STUDIES IN MARK

A series of sermons in Mark's Gospel

by David Legge
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Contents

1. John Mark - The Man, His Method, and His Message - 3
2. John The Baptist and The Beginning Of The Gospel - 11
3. The Servant's Baptism - 19
4. The Servant's Test - Part 1 - 27
5. The Servant's Test - Part 2 - 35
6. The Servant's Test - Part 3 - 43
7. The Servant's Task Begins - 51
8. The Call To Follow And Fish – 59
9. The Servant's Authority - 66
10. A Day In The Life Of The Servant - 73
11. The Servant's Priority Of Prayer - 81
12. The Touch Of The Servant's Hand – 88
13. Four Soul-Winners And The Forgiveness Of Sins – 95
14. The Saviour To Sinners – 103
15. Feast Or Famine, Old Or New – 111
16. Lord Of The Sabbath - 119
17. The Sabbath Setup - 128
18. The Servant’s Servants - 135
19. Unforgivable Opposition - 144
20. Jesus’ True Relations – 152
22. A Parable On Parables, Part 2 - 170
23. The Parable Of The Lamp And Its Stand - 177
24. The Parable Of The Growing Seed - 185
25. The Parable Of The Growth Of The Mustard Seed - 193
26. In The Same Boat - 202
27. Satan To Jesus Must Bow - 210
28. The Difference Faith Makes - 217
29. The Paralysis Of Unbelief – 226
30. The Reproduction Of Power In Effective Service – 234
31. The Silencing Of A Servant – 243
32. The Rhythm Of Rest And Readiness In Service – 251
33. The Servant’s Unlimited Supplies – 259
34. The Servant’s Security – 267
35. The Heart Of The Problem – 275
36. A Harsh Lesson In Grace – 283
37. The Signs Of The Servant - 293
38. Rote Learning Of Multiplication - 303
39. Blindness By Degrees - 311
40. The Suffering And Then The Glory - 320
41. Believing Prayer, And Power For Service - 328
42. True Greatness - 336
43. The Stumbling-Blocks To Greatness – 346
44. The Sanctity of Marriage and The Security of Children - 357
45. Rich But Wretched – 366
46. You Can’t Lose - 375
47. God’s Qualification Of Greatness - 384
48. A Real Eye-Opener – 393
49. The Servant King’s Short-Lived Welcome – 401
50. Question Time - 413
51. Signs Of The Second Coming - 426
52. A Miserable Betrayer and An Extravagant Worshipper - 438
53. The Sop And The Supper - 449
54. The Agony Of Gethsemane - 461
55. Trial And Denial - 473
56. Golgotha - 484
57. Fear - 495

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Now we're turning to Mark's Gospel, and I want to use this morning as a study in introduction to this series on the Gospel of Mark, so we'll not be taking any of the verses of the first chapter this morning. First of all I want you to turn to Mark chapter 10, and then Mark 14, and then we'll look at a number of portions from the Acts of the Apostles. The title of my message this morning is: "John Mark - The Man, His Method, and His Message".

Reading from chapter 10:45, just one verse - and this, if there is a key verse of the book, this is certainly it: "For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister", or came not to be served, but to serve, "and to give his life a ransom for many". Then chapter 14 verse 50, speaking of the disciples: "And they all forsook the Lord Jesus, and fled. And there followed him a certain young man, having a linen cloth cast about his naked body; and the young men laid hold on him: And he left the linen cloth, and fled from them naked".

Then turning to the Acts of the Apostles chapter 12, Acts chapter 12 verse 24: "But the word of God grew and multiplied. And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem, when they had fulfilled their ministry, and took with them John, whose surname was Mark". Then chapter 13 and verse 13: "Now when Paul and his company loosed from Paphos, they came to Perga in Pamphylia: and John", that is, John Mark, "departing from them returned to Jerusalem". Then chapter 15 for our final reading, verse 36: "And some days after Paul said unto Barnabas, Let us go again and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the LORD, and see how they do. And Barnabas determined to take with them John, whose surname was Mark. But Paul thought not good to take him with them, who departed from them from Pamphylia, and went not with them to the work. And the contention was so sharp between them, that they departed asunder one from the other: and so Barnabas took Mark, and sailed unto Cyprus; And Paul chose Silas, and departed, being recommended by the brethren unto the grace of God. And he went through Syria and Cilicia, confirming the churches".

Over 2000 years of Christian history, traditions have developed concerning the apostles. Some of those traditions appear to be quite plausible. They are plausible in the sense that they don't seem to contradict any obvious Scriptures, and generally speaking they enjoyed acceptance in the early church who were nearest to them in a chronological sense. Other traditions concerning the twelve apostles, however, are less reliable. Take some concerning John Mark, who is before us in his Gospel. Some believe that he was nicknamed 'stump finger', probably because of some disability, supposedly - that may or may not be the case, it doesn't really matter. Others believe he was the founder of Christianity in Alexandria. There are reasons for that, but we're not sure about it. Others think he suffered a martyr's death in Alexandria, and then the Roman Catholic Church indicates that his body, John Mark's body, was taken from there to Venice and buried in that famous San Marco church in Venice (which I visited on my holidays), which was supposedly built in the 10th century to house the remains of Mark the evangelist.
Now we cannot be sure of any of those things, in fact some of them are highly dubious - but what we must always maintain is that we look to the Scriptures to construct reliable pictures of the apostles, and of circumstances that are the context for biblical doctrine and teaching. So let's look at the Scriptures this morning as we look at John Mark, the man, and find a reliable picture of him. Now some traditions, when they're helpful and reliable, we will use, but we want to look primarily at the Scriptures to find a portrait of the Holy Spirit for this man.

So first of all let's look at John Mark, the man, and find out a little bit about his background. 'John' was his Jewish name, 'John' simply means 'the grace of God'; 'Mark' was a Roman name, which was a bit like a surname, and it means 'the hammer'. We find out very early in the Acts of the Apostles, or somewhat early, about chapter 12, that he was the son of Mary of Jerusalem, who was a wealthy woman who owned a house in Jerusalem where the Christians met together to worship, a meeting place. Chapter 12 and verse 12 shows us that, if you care to turn to it, we find that after Peter was miraculously released from prison by an angel, it was to this home, to Mary of Jerusalem, John Mark's mother, that he went: 'And when he', verse 12, 'had considered the thing, he came to the house of Mary the mother of John, whose surname was Mark; where many were gathered together praying'. Peter knew which house to go to, it was the house where the believers, some of them at least, in Jerusalem were met.

We also know from Colossians chapter 4 that John Mark was a cousin of Barnabas the encourager, the son of consolation. Of course, both Barnabas and Mark accompanied Paul on his first missionary journey that we read about in Acts chapter 12. But what becomes very clear by the time we get into chapters 13 and 15, is that this young man, John Mark, had a shaky beginning in Christian ministry. We read in chapter 13 verse 13 that he abandoned the apostle Paul, and decided that he had had enough and was returning home for whatever reason - it's not given. Paul the apostle was so unhappy with Mark that he refused to take him on his second missionary journey, even though his cousin Barnabas had recommended him and suggested this. This suggestion actually started a bitter quarrel between the apostle Paul and Barnabas, which ended with Paul and Silas going one way, and Barnabas and John Mark going another. Then we lose sight of John Mark for about six or seven years, and for all we know those may have been wasted years for him in a spiritual sense.

Although the details are lacking - I admit that - Paul and Mark, we find, later reconciled. Something happened in the life of John Mark to make him a mighty servant of God. When the apostle Paul was in prison in Rome, we read that there was some kind of reconciliation, and Mark actually served as the apostle Paul's aide, then he became a delegate to him in Rome in service, from Rome to Asia Minor - we find that from Philemon 24 and Colossians 4:10. Later we find that Paul would ask Timothy to bring John Mark back with him to Rome, because he was useful to him in the service of the Lord. If you care to turn to 2 Timothy chapter 4, we read these words in verses 9 through to 11 - 2 Timothy 4 verse 9, Paul says to Timothy: 'Do thy diligence to come shortly unto me: For Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world, and is departed unto Thessalonica; Crescens to Galatia, Titus unto Dalmatia. Only Luke is with me. Take Mark', that is, John Mark, 'and bring him with thee: for he is profitable to me for the ministry'.

Who is this man John Mark, this young man? Well, he is a man who had a serious spiritual blip. He also became, through that backsliding error, a cause for division between two great men of God. But the surprising thing to us this morning for our consideration, as we embark upon an exposition of Mark's Gospel, is that this was the man that the Holy Spirit turned to to write an account, as we read of in Mark 1 verse 1, of the beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I don't know about you, but I'm left dumbfounded, expressing 'Amazing grace, how sweet the sound'!
That, in application, is very sweet; because one may have been, as Mark, a failed servant in the service of Christ; one may even have been a cause for dissension among brethren, and unrest in the assembly; yet still here we have John Mark in his Gospel giving us an exemplary depiction of the servant of Christ.

