:6-9 we find the story of how someone who loved Jesus paid a great sum of money to provide the perfume to symbolically anoint him for his death, whereas in Matthew 26:14-15 those who did not love him unappreciatively paid to arrange his death.

The story has powerful lessons for us, too. Sadly, in our sins and failures, we have all betrayed the love the Son of God has shown us. It is significant that Matthew chose the same Greek word that he uses of Judas’ betrayal (*paradidomi*) to describe the actions of the religious leaders who condemned Jesus (Matthew 27:18) and also of the Roman Governor Pilate (Matthew 27:26). We can extrapolate to say that ultimately we have all betrayed Jesus.

But there is also a more positive lesson for us in Matthew’s account. A little earlier in his gospel Matthew records Jesus’ own words regarding his purpose in life – that he came “... to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28). We should never forget that the word “serve” here literally means much more than “occasional help,” but total, slave-like service.

The price paid for Jesus was more fitting than those who betrayed him guessed. The thirty pieces of silver were indeed the price for the death of a slave, and for that purpose Jesus was born – to serve and to be a sacrifice. It is also the reason for our calling in him: if we are to follow in the steps of Christ to the fullest degree possible, we must realize that we are not called merely to find our own salvation. We are called to serve others and to be willing to sacrifice to do so.

28. THE CROWN OF THORNS

Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged. The soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head. They clothed him in a purple robe and went up to him again and again, saying, "Hail, king of the Jews!" And they slapped him in the face (John 19:1-3).

In these words, John summarizes the brutal beginnings of the crucifixion of Jesus. Matthew, in his gospel, adds the detail that the Roman soldiers also put a staff in Jesus' right hand (Matthew 27:29), which clearly imitated the emperor's scepter, just as the purple robe and crown of thorns also imitated the emperor's other regalia.

The mockery of the soldiers is clear. Charged as "King of the Jews" (Matthew 27:37), and hence as someone attempting to take the place of the emperor, the imperial attributes of robe, scepter and crown were intended as a cruel, insulting joke. But the mocking soldiers were doubtless unaware of how richly symbolic their parody actually was.

Roman emperors did not wear golden crowns like many Eastern kings, and the crown of thorns given to Jesus was doubtless intended as a parody of the Roman Civic Crown given to military heroes who saved the lives of others. Like the crown of thorns, the Civic Crown (Latin: *corona civica*) was formed of plant material: of leaves of the oak tree woven into a circle. But so high was the honor of this crown that it became part of the imperial regalia and was worn by all the emperors from the time of Augustus. Wearing it, the emperor was often hailed as the "savior" of the people.

Biblical Thorns

Ironic or not, the richness of the symbolism that God allowed in the crown of thorns also finds much earlier foreshadowing in the Bible itself. Not only does the biblical story of humanity's "fall" tell us that as a result of sin the earth would produce "thorns and thistles" (Genesis 3:17-19), but also the crown of thorns is more specifically foreshadowed in the story of Abraham's sacrifice of his son, Isaac. Genesis 22:13 tells us that the sacrifice of Isaac was transferred to

the sacrifice of the male sheep God provided that was caught by its horns in a “thicket.” The Hebrew word used for thicket is *sebak*, probably signifying the Palestine Buckthorn (*Rhamnus lycioides* or *Rhamnus palaestinus*), a bush or small thorn tree which grows on hillsides in much of Israel. Its botanical name *Rhamnus* refers to its intertwined, prickly branches. The ram “caught by the horns” in such a tree was thus essentially a sacrificial sheep with thorns intertwined around its head, and the ram became a substitutionary sacrifice for Isaac, just as Jesus became a substitutionary sacrifice for everyone.

So the crown of thorns given to the Messiah and intended as a cruel parody to mock him was, in fact, a fitting symbol for the One who took upon himself the thorny result of our human sin, who willingly acted as a substitutionary sacrifice for all, and whose bravery infinitely eclipsed that of heroes who may have saved others (Romans 5:7). It may have been intended as a parody, but no one else ever qualified to receive such an exalted crown as the one made of thorns worn by Jesus.