It's interesting not only to see how Mark was restored, but to see also how the apostle Paul - who had been so scathing and unwavering in his criticism of him earlier - how he is so generous in recognising Mark's restoration, how he accepts the fact that God's grace had restored him, and therefore Paul very readily reinstates John Mark as an invaluable servant of Jesus. He recognised grace at work in the life of John Mark. What a tremendous lesson there is in this for us all. Erwin T. Lutzer wrote a book entitled 'Failure Is the Back Door to Success' - we often are familiar with the apostle Peter concerning failure and how he was restored, but do we ever think of John Mark? Here is a young man who, as far as we are concerned when we reach the middle of the Acts of the Apostles, his Christian service is over - but God turned to him by His Spirit to write an account of the beginning of the Gospel of Jesus!

Now when we turn to 1 Peter, we find that when Peter was writing his first epistle in Rome, Peter affectionately calls John Mark his 'son' - 1 Peter 5:13. Now Peter, of course, as I've said, was no stranger to failure himself. Who knows, it could've been his influence on the younger Mark that was instrumental in helping him out of his spiritual instability of youth, and into the strength and maturity that he would need to serve the Lord in the work that He had called him to. Whatever the case was, we believe that it was Mark's close relationship with the apostle Peter which motivated and enabled him to write the intimate portrait of Christ that we have in these sixteen chapters of Mark's Gospel. Now we can't prove this point, and scholars are generally in agreement on it, but we know that Mark and Peter were together in Rome in later years - we know that from 1 Peter 5:13. We also know that Peter was intending, before his own death, to make a permanent record of his memories of Christ. If we read 2 Peter 1:15-16, he says there: 'Moreover I will endeavour that ye may be able after my decease to have these things always in remembrance. For we have not followed cunningly devised fables, when we made known unto you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of his majesty'. He seems to indicate that he wanted to put down his reminiscences of the Lord Jesus Christ. Most of the early fathers in the church believed that what we have in Mark's Gospel is really the memory of the apostle Peter concerning our Lord.

The earliest statement about the Gospel of Mark was written by a man called Papius, the Bishop of Hierapolis in AD 140. He said this: 'Mark became Peter's interpreter and wrote accurately all that he remembered'. Justin Martyr, an early church father writing in AD 150, referred to Mark - that is, the Gospel of Mark - as the memoirs of Peter. Ireaneus, writing in AD 185, called Mark 'the disciple and interpreter of Peter' - and he recorded that 'the second Gospel' of Mark consisted of what Peter actually preached in his sermons about Christ. On that vein, it's interesting to note that the outline of Mark's Gospel parallels remarkably with Peter's sermon preaching Christ in Acts chapter 10 - that's for another day, but you should go home and look at that, it's the same outline.

The common belief of scholars is that the text we read in Mark 14:51 that refers to this young man in a linen cloth who ran away naked, that this is Mark's modest signature to the book. It's Mark's way of saying that it is he who has authored this Gospel. But I want you to get this point as we think of Mark the man, before we go on any further examining his method of writing: what a recovery this young man made! Am I speaking to a young man or a young woman, or a not so young man or woman, who had a blip in their spiritual experience in their youth? What a recovery this Mark made! Starting off as a companion of Paul, and then having
this backslidden experience, causing dissension among brethren - and then God comes to him for a work that He still has him to do. The poet put it like this:

'They on the heights are not the souls
Who never erred nor went astray,
Or reached those high rewarding goals
Along a smooth, flower-bordered way.

Nay, those who stand where first comes dawn
Are those who stumbled - But went on'.

Mark stumbled, but went on. Now it's important to remember this when we consider Mark's message, which I'll deal with later on, but which was encapsulated in chapter 10 and verse 45: 'The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve'. Here we have...if anything, Mark's Gospel is the Gospel that portrays the perfect Servant of Jehovah in the person of the Lord Jesus. Now think about this: Mark, the failed servant, setting forth the perfect Servant. Mark, who was first the servant and attendant of Paul and then failed, and then became the servant and attendant of his cousin Barnabas, and according to reliable tradition later in life became the servant and attendant of the apostle Peter before his death - here he is, a man who had both failed and succeeded as a servant, setting forth the ideal Servant, Jesus Christ. He was the right man for the job.

Let's look secondly at John Mark, his method - because his message, which we'll deal with in a moment or two later, is reflected in the distinctive features that you have in Mark's Gospel, compared with Matthew, Luke and John. You do know that there are differences in the Gospels? For instance, most agree that Matthew's Gospel sets forth Jesus as the King, and His kingdom. Luke's Gospel sets forth the Son of Man, and the humanity of our Lord Jesus Christ. John's Gospel sets forth how He is the Son of God, how He is divine. But Mark's Gospel sets forth the servanthood of our Lord Jesus Christ. Now it's interesting to note that some believe that there is a type and representation of this in the faces of the cherubim that you have in various apocalyptic books of the Bible. For instance, the cherubim in Ezekiel have four faces, one face of a lion, one face of a man, one face of an eagle, one face of an ox. Many Bible teachers have seen the parallels here: the lion being the face of the King; the man obviously speaking of Christ's humanity; the eagle speaking of soaring in the heavenlies, the deity of Christ; and the ox, an animal of service, speaking of the servanthood of our Lord Jesus. One thing is clear, that this man Mark, who was a servant, in his method in writing this Gospel sets forth, even in the literary scheme of the book, how Christ came as the Servant of Jehovah.

Let me show you this, and this is seen perhaps more in the things that are omitted from Mark's Gospel in comparison to Matthew, Luke and John, than that which is included. For instance, if you turn to the first chapter of Mark's Gospel, there's no genealogy of our Lord Jesus. You find it in Matthew and in Luke, but it's not there in Mark - there is nothing to be said about Christ's birth. I don't know why that is completely, but certainly one aspect of it is: there was a visit by the wise men to pay homage to the Lord Jesus as the one who would be born King, but people never pay homage to a servant. Mark is setting forth the Servant. Mark particularly emphasises the deeds of the Lord Jesus as opposed to the words of the Saviour. For instance, there are 19 miracles in Mark's Gospel but there are only four parables - and, incidentally, all of those four parables have to do with service as their theme. What Mark omits, for example, one parable he leaves out is the parable of the householder who hires the labourers - the reason being, because the Lord Jesus Christ in Mark's Gospel is depicted as a servant, He is in the place of a labourer, He isn't hiring anyone.
Another parable that he leaves out is the parable of the marriage of the King's son. You remember that one came into the marriage feast and was not adorned correctly, and he was cast out - it's not there, probably because it's not the servant's place to cast anyone out. There's no Sermon on the Mount in Mark's Gospel, because chapters 5, 6 and 7 of Matthew's Gospel where we find the Sermon on the Mount is understood as the King's Manifesto, the laws of the kingdom, it describes the character of the subjects of Christ the King in His kingdom - but Mark is not presenting Christ as a King, he is presenting Christ as the workman of God, the Servant who has no kingdom, who frames no laws. Nothing whatever is said in Mark's Gospel about Christ's command over principalities and powers and the angels. Nothing is said of His right to send them forth to do His bidding, instead what we actually find in chapter 1 and verse 13 is that the angels ministered unto Him. There's no sentence of judgment passed on Israel by Christ in Mark's Gospel, because obviously it's not the place of a servant to pass judgment on others, indeed anyone.

Then we see that there is an omission of divine titles within Mark's Gospel. Sometimes people think when you omit a divine title, even in your prayer, that you in some way are being dishonouring to the Lord Jesus Christ - well, this puts paid to that, because Mark leaves out divine titles. The only time that Christ is referred to as a King is in derision in Mark's account of the crucifixion. We do not read in Mark, as we do in Matthew, that 'They shall call His name Immanuel, God with us' - that doesn't mean He's not, or that Mark didn't believe it, it just means that what Mark is conveying to us is the servanthood of Christ. He's only once termed the 'Son of David', which is a regal title. Highly significant is the fact that He is frequently addressed in Mark's gospel as 'Master', and yet in parallel passages in the other Gospels, in the same instance, He's not called 'Master' but 'Lord'. For instance, I'll give you one example, Matthew chapter 8 and verse 25: 'And his disciples came to him, and awoke him, saying', as they were in the storm on the boat, 'Lord, save us: we perish'. Yet in Mark's account, in Mark 4:38: 'He', the Lord Jesus, it says, 'was in the hinder part of the ship, asleep on a pillow: and they awake him, and say unto him, Master, carest thou not that we perish?'. In Matthew He is 'Lord', in Mark He is 'Master'. I'll give you another example of it, if you look at Matthew chapter 17, the account of the Transfiguration. We read there that Peter, after seeing this great sight, and Elijah and Moses at either side of the Lord: 'said unto Jesus, Lord, it is good for us to be here'...and then he talks about making little booths, little temples to worship in. But Mark, when he gives his account in chapter 9 verse 5, says: 'And Peter answered and said to Jesus, Master, it is good for us to be here'. Even when you come to the betrayal of the Lord Jesus Christ in Matthew chapter 26, we find that around the table each disciple is asking themselves: 'Am I the one that is going to betray the Lord Jesus Christ?', and Peter said in verse 22 of Matthew 26 unto Jesus: 'Lord, is it I?'. Yet in Mark's Gospel 14:19 it says: 'They began to be sorrowful, and to say unto him one by one, Is it I? and another said, Is it I? - not 'Lord', just 'Is it I?''. The words of the dying thief are omitted from Mark's Gospel, what were they? 'Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom'. It's omitted from Mark because a servant doesn't have a kingdom, neither is he presented as Lord.

So Mark's message is reflected in the man who the Holy Spirit turned to to write the message - he was a servant who both failed and succeeded in service of others. But it's also reflected in his method, how he omits things concerning the Lord Jesus that speak of His royalty, or of His Lordship, or of His deity - not because he doesn't believe in it, but the Holy Spirit has given him the responsibility to set forth Christ as the Servant of Jehovah.

So we come thirdly to John Mark and his message. Now let me say a couple of things concerning his purpose in writing this Gospel. The first purpose I believe he had was to make
the good news accessible to Gentiles. This, if you like, is a missionary book. Mark's Gospel is a Gospel that was written, and you find that it omitted what we would call 'insider language'. He uses Roman terms because he's writing to Gentile people in a Roman world. He explains Aramaic words, that is the language spoken in the day of Jesus, because Gentiles wouldn't have understood it. Incidentally, there's a scarcity of Old Testament quotations in Mark's Gospel - because Gentiles would not have been familiar with Old Testament Scriptures. Now, if I had the time, we could take a lot of lessons in our evangelism out of the fact that Mark's Gospel was to make the good news accessible to those who were not insiders, to those who had never heard - you work that out for yourself.

Secondly, his purpose was to be an apologist of the cross of Jesus. In other words, he wants to set forth the significance of Jesus' death, explaining it. Mark, as you find, and we will as we go through it week by week, he wants to make clear that the death of Jesus was not a tragic accident, but it was part of God's plan from the very beginning. Jesus knew He was going to die, and indeed He told His disciples that He was going to die, even though they misunderstood Him. So what Mark wants to set forth is that God chose to bring His kingdom to bear through the shameful death of His chosen Servant - now that was a great stumbling block, not only to the Jew but to the Gentile: that Messiah should die in shame, that He should not only come as a Servant, but die on a cross as a criminal. The Greek mind and the Roman mind could not conceive of how a Saviour could die for others in such shame and ignominy, and then arise again. The preaching of the cross was a stumbling block, and so Mark wants to set forth an explanation of why He was to die.

It's interesting that today the cross is still a stumbling block to those who do not believe. Muslims, for instance, cannot understand that God would have allowed a great man - that's all they see Him as, or even a good prophet - to die in such a terrible way. They go as far in their theology to say that He didn't die. Some say He revived again, other Muslims say that He was replaced by a substitute before He died, but Mark's point is this: Jesus was not merely a good man, He wasn't even a great prophet, but He was the Son of God, and He must die, He must be delivered into the hands of wicked sinners, He must be slain if we are to be saved!

He has a gospel purpose, he has a purpose in explaining the cross, but here's the third - and I think the one that comes to the forefront, and perhaps the one that is most applicable to us here this morning. His third purpose was to encourage those who were facing persecution, Christians who were facing persecution. Now if Peter was the source for the information in Mark's Gospel, as we believe, it's very likely that Mark's Gospel was written in Rome. We know that Rome was not only a sprawling city of a population of several million, but we know that it was from Rome that great persecution of Christians came by Nero in AD 64 - and we believe that many Christians, probably including Paul and Peter, died for their faith during Nero's reign. So Mark's Gospel has this possible background of Rome, and it seems to be aimed at Christians who were not just facing persecution, but going to face even worse persecution in the days that lie ahead. So what Mark is doing here is preparing them, he is telling them of the Christ who suffered and how He suffered, and how it was predicted that He would suffer, and He comes as the Servant of Jehovah - it's been fore-ordained, and through this suffering our redemption would come - but also, not only He suffered, but His followers would suffer.

So in other words, what Mark is doing is he's writing to encourage a minority church in a hostile environment to keep the faith. The One who you worship suffered, He was ordained to suffer, He came to suffer, but through His suffering your redemption has been bought - and you will suffer, but you are suffering in the line of your Saviour. Are we not a minority church today? Do we not live in a hostile environment? Should we not look to the Lord Jesus Christ
and see the suffering Servant Saviour? That's why John Mark is arranging his material the way he does: he wants to show us Christ as the One who speaks, the One who acts and delivers in the midst of crises. In every age, whether you live under Neronian persecutions, whether you live during the time of Reformation where men of God have been burned at the stake, whether you live in the modern Western 21st-century of affluence and pleasure crazed society - in every age, in every circumstance the Christian needs to get a fresh focus on Christ.

I want to ask you today: have you lost focus of Him? My reason for embarking upon this study of Mark's Gospel is that we as God's people again will get taken up by seeing Jesus! How does Mark portray Jesus? He came not to be served, but to serve and give His life a ransom for many. As such, Christ is the Christ of the crisis, but He's all action in the crisis - and that's why, in Mark's Gospel, Mark uses the historical present tense 15 times: Jesus comes, not 'came', Jesus comes; Jesus says, not 'said', says; Jesus heals, not 'healed', heals - all in the present tense, what to communicate? To communicate that in the crisis of his life and the life of the disciples, He was active, He was busy, He was instrumental, He was moving, He was doing. In the same way in our crisis, in our persecution, in our difficulties: Christ is still being our Servant.

There are more miracles recorded in Mark than in any of the other Gospels, even though it is the shortest of the four. Every scene is brilliant and vivid and fast-moving - if you've ever read through Mark you'll notice the word 'immediately'. The Greek word is mentioned 42 times: immediately, immediately, immediately. The conjunction 'and' is frequent, indeed it begins 12 of Mark's 16 chapters - and, and, and. There's a rush of action, Christ's life is portrayed as super-busy. In chapter 3 we find that He has trouble finding time to eat, and in chapter 6 as well. What's Mark showing us? This is the Servant of Jehovah, and He's come to serve men at great cost, at great price, at great suffering. Wherever you find yourself today, He's still serving those in crisis.

R. Kent Hughes says: 'It takes a slow reader about two hours to read Mark through at a single sitting. If you take the time, you feel surrounded by the crowds, wearied by demands and besieged by the attacks of demons'. It's all about how Christ served - but the big question is: what does it mean to us? R. Kent Hughes in his commentary on Mark, which is excellent, at the beginning of his first chapter he tells a story about one of the world renowned scholars of the classics, Dr E .V. Rieu. He completed a great translation of Homer into modern English for Penguin Classics, some of you have seen them. In his late 60s, Kent Hughes tells the story that, being an agnostic at the end of his career, the publisher, Penguin publishers, came to him and approached him again and asked him to translate the Gospels. Can you imagine this: an agnostic classical scholar being asked to translate Matthew, Mark, Luke and John! Now, when Rieu's son heard about this, he was heard to say - listen carefully: 'It will be interesting to see what father will make of the four Gospels', then he paused, 'It will be even more interesting to see what the four Gospels make of father'. He didn't have to wonder very long - within a year's time E.V. Rieu, the lifelong agnostic, responded to the Gospels. As he translated them he faced Christ, and he became a committed Christian. His story is a testimony to the transforming power of opening up of God's word.

Now, as we open up Mark's Gospel in an in-depth study, and we see the Servant of Jehovah - the question is: not what will you make of Mark's gospel, or what will I make of it, but what will Mark's gospel make of you? I'll tell you what it will make of us if we respond to it: it will make us servants like the Master. It will make us servants who don't just run on theory, but on action. The freshness and the vigour of Mark will grip us and make us long to serve according to the example of our Lord Jesus Christ. I once read a doctor of the mind, I wish I could
remember his name, and he was asked the question: 'What advice would you give to someone who is depressed?'. Now I know this is a very carte blanche simplistic answer, but he said: 'The main thing I would tell them to do is go away and help someone else'.