It may seem hard to relate the crown of thorns given to Christ to our own lives, but we can find something to consider in our own striving to follow him. For his own reasons, God allows us to endure some thorns in our lives, too (2 Corinthians 12:6-8). But we should not lose sight of the fact that those thorns are according to his will and that some of the seemingly negative and even destructive things that happen in our lives may be used by God to his purposes in the overall fulfillment of his plan for us.

29. THE PSALM OF THE CROSS

Two of the gospel writers – Matthew and Mark – record that near his death Jesus called out with what might seem to be a strange statement:

And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” that is, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46 ESV)

And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?” which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34 ESV)

While Matthew records Jesus’ words in Hebrew, Mark records them in Aramaic (the language in which they were probably uttered); but the words are almost identical, and the meaning is the same.

These words have long been interpreted as showing that at that point in time Jesus symbolically bore the sins of the whole world and that God – who cannot look at evil (Habakkuk 1:13) – turned away from his Son who was left in near-despairing isolation. Because sin cuts off from God, the argument is made, and Jesus at that moment represented all sinners – so God totally cut himself off from his perfect Son because of our sins.

But is that what those terrible words really signify? Did God really turn away from his only Son who had lived a life of perfect obedience – obedience all the way to death itself (Philippians 2:8)? Although that may possibly be the case, we do not have a scripture saying that. And how do we mesh that concept with the fact that it was because God loved sinners so much that he sent his Son to die for them? (John 3:16). Or the fact that God looks on and deals personally with every sinner he calls, and that we have it on scriptural authority that “nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ”? (Romans 8:38-39).

A Few Words for Many

There is another – and far more positive – way to understand those troubling words of Jesus. Jewish rabbis have long utilized the

principle of referring to a scriptural passage by means of a few of its words, knowing that their hearers would mentally supply the rest of the passage. This method of teaching and reference (called in Hebrew *remez*, meaning “a hint”) was certainly used in Jesus’ time and we see him employing it frequently. For example, in Matthew 21:15 when the children of Jerusalem shouted praises in his honor and the priests and teachers of the law became indignant, Jesus responded by quoting only a few words from Psalm 8:2: “From the lips of children and infants, you have ordained praise.” But the religious leaders would have fully realized that the rest of that psalm states the enemies of God would be silenced by children’s praises.

We see Jesus using this technique so often that when we turn to his words spoken on the cross “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” we can see that this is almost certainly what Jesus was doing. The words Jesus uttered are the opening words of Psalm 22 – the great messianic psalm that foretells even the smallest details of the Messiah’s death. Every biblically literate Jew present at the crucifixion would have been reminded of the prophecies made in that psalm – the insults of the mocking crowd (vss. 6-8), the dying thirst of God’s servant (vs. 15), the “dogs”/Gentiles (vs. 16) who pierced his hands and feet (vs. 16), the casting of lots for his garments (vs. 18) – simply by the “hint” of Jesus quoting the psalm’s opening verse.

We should remember, too, that these words were the only ones we are told Jesus spoke “with a loud voice” (this fact is recorded by both Matthew and Mark) on the Cross. These were the words – few though they were – that Jesus spoke in his agony to all present – and those present would have likely recognized the intent of the small *remez* that referenced the whole of the psalm from which it was taken. Seen this way, we realize that Jesus’ words “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” were his last great teaching. These words were an abbreviated reference to Psalm 22– the final proof he offered that he was, indeed, the One who was prophesied.

A Fuller Understanding

Understanding Jesus’ words in this way – as a *remez* of Psalm 22 – is not to argue that sin cuts us off from God, but to urge us not to presume that this is why Jesus uttered these words. We should

perhaps temper that concept with a fuller understanding of God's love – that God always loves us as his children despite our sins – which means that God still loved his Son at that terrible time of his shouldering of our sins. Jesus himself told his disciples shortly before his crucifixion: “A time is coming and in fact has come when you will be scattered, each to your own home. You will leave me all alone. Yet I am not alone, for my Father is with me” (John 16: 32-33).

In fact, the very psalm that Jesus quoted contains, near its end, not words of his rejection as he suffered, but words that Jesus knew he could trust completely: “He has not despised or scorned the suffering of the afflicted one; he has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help” (Psalm 22:24).