If you like, this is what Mark is showing us. You're in persecution, you're in difficulty, you're suffering for your faith or for whatever reason. The best way to cope in the midst of that is to get a glimpse of your suffering serving Saviour, and to go away and forget about yourself for a wee while and serve others. The truth is, many of us want to serve Christ, we just don't want to be treated as a servant. I don't know whether Mark's abandonment by the apostle Paul in his first missionary journey was due to a shallow view, a simplistic carnal view of Christian service that he had. One thing is sure: we're going to see from Mark's Gospel that John Mark learned what perfect service was through the perfect Servant, the Lord Jesus Christ, the One who stooped to serve. We sang:

'His were the planets and stars in the sky,
His were the valleys and mountains on high,
His all earth's riches, from pole unto pole,
But He became poor to ransom my soul'.

Oh, we rejoice in it, we exalt in that truth! The condescension of Christ, the humiliation of Christ - but what about our condescension? What about my humiliation? What about becoming poor that I might make others rich? In 1878 when William Booth's Salvation Army had just been named, a man came over from the United States to enlist. He once dreamed of himself as a bishop in the church, and he crossed the Atlantic from America to England to become a member of the Salvation Army. His name was Samuel Logan Brengle, and he ended up being the head man, the First Commissioner in America. But when he first came and introduced himself to Booth, Booth accepted his services reluctantly and grudgingly. Booth said to Brengle: 'You've been your own boss too long', and in order to instil some humility into Brengle, he set him to work cleaning the boots of the other trainees. Brengle said to himself: 'Have I followed my own fancy across the Atlantic in order to black boots?'. Then, as if in a vision, he saw Jesus bending over the feet of rough unlettered fishermen, and he said: 'Lord, You washed their feet, I will black their boots'.

He came not to be served, but to serve - the question is: as we encounter God's Servant King, will we serve Him and serve others?

Father, help us these Sunday mornings through Mark or Peter's eyes to see the garden of tears, to see His hands and His feet, and let us learn how to serve, and in our lives enthrone Him, each other's needs to prefer - for it is Christ we are serving. Lord, we thank You for the Lord Jesus, and we pray that through these studies we will not only be taken up with Him, but we will become more like Him in our service of Him and of one another. Amen.

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We're looking this morning at verses 1 to 8. Now some people believe, some scholars, that verse 1 is in fact the title of Mark's Gospel. Of course, many of the first verses of the first chapters of books in the Bible are indeed the titles, if you like. There are others who believe that this verse 1 is referring to what follows in the next verse and right through to verse 8 or thereabouts: how the story of the Gospel began, the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Well, if you want to comprise those two views, verses 1-8 could comprise of, if you like, the beginning of the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It's how the whole story began.

Well, how did it begin? I wonder if I was to ask you the question: where did the Gospel begin? What would your answer be? It's a kind of tricky one, isn't it? Perhaps your answer would be: 'Well, it begins with the Nativity, Jesus being born, the Son of God, into the human race in a miraculous way at His conception, and then born in Bethlehem's manger'. Well, we've got a problem with that, because Mark, as we saw last week, doesn't have a nativity story - yet he has taken it upon himself, as verse 1 shows us, to write 'the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ'. So we would have to say that the account of the Gospel as such does not begin, essentially, with the birth of Christ. Indeed, Mark begins the beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ with the story of the ministry of John the Baptist.

Now you remember we outlined last week that Matthew's purpose in writing his Gospel was to show forth the King and His kingdom, and he gives us the Nativity story, and indeed the lineage of the Lord Jesus to show that He is of blood line of the King, and He is the promised Messiah-King. Luke's Gospel, the purpose of the writer is to show forth the human nature of the Lord Jesus Christ, and as such he gives us another genealogy of the Lord Jesus as a man. John's Gospel, the purpose is to set forth Jesus as the Son of God, as being divine, so he gives us this Nativity story, as it were, way back in eternity past: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God' - His sonship as the eternal Son of God, rather than as Son of Man.

Mark's purpose, of course, as we have said, is to set forth the Lord Jesus as the Servant of Jehovah. It appears that as Mark does this in his Gospel he's keen, dare we say even impatient, to launch into a presentation of the earthly service of the Lord Jesus to God and to all of mankind. Look at chapter 1 for instance: he rushes through the record of the ministry of John the Baptist in little more than eight verses, he rushes through the baptism of the Lord Jesus Christ, the temptation of the Saviour in a verse or two, to get to the record in verse 14 and following of Christ's ministry on the earth. So Mark is giving us a record of the Servant of Jehovah, and that record does not begin in Bethlehem's manger, but strangely it begins in a city called Babylon. Babylon?

Well, it's as if it begins there, because he takes us right back to the ministry of the evangelical
prophet Isaiah, who ministered to the Jews as they were facing captivity in Babylon because of their sins against God. We have in verse 2: 'As it is written in the prophets', some manuscripts say 'in the prophet Isaiah', and there is the prophecy: 'I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee. The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight'. So Mark, giving us an account of the beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, takes us back to the prophet Isaiah. He also quotes Malachi, and in fact he quotes him first in this verse 2, for it is he who said: 'I send my messenger before thy face', and then in verse 3 he quotes Isaiah.

Two quotes from the Old Testament, Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3. So right away, and we'll visit this in a moment or two, he's going back further than Bethlehem to establish the identity of the One who is the Servant of Jehovah. Mark is seeking to establish for us the Servant's identity, and in verse 1 he does it: 'The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God' - Jesus, the man who would be the Saviour of mankind; Christ, the anointed One who was prepared of God and prophesied in the Old Testament; and this One is none other than the Son of God in His divine being, He is the eternal pre-existent Son.

But this is Mark's point: where does the Gospel begin? The Servant of Jehovah begins in Old Testament prophecy, He is the Son of God. So Mark, as the Holy Spirit's inspired author, is now witnessing to the identity of this Servant of Jehovah. Mark is witnessing to it, and now he's pulling up, if you like, into the stand to witness, the prophets - Malachi and Isaiah. We will see in this account of verses 1-8 that he also calls up to the stand John the Baptist as another witness to the identity of the Servant of Jehovah. Later, God willing next week, in verses 9-13 we find that he also calls up the Father and the Spirit to witness as to who the identity is of this Servant of Jehovah.

But in another sense, the beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is now actualised in time in the ministry of John the Baptist, who is the fulfilment of Isaiah and Malachi's prophecies in verses 2 and 3. So, prophetically this Gospel of Jesus Christ begins for Mark, prophetically, in the prophecies of Malachi and Isaiah and all the other prophets - but actually, Mark is saying to us, actually in time the ministry and the beginning of the Gospel starts through John the Baptist. Now there are several points here of interest - one being, in our particular society today and in the church, that the Gospel has been redefined by many. You often hear it said in debates on the radio, even in the press, that the Gospel is 'to love your neighbour'. Well, yes, that statement and many more are contained within the gospels, but that of course is not the Gospel. The problem takes place when people maintain that the Gospel is a genre of literature setting forth a historical record of the whole life and ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ. Now that's true, the gospel, or a gospel is a form of literature - Matthew, Mark, Luke and John - but that is not the Gospel. We see that very clearly, because we don't have a record in Mark's Gospel of the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ. His Nativity is absent.

So we're left with the question: then what is the Gospel? Is it simply the whole story of Jesus' life? Mark would indicate that it is not, because he leaves out His birth, so what is the Gospel in essence? I believe the answer is given to us by Mark - the beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God - and where does it all begin? Not just in Old Testament prophecy, prophetically in Malachi and Isaiah, but actually where did it all begin? In the fulfilment of Malachi and Isaiah's prophecy in the person of John the Baptist, and what John the Baptist preached, and who John the Baptist pointed to. Matthew Henry puts it well when he says in his commentary: 'The Gospel did not begin so soon as the birth of Christ, for He took time to increase in wisdom and stature. Not so late as His entering upon His public ministry, but half a year before when John the Baptist began to preach the same doctrine that Christ afterward
preached'. I believe Matthew Henry is correct, but that poses some questions for us this morning, and I believe their answers will be deeply instructive and beneficial to us.

The first question is: did the Gospel begin with John the Baptist? The second question is: was the Gospel preached by John the Baptist the same Gospel preached by Jesus? Well the answer to the first question I think is clear in Luke's Gospel chapter 16:16, which says: 'The law and the prophets were until John: since that time the kingdom of God is preached, and every man presseth into it' - the kingdom being preached at the beginning by John the Baptist. Peter actually, when he recounts during the occasion of the choosing of Matthias in Acts chapter 1:22, he records there that: 'Beginning from the baptism of John, unto that same day that he was taken up from us', that is the Lord, 'must one be ordained to be a witness with us of his resurrection' - speaking of how an apostle had to be a witness in some shape or form of the ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ, he records that ministry as being from John the Baptist, the baptism of John to when the Lord was taken up from them after His resurrection.

So I think that's clear, and in verse 14 of Mark's Gospel we see that after John was put in prison, in chapter 1: 'Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel' - preaching exactly the same thing as John the Baptist preached. So then, how did the Gospel begin in John the Baptist, and what was his message? I want to give you the answer to those questions under two headings - first of all: the Baptist's life was an illustration of the Gospel; and secondly: the Baptist's preaching was an articulation of the Gospel.

So first of all: the Baptist's life was an illustration of the Gospel. In Matthew 11, Jesus called John the Baptist 'the greatest of the prophets', and of course he is identified in the Old Testament prophetically and in the New in Matthew 17 with Elijah the prophet, and we see him very similar in his demeanour and his dress. But this is Mark's point, I believe, and we could go into all those little intricate details and miss the point: John the Baptist lived, in his life, the message of the Gospel. He was a witness to Christ and to the Gospel by his lifestyle, and that is one of the senses in which he begins the beginning of the Gospel of Christ.

Now let me show you this. Take, for instance, his home - verse 4 says he lived in the wilderness. William Hendrickson, the commentator, gives us a very graphic picture of what the wilderness was in those days: 'John was preaching', he says, 'in the wilderness of Judaea, a term indicating the rolling badlands between the country of Judaea to the West and the Dead Sea, and the lower Jordan to the east, stretching northward about the point where the Jabbok flows into the Jordan. It is indeed a desolation, a vast undulating expanse of barren chalky soil covered with pebbles, broken stones and rocks. Here and there a bit of brushwood appears with snakes crawling underneath'. Another person says: 'It shimmers in the haze of the heat, the limestone rock is hot and blistering, and sounds hollow to the feet as if there was some vast furnace underneath. In the Old Testament it is sometimes called 'Jeshimon', which means 'the devastation''. Hendrickson goes on: 'It is evident from Isaiah and John's preaching as recorded by Mark, that the wilderness through which a path must be made ready for the Lord is, in the final analysis, the people's hearts that were inclined to all evil'. So John, where he lived, was actually living out a pictorial illustration of the message that he was preaching to prepare the way for the Lord to come to the hearts of men and women in Israel. His home speaks forth of the wilderness of the hearts of men.

Secondly, his life illustrates the Gospel in the clothing that he wore - verse 6, if you look at it, he wore a garment that was woven from camels hair, and a leather thong about his waist. Just like Elijah in 2 Kings 1:8, and of course Elijah was expected by the Jews to be the forerunner of
Messiah. But here is Mark's point: when you looked at John the Baptist, as one has said before, you weren't reminded of the fashionable orators of the day but of the ancient prophets who lived close to the great simplicities, and avoided the soft and effeminate luxuries which kill the soul. His home and his clothing were speaking of the absolute poverty of humanity to come to God. Here he is, calling the people out into the wilderness to recognise their inability before God.

His home, his clothing, thirdly his food - verse 6 tells us that he ate locusts, which indeed was permitted in Leviticus 11 - mightn't be very appetising, but it was allowed - and wild honey. Wild honey was often bountiful in the clefts of the rock, and there's a lovely thought even in that. Whatever these foods were, and whatever his diet consisted of - I don't think this is an exclusive statement that that's all he ate, but it's a general reference to the simple food that John ate. It was of the simplest fare imaginable. Now, think of his home, think of his clothing, think of his food, and all that is being conveyed here by Mark is that this man John the Baptist subordinated these things which are so basic, yet so important to us in our lives - home, clothing and food - he subordinated these personal things to the glorious task of making Christ and the Gospel known.

Perhaps he could have been rich, I don't know, but he chose to be poor. One thing is certain: he became a fitting herald of Him who has not where to lay His head. He became an apt servant to the Servant of Jehovah. What was the result of this lifestyle that illustrated the Gospel? Well, it's found in verse 5, we're told that 'there went out unto him all the land of Judaea, and they of Jerusalem, and were all baptized'. Now that is in the imperfect indicative, where it says 'Then went out unto him'. Now that simply means this: it's describing a steady stream of people who kept coming to the baptism. Now 'all' there cannot mean 'all' of course, many feel that it could be up to 300,000 people who came to John for baptism - but it's again the use of hyperbole, in other words he's exaggerating to make the point. It wasn't every citizen in Jerusalem and Judaea came out and was baptised - no, but generally there was a widespread acceptance and an embracing of the ministry of John and his preaching. All classes, we know from the Gospel, came out - in Matthew 3 the Pharisees and the Sadducees, some of them went out to hear him; in Luke 3 the publicans or tax collectors went out; in Luke 3 again, verse 10, the rich and the poor were there; Luke 3:14, the soldiers went out to listen to his preaching.

Why was he so successful in his ministry? Well, obviously, the main reason was that it was ordained of God. He was the fulfilment of this prophecy of the one who would prepare the way of the Lord, but on a human level surely it is not insignificant to see that this preacher's life paralleled his message, and what he said agreed with how he lived. In other words, John the Baptist was a walking Gospel, and his whole life illustrated it. How different we are! How different I am! We talk about sacrifice, we talk about giving to Gospel causes, but perhaps we just go on our merry way living in the luxuries that everybody else lives in, without any inconvenience for the cause of the Servant of Jehovah. Not John the Baptist, and I think that was one of the reasons that people listened to him.

Do we, as Christians, go against the trends of the day to make a point for the sake of the Gospel of Christ? That's what John the Baptist was doing, and though he was fulfilling prophecy, in this sense it is irrelevant: we need to grasp the point that John's dress, John's lifestyle were a protest against the godlessness, the self-serving materialism of the day, even in the echelons of the religious establishment. His life was a call, literally, to separation: 'Come out!'.
Fourthly, one other factor that was illustrative of the Gospel - not only his home, his clothing, his food - was his humility. As the Sun of Righteousness rose on the horizon of Israelite history, John, the North Star who was guiding folk to Christ, eclipsed. Jesus came on the scene, John disappeared. Humility. We read that John was quite happy to do that, in John 3 John said: 'A man can receive nothing, except it be given him from heaven. Ye yourselves bear me witness, that I said, I am not the Christ, but that I am sent before him'. He saw himself, from John 3 we know, as the friend of the Bridegroom, rejoicing in the voice of the Bridegroom. In verse 30 of John 3 he speaks these immortal words: 'He must increase, but I must decrease'.

Humility - now we'll look at this a little bit later, but save to say that there's a great lesson in this for any of us who are preachers. I have felt the lesson deeply as I've been studying. R. Kent Hughes in his commentary makes the point of how John embodied the message that he preached, and he quoted referring to 1877 Yale Lectures on preaching that were given by Phillip Brooks. When he was lecturing he gave this foundational definition of what preaching is, this is what he said, I'm quoting: 'Truth through personality is our description of real preaching. The truth must come through the person, not merely over his lips, it must come through his character, his affections, his whole intellectual and moral being. It must come genuinely through him'. He goes on to quote Bishop Quayle who said almost the same thing by asking the question: 'Preaching is the art of making a sermon and delivering it?', to which he answered, 'Why, no! That is not preaching, preaching is the art of making a preacher and delivering that'.

John the Baptist was a living sermon that God delivered to Israel. E. M. Bounds put it like this: 'It takes 20 years to make a preacher, because it takes 20 years to make a man'. John, from his mother's womb, was filled by the Spirit of God. He was a Nazarite from birth, totally committed to God - what a message!

Secondly let's look at the Baptist's preaching - how was he the beginning of the Gospel in his preaching? Well, his preaching, I believe, was an articulation of the Gospel. Malachi 3:1 spoke prophetically of him, Isaiah 40:3 - Malachi says he was a messenger, and Isaiah 40 said he would be a voice. The significance of that is that for 400 years after the prophet Malachi, before we come to Matthew's Gospel, there was no voice from God - God did not speak to the nation of Israel. Now John would be that voice in the wilderness coming to prepare the way for the Son of God.