So, if we consistently apply all of Psalm 22 to Jesus' crucifixion, we can realize that as he hung on the cross, his Father did not reject his beloved Son and had not “hidden his face from him.” The Father loved Jesus till his last breath. As a result, the words spoken by Jesus as his end neared – “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” – were words addressed doubtless not to God, but quoted for our benefit as a summary of the prophecies Jesus was fulfilling in laying down his life for us.

30. THREE TRIUMPHANT WORDS

Most of us know what it feels like to finally accomplish something we have worked toward for a long time: a goal, a dream, a project to which we have dedicated time and energy. Even with relatively small-scale things, it can be a triumphant feeling. The larger the accomplishment, the greater are the emotions of triumph, thankfulness and deep happiness that come with accomplished plans and goals.

This feeling ties in to the story given in all of the four gospels of the supreme sacrifice of the Son of God on behalf of humanity. That had surely been a project a long time in the planning – from before the world was even formed (1 Peter 1:20). It had been over thirty years of the physical life of Jesus in the actual making: growing, building, preparing, patiently working toward the eventual goal of the sacrifice itself.

The sacrificial death of Christ is a somber and heart-wrenching thing to ponder, yet it seems more than likely that even as he perished in excruciating pain, there was for the Son of God a feeling of triumph and thankfulness at the very end. We know that even beyond the physical pain Jesus bore, he endured the terrible weight of the human sin he had taken upon himself. But the Son of God was not crushed by that weight – as we see in his final words.

Putting the gospel accounts together, we find that the last recorded words of Jesus – three small words in English translation, spoken directly before he died – show a supremely positive ending to the story of the physical life of the Messiah. Those words, according to John, were simply: “It is finished!” (John 19:30). In the original Greek of the New Testament the expression is a single word (*tetelestai*), but the sense is certainly that of the three English words – “It is finished!” The positive nature of the expression becomes clear if we look at it closely.

The Greek word *tetelestai* carries a number of related meanings. In the English New Testament it is translated as “finished” (as with a job), “fulfilled” (as with a purpose), “accomplished” (as with a task), “performed” (as with a command), “completed” (as with a goal), and in other similar ways. But the central idea in each case is a positive one. While it is natural for us, as we come to the end of the crucifixion story, to think of “it is finished” as a negative

expression – we see it as a supremely sad ending, almost like an admission of defeat – nothing could be further from the truth. When we translate the word *tetelestai* in any of the other ways it could be rendered, the meaning is much clearer. “It is fulfilled!” “It is accomplished!” “It is performed!” “It is completed!” These are not three words of defeat, but three words of triumph!

Despite the pain, the humiliation, and the anguish of his own impending death, the Son of God knew that he had succeeded – he had accomplished the very reason for his human life in a victory that would touch all human lives throughout all time. To that point in history no single event had accomplished so much good or incorporated such a victory. The last words of Jesus – “it is finished” – were surely the three most triumphant words ever spoken. They were equaled only by another three triumphant words spoken a few days later: “He has risen” (Matthew 28:6).

The Triumph of Trust

Ultimately, the lesson we can draw from the story of the last words of Jesus is one of trust. Jesus trusted God throughout his life and ministry and even throughout a slow and terrible death. He trusted that God was fulfilling his purpose when he was in pain, when he felt cut off from God, even as he felt his very life ebbing away. Far from being an expression of defeat, his words “it is finished” were the final and complete expression of his trust. The last words of Jesus were, in that sense, the fulfillment of a prophecy contained in the book of Isaiah: “The Lord Almighty has sworn, ‘Surely, as I have planned, so it will be, and as I have purposed, so it will happen’” (Isaiah 14:24).

When we see the final words of Jesus in context, with the sense they really convey, we can rejoice that they can – and will – apply to our lives also. Just as Job wrote of God “Though he slay me, yet will I trust him” (Job 13:15), the last words of Jesus remind us that we too can trust that despite any and all appearances, whatever may happen in our lives, if we continue to trust God he will complete his purpose in us. That is a tremendous truth that can underlie our desire to follow in the steps of Jesus and to strive to learn lessons from his sonship, signs, sermons, service and sacrifice.

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