Now we have to understand a bit of the custom of the day to appreciate what this preparation of the way of the Lord really means. In ancient times, before a King visited any part of his realm, there was a messenger that was sent on before him to prepare the way. Often, depending on how high and mighty the Emperor was, it was a band of engineers and workmen that would go along the road to prepare the way of the King. The thoroughfare may have been rough and mountainous, and you can just imagine that these people in their day would have been familiar, nearly every generation witnessed such road making for their Emperors. Josephus the historian describes the march of Roman Emperor Vespasian, who succeeded Nero, and he says that the engineers went before Vespasian, and they were to make the road even and straight - if anywhere there was roughness or hardness, they were to smooth it over, to plane it, to cut down even woods if it hindered the march of the army.

Here we have an illustration that people would have understood: John the Baptist is coming, preparing the way of the Lord out in the wilderness, living like an Old Testament prophet; and he's now communicating that he wants to prepare a way in the hearts of the men and women of Israel for the Lord coming. Now how did he do it? We see how he depicted it, but how did he
actually do it? He did it through his preaching. Somewhere in the last, I don't know how many years, the evangelical church has got away from preaching, and preaching is in ill-repute. 'Do anything, do everything but preach!', but it is by the foolishness of preaching that God has ordained to save, and through his preaching he prepared the way of the Lord, and in his preaching he was beginning the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, articulating the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

There are essentials, I believe, in John's ministry to show us what good Gospel preaching is. Let me show you this, how his preaching was an articulation of the Gospel. First of all verse 4: he preached the remission of sins, through the baptism of the remission of sins. Now 'remission' simply means 'forgiveness' or 'sending away', sending away sin. In other words, John the Baptist, through this baptism - and I believe that it's obvious he received confession before he baptised anyone, confession of their sins - he was encouraging the people to see their need of forgiveness, and to see that they could not achieve forgiveness themselves, and then to point to how that forgiveness could be obtained. He's preparing the way for the Lord, preaching remission of sins.

Secondly we see that he's preaching repentance. Verse 4, it's a baptism of repentance that he is administrating. In other words, you've got to forsake sin and turn to God. One commentator refers to the fact of how baptism was a wholly novel idea, no one else had ever baptised like John. The only thing that ever existed that was quite close was the fact that whenever Gentiles converted to Judaism, they were ritually washed from their defilement and uncleanness that they had accrued through their past Gentile sinfulness. But the Jews were now being asked themselves, God's true chosen people, to be washed - this was unheard of, Jews being baptised? John was wanting to point out that all need repentance, everyone, Jews and Gentiles. So he's preaching the forgiveness of sins, that we need it; and he's pointing, as we'll see in a moment, to the One who can get it for us; but he's also telling us that repentance is necessary, and it's not a cheap grace or a cheap forgiveness.

The Jews had to go out into the wilderness, and I just suppose that they would have been reminded of the 40 years that they wandered around in the wilderness because of their backsliding and their disobedience - but the purpose of all of it, John's life and John's preaching, was to get them to that point of repentance so that when the Lord Jesus came He would have acceptance. How is our brokenness for sin? You know, this is the preparation for the Gospel that is necessary, this is the beginning of the Gospel in all of our lives - 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted'. I have a firm conviction that a great many of the false professions that are around today, and the so-called backsliders, are because there was a lack of repentance when they professed Jesus Christ as the Saviour. They took hold of Christ, but didn't let go of their sin. The fact remains from scripture that that means they didn't take hold of Christ at all.

He preached remission of sins, he preached repentance, and then in verses 7 and 8 he preached Christ! How else could we see that his preaching was an articulation of the Gospel except in this very point: the pure Gospel is Christ! May I just say that it's interesting, in passing, that John the Baptist did not magnify baptism. I believe, of course, in believer's baptism - but isn't it interesting that that wasn't the theme of his message? He baptised, but the theme was Christ! He magnified Jesus Christ, and often we get sidetracked from Christ even by sound doctrine and true doctrine, and Christ is eclipsed by our doctrine! John preached Christ. How did he preach Christ? One, Christ's preeminence. Matthew Henry says: 'Christ is so high, so great, that John - though one of the greatest that was born of women - thinks himself unworthy to be employed in the meanest office about Him, even to stoop down and untie His
shoes - 'I am unworthy'. Christ's preeminence! He set Christ above himself, and he set himself as low as he could in the presence of Christ.

Now sandals today are all mod-con, but in those days they were composed of leather soles, fastened to the foot by straps passed through the toes. The roads were unsurfaced, in dry weather they were dust heaps, in wet weather they were rivers of mud. But according to ancient Jewish tradition, the difference between a disciple and a servant or a slave was this: a disciple was willing to perform every service for his master that a menial servant would have performed, except untie his sandals. So what may well be given to us here are the three ascending degrees of humility in John's life - note it: one, the disciple is willing to render almost every service. A disciple will do everything except untie a man's sandals. Two, the slave, the servant must be willing to render every service including untlying sandals - but here's what John says, this is where he was: the Baptist considers himself even unfit or unworthy to render the service of untlying his Master's sandal straps. The preeminence of Christ - so high, and I so low!

He preached Christ's preeminence, secondly he preached Christ's power. He says: 'He that comes after me in time is mightier than I. I baptised you with water, I drenched you', literally, 'immersed you in water, externally cleansing you. But He will come and drench you with the Holy Spirit, cleanse you from within to without'. Of course, John could only prepare their hearts, Jesus had the power to mend them. He pointed to Christ, pre-eminent, powerful. He pointed to His promise, that He would baptise them with the Holy Spirit - and we know from John 3 that this was the new birth, we know from Acts chapter 2 that in the Day of Pentecost it was realised in the birth of the church and the coming of the Spirit. His promise came true! John preaching this gospel, the preeminence of Christ, Christ's power, Christ's promise, and also - though it's not found in Mark - Christ's passion.

He preached the cross. In John 1 we hear the Baptist saying, verse 29 and later on, 'Behold, the Lamb of God, who taketh away the sin of the world'. He knew the basis for the remission of sins was the shedding of the blood of the Lamb. So, in John's life we see the beginning of the Gospel illustrated through his lifestyle. We see it articulated in his preaching. In a nutshell, he preached Christ and Him crucified. That is why Paul would say to us: 'I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified'. How do we measure to John? But you know, Mark is giving us account of John the Baptist's beginning of the ministry and Gospel of Jesus Christ - and do you know what John and Mark have in common? They're always directing people's attention to Jesus. Mark never names himself once in his Gospel, he alludes to it in chapter 14 as we saw last week. And John is always pointing people to Christ - the Baptist witnessed Christ to, eventually, the expense of his ministry which faded away, and his life as he was decapitated by Herod.

Can I ask you as we close this morning: what is it costing us to be servants of the Servant of Jehovah? Does it cost us our home? Our clothing? Our food? Our pride? Does it cost us ourselves, as we point from ourselves to Jesus? Dr G. J. Jeffrey was speaking many years ago when old telephone exchanges were in operation - some of you remember that. He said these words: 'When we make a telephone call and there's some delay, the operator will often say, 'I'm trying to connect you', and when the connection has been effected the operator fades out and leaves us in direct contact with the person to whom we wish to speak'. He said these words: 'John's one aim was not to occupy the centre of the stage himself, but try to connect men with the One who was greater and stronger than he, and men listened to him because he pointed not to himself but to the One whom all men need'.

17
Lord Jesus Christ, we pray, be our vision. We ask that we will take the exhortation of Mark and John, and look to Jesus and Him alone for our salvation, for the remission of our sins, for the power to repent - the pre-eminent Christ, the powerful Christ, the Christ who gives the promise of God, the passionate Christ who died for us that we might live. Lord, let us see at all times Jesus, and in seeing Him as the Servant of Jehovah, let us learn what it is to serve, let us take the position of John the Baptist - feeling himself unworthy to unloose the latchet of the sandals of Christ. May we perpetually decrease, and Christ eternally increase to the glory of God. Amen.

Transcribed by Andrew Watkins, Preach The Word – July 2006
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Now we're turning to, first of all, Mark's Gospel chapter 1 - but we've another two readings in Matthew chapter 3 and Luke chapter 3 - as we consider this morning 'The Servant’s Baptism', the baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ.

First reading, chapter 1 of Mark, beginning at verse 9: "And it came to pass in those days, that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and was baptized of John in Jordan. And straightway coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens opened, and the Spirit like a dove descending upon him: And there came a voice from heaven, saying, Thou art my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased".

Then Matthew chapter 3, for Matthew's account of the same incident, beginning to read at verse 13 of Matthew 3: "Then cometh Jesus from Galilee to Jordan unto John, to be baptized of him. But John forbad him, saying, I have need to be baptized of thee, and comest thou to me? And Jesus answering said unto him, Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness. Then he suffered him. And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him: And lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased".

Then Luke's Gospel chapter 3, for Luke's account of the baptism of the Lord Jesus, Luke 3 verse 21: "Now when all the people were baptized, it came to pass, that Jesus also being baptized, and praying, the heaven was opened, And the Holy Ghost descended in a bodily shape like a dove upon him, and a voice came from heaven, which said, Thou art my beloved Son; in thee I am well pleased".

For the last time, the door of the carpenter's shop in Nazareth swings shut, and the Carpenter makes His way toward the river Jordan, where the multitudes are beginning to gather. A gruff, rustic, unorthodox preacher is proclaiming and administering a baptism of repentance for sins. His cry is: 'Repent ye, and be baptised for the remission of sins, for the kingdom of God is at hand!'. He is a prophet like unto Elijah. He is as fearless as Elijah.

The humble Carpenter of Nazareth pushes His way through the throng, and joins the candidates for baptism. Now I'm sure you can imagine John the Baptist's shock as he sees the face of his next candidate for the baptism of repentance: the holy, sinless face of our Lord Jesus Christ. Let me say that Mark does not record, as Matthew, that John protested and attempted to prevent the Lord Jesus Christ being baptised, saying 'I have need to be baptized of You, and do You come to me?'. Jesus humbly replies, according to Matthew, that it is appropriate, necessary for Him to be baptised, in order that - as one version puts it - 'Permit it at this time, for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness'.

But Mark does not record these features, Mark records no objections to the baptism of the Lord Jesus by John the Baptist. I believe that here is a significant feature because Mark, of course, as we found out in our introduction, and last week through this study of the Gospel, Mark is
emphasising the servanthood of our Lord Jesus Christ, rather than the Kingship and the royalty of Jesus - so there is no objection for the Servant to be baptised.

Now our consideration, of course, in these studies, is Mark's Gospel - but if we were to look briefly just now at Matthew's account in Matthew 3, and Luke's account in Luke 3, you would find some profound thoughts and lessons in the differences, the distinctions in their accounts as compared to Mark's. Just look at two with me: first of all, in Luke chapter 3 we find that Luke records that Jesus was praying when the heavens opened and the Holy Spirit descended in the form of a dove. Now we don't know what His prayer was, it's not recorded for us. His prayer may have been, indeed, that He would receive the Spirit of God without measure. Whilst we don't know the exact details of His prayer, the answer to whatever the prayer was, was that the heavens were opened, and the Spirit did descend and enable Him for His Messianic ministry. So He got an answer, and that's what the answer was - which may give us a clue as to Jesus' prayer.

Here's the significance of what Luke is emphasising when he talks of the Lord Jesus praying at His baptism. Luke often emphasises, if you're familiar with his Gospel, Jesus praying, and specifically Jesus praying as a man, a human being who is in absolute dependence upon God. We know that Luke emphasises the humanity of Jesus. Take Luke 11 for instance, verse 1: 'It came to pass, that, as he was praying in a certain place, when he ceased, one of his disciples said unto him, Lord, teach us to pray, as John also taught his disciples', and then He teaches them the Disciples' prayer 'Our Father, who art in heaven'. In verse 13, then the Lord Jesus, having taught them a little bit more about prayer, says: 'If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children: how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him'. Praying for the Holy Spirit is emphasised in Luke's Gospel, and here we see Him at His baptism, and Luke records Him praying, the heavens opening, and the Spirit of God descending. There's a great lesson in Luke's Gospel when we look at the prayer life of our Lord Jesus, because it teaches, I believe, that our dependence on God is directly proportionate to the quality of our prayer life. I wonder how we measure up?

Then secondly, if you look at Matthew's account of the baptism of Jesus, Matthew tells us that when John saw Jesus coming, he looked at Him and said - recorded in verse 14 of Matthew 3 - 'I have need to be baptized of You, and do You come to me?'. Bible teacher and commentator G. Campbell Morgan says these words: 'It is of supreme importance that we understand that when John said that, he did not know who Jesus was, he did not know that He was the Messiah'. Now that might strike you as incorrect, but I ask you the question: how well did John the Baptist really know the Lord Jesus? Of course, they may have been companions in childhood, we've no record of that. They certainly were related, as second cousins. John's mother Elisabeth seems to have been informed about who the Lord Jesus was - she refers to Him in Luke's Gospel chapter 1 as 'My Lord'. We are left with conjecture, asking the question: did Elisabeth convey to her son, John the Baptist, some of the knowledge that she had about who Jesus was? Nazareth, where Jesus lived, and Hebron, where John the Baptist was brought up were separated, but it is not impossible that they crossed paths in their childhood, and certainly it is likely that they met up as a family as they went on their pilgrimage to Jerusalem at various festivals in the year.

Yet the fact remains that on two occasions in John's Gospel chapter 1, John the Baptist says distinctly that he did not know the Messiah until the Spirit of God descended and lit upon Him. So from John's own mouth we've the confession that he did not know that Jesus was the Messiah - yet, according to Matthew chapter 3, when John looked into the eyes of this One who
came to be baptised, he said: 'No! I'm not going to baptise You! I should be baptised by You, not me baptising You!'.

Now I believe that the only answer to that seeming dilemma is the fact that when John refused to baptise Jesus initially, that this was a revelation, a prophetic declaration given to John by God, to show the sinlessness of Jesus as the Son of God. There's no other explanation - for on the one hand, John says 'I didn't know who the Messiah was', and yet he refuses baptism to Jesus because he feels unworthy. Of course John himself in chapter 3 of John's Gospel, that is John the Baptist, says: 'A man can receive nothing, except it be given him from heaven'. John, we know, was given a sign to know who the Messiah was, in John 1:33 we read he says: 'I knew him not: but he that sent me to baptize with water, the same said unto me, Upon whom thou shalt see the Spirit descending, and remaining on him, the same is he which baptizeth with the Holy Ghost'.

Now let me say that this is very important: this was not John the Baptist's opinion of Jesus, but it was a divine revelation and declaration that this is the sinless Son of God. Here's why it is important: because the whole crowd would have assumed that Jesus was coming to be baptised with the baptism of repentance for the same reason that everybody else was coming - because they were sinners in need of God's forgiveness - but by this divine declaration and revelation it was clear that Jesus was different.

Now this brings us to the salient issue, I believe, when we consider the baptism of Jesus. Whatever Gospel record we read of Jesus' baptism, the big question the careful reader is left asking is: why was Jesus Christ, the Son of God, baptised? It has to be said that the baptism of Jesus does seem to cause problems for many. Someone has said: 'This could not have been the baptism of repentance, as Jesus had nothing to repent of'. What do you think? How would you answer? Here's how Campbell Morgan answers that question, and I favour his explanation though it seems a little shocking in the first instance, he says: 'He was baptised', that is, Jesus, 'as a repenting soul. His, also, was a baptism of repentance. His, also, was a baptism of the confession of sins. In that hour He repented, He confessed sins, but the repentance was not for Himself, the sins were not His own. In that hour He identified Himself with the multitude who had been thronging out to the baptism, identified Himself with them in the consciousness of sin, in repentance for it, in the confession of it. In that hour of baptism we see the most solemn and wonderful sight of the Servant of God who had come from the silence and seclusion of Nazareth, taking upon Himself the burden of human sin, counting it as if it were His own sin, doing that to which an apostolic writer ultimately referred by declaring: 'He was made sin". This is perhaps why Martin Luther, the reformer, in his book 'Table Talks' said that our New Testament really begins here at the Jordan.

Now let's see Mark's, in particular, fourfold emphasis concerning the baptism of the Servant of Jehovah - how Mark gives it to us. First of all, the significance of the baptism of Jesus is explained in that it is the Servant's identification with sinners. Why was Jesus Christ, the Son of God, baptised? It is the Servant of Jehovah's identification with sinners, and we've touched on this a little bit. Let me expand, Hebrews chapter 2 and verse 17 says that the Saviour had to be made like unto His brethren in all things. Isaiah 53 and verse 12 tells us that the Messiah had to be numbered with the transgressors. So, as in His incarnation, so also Jesus in His baptism - mark this - was made in the likeness of sinful flesh. Now, when Jesus came as a man, there was no difference that you could have seen between Him and any other member in humanity. There was no beauty in Him that we should desire Him, He wasn't a foot taller than everybody else, there wasn't a halo around His head or an aura about Him. He looked like any
other man, He lived like any other man apart from sin. That is why He came in the likeness of sinful flesh, and in the same sense the reason why He is being baptised as any other sinner is that He is coming in the likeness of sinful flesh.

'Jesus' was a very common name in Palestine during the time of Jesus' nativity - it was like 'John' or 'James' today. He came from Nazareth, and we know from Nathaniel's confession, he asked the question: 'Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?'. Incidentally, in Matthew's record of the baptism of Jesus, it just says that Jesus came out of Galilee to be baptised. Whereas Mark emphasises more specifically, he says: 'He came out of Nazareth of Galilee'. Despised and rejected of men, a Man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief - now why is He being baptised? It's all, just like His incarnation, that He might identify with humanity and the sinful, fallen depravity of humanity.

Of course our Lord did not come confessing His own sins, He had no sins of His own - but this is the point: He came to make Himself one with those who were confessing their sins. In other words, He was alloying himself with the race He had come to redeem, and the preliminary step to becoming the substitute for sinners was to be baptised in this baptism of repentance. What the Lord Jesus Christ is doing as the Servant of Jehovah, is He is identifying with sinners, He is symbolising how He will take the sinner's place in physical death. So, just as John the Baptist in his preaching and his baptism was preparing the way of the Lord, by baptising the Lord Jesus Christ he is actually preparing the way of the Lord's substitution.

The explanation is clear from Luke 12, from the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, where He says Himself in verse 50: 'I have a baptism to be baptized with; and how am I straitened till it be accomplished!'. He had been baptised already by the baptism of John, but the baptism He is speaking of is the baptism of Calvary, where He would be baptised, 'immersed' is the literal word, drenched in the judgemental wrath of God as the substitute for sinners. Isaiah 53:6: 'All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all'. Remember, it wasn't long after this baptism of Jesus that John the Baptist said, recorded in John's Gospel 1 verse 29, 'Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world'.

The baptism of Jesus, first of all, is explained as the Servant of Jehovah's identification with sinners. Now there's great comfort there in that thought to all of us, or at least there ought to be, because this means that though sinless, though perfect, though holy, the Lord Jesus Christ is able to sympathise with our struggles with sin and with temptation, because though He never sinned, He has actually entered into the shame of sin. That is profound, and it is very comforting for us as sinners! But there is also a challenge in this thought, we need to ask the question of ourselves: how do we behave towards those who are struggling in sin around us? We often are at great pains to disassociate ourselves from sinners and from the type of sins that they sin in, but this causes us to consider: what was it for Christ to identify with sinners? It was a greater cost than it would ever cost us to identify with them! But His great cost to Himself meant great gain to us, His utter selflessness in being willing to lose all reputation to be identified with sinful men.

There's two lessons I want to give you out of this. First of all there's a lesson for us in our evangelism: what does it cost us to reach the lost? I've often said, and I think it's correct, if you want to know how much evangelism is done by a church, analyse their finances as to how much is spent on it - but you know, there's more than money involved in the cost to reach the lost, there often is inconvenience, there can even be a loss of reputation. Whatever the cost is to reputation or self-serving purpose, Jesus is giving us an example that whatever the cost is,
however high it is, or broad, or deep, we ought to identify with sinners! If He could do it, ought we not to do it?

I often think of Ezekiel, where he sits by the river Chebar with the exiled people of Israel in Babylon. There they are, dejected, away from their Holy Land, and he says in chapter 3 and verse 15 of his prophecy: 'I sat where they sat'. Alexander Whyte, speaking of General Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, says this of him: 'The General sits down on the same form, himself beside the off-scouring of the city, thus it is that he gets his penitent form so well filled, and his Salvation Army so well recruited. It was something not very unlike that when He, who knew no sin, came to the Jordan waters along with the Roman soldiers and the Jewish publicans who were there confessing and forsaking their sin'. What a lesson in evangelism!

There's also a lesson in appreciation, that is, appreciation of other men's ministries. This is the Lord of heaven, the Creator of the earth, the Son of God, and He comes to hear the preaching of John the Baptist and undergo his baptism! One old commentator called William Burkitt put it like this: 'Thence learn that the greatest persons should neither think themselves too great nor too good to come unto the ministers of God to hear the word from their mouth; for Christ, the Son of God, was content to be baptised of John, a mean person in comparison to Himself. How dare, then, the greatest upon earth despise the ministry of a man being appointed of God?'. Christ appreciated the ministry of John the Baptist - do we appreciate other men and women's ministries, even if they don't always agree with us?

Well, the Servant's identification with sinners is, I believe, what Mark would first teach us. Then secondly, we see, I believe, outlined here the Servant's consecration as Saviour. What I'm talking about is that there is a decision made here by the Lord Jesus, a commitment, dedication of Himself to God. For 30 years He had stayed in Nazareth faithfully doing His days work, discharging His duties in the workplace, probably at home after the decease, we think, of Joseph. He must have longed for a sign to lead him out into the Father's will for His life's purpose, His Father's business. As we see from the Gospels, the emergence of John the Baptist was that sign, and the moment He knew John was there He launches Himself out upon His life's task. His baptism by John the Baptist signifies His entire consecration of Himself to be the world's sin-bearer.

In other words, by being baptised He is yielding Himself up without any reserve to do His Father's will, even if it involved the cross. We know that this Gospel is an apology, an explanation of Christ's cross. Now the issue faces us, the applicative challenge is: do we as the servants of the Lord, the servants of Christ, surrender ourselves to God, whatever the consequences may be? This is what the Lord was doing, consecrating Himself to be the Saviour, to fulfil all righteousness as He says in Matthew. It is the spirit that we find in Esther when she says: 'If I perish, I perish! I'm going in to save God's people, and this man could chop my head off with the drop of a word, or even a gesture, but if I perish, I perish!'. Like Luther, standing before that great court in Worms, indicted by the Church of Rome, he explains the reason why he believes in this doctrine of grace, and justification by faith, and after outlining it and the fallacies of Rome, he says: 'Here I stand, I can do no other!'. That is the spirit of the Lord we see in His baptism.

Prophetically it's outlined for us in Psalm 40, where He is shown as saying to the Father: 'Lo, I come: in the volume of the book it is written of me, I delight to do thy will, O my God: yea, thy law is within my heart. I have preached righteousness in the great congregation: lo, I have not refrained my lips, O LORD, thou knowest'. He is consecrating Himself as Saviour. Though He is truly God, He was a man; though He was a Son, He became a Servant; and now as He is about
to enter into His life's ministry, He consecrated Himself to do the will of the Father, whatever that may be. I think that's a tremendous commentary on a commonly misunderstood verse in Hebrews 5 verse 8 which says: 'Though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered'.

My friend, in every life there come moments of decision, and they have to be accepted or rejected. Do you know what God's will for your life is? Has it been made clear? I know it's a very profound subject, the will of God, but perhaps there's someone here this morning and you know what God's will is - but have you submitted to the will of God and consecrated yourself to be the servant of the Lord? Verse 10 uses that phrase 'straightway' or 'immediately', which is right throughout the whole of Mark's Gospel, and it's speaking specifically of how Jesus came out of the water. What Mark is describing is the promptness in His service after He consecrated Himself to serve the Lord as Saviour to the world. Immediately after that consecration He is engaged in the act of service.

How long is it since you have been saved? Or how long is it since you consecrated your life to the Lord? How is your service now? This baptism of Jesus was the Servant's consecration as Saviour. But thirdly, see that it is also the Servant's recognition by the Father. So there is identification with sinners, there is consecration as Saviour, but thirdly there is recognition by the Father. The heavens open and He says to the Son: 'You are my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased', and the Spirit descends as a dove. What this is is approval from God, it is God's ratification - in other words, God is owning Him. W. Kelly, the brethren writer, says: 'Could heaven behold unmoved such grace? Impossible!' What meaning had the act of baptism in the mind of God? Who could understand what the tearing of the heavens meant to Jesus as the Son of God? Who could understand what those approving words: 'This is my beloved Son', or 'You are my beloved Son', what that meant to the Son of God? What it meant even to the people of Israel, who it says, at least John the Baptist, heard it in the record of the other Gospels? Because God had not spoken in such a manner since the law of God was given at Sinai's Mount! What did it mean?

Of course, these words are a combination of Psalm 2:7 and Isaiah 42:1: 'This is my beloved son'. But notice that Mark records not as Matthew, Matthew says God said: 'This is my beloved Son', whereas Mark records: 'You are my beloved Son'. Mark presents the story as a personal experience which Jesus had, not in any sense a demonstration to the crowd: 'You are my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased'. What I think that is signifying is that at the baptism Jesus submitted Himself to God, and at that moment He was approved by God, and this was a personal approval of the silent years of Jesus' life for 30 years in obscurity - but it is also an approval of the work that He's about to embark on, the work of the cross! The significance of the Father's ratification of the Son here is that He is saying: 'I love you, in spite of the humiliation that you've gone down into, I love you no less because of it'. Equally so, He honours Him all the more because He was willing, He who was rich, to become poor that He might make poor sinners rich through His humiliation and through His death.

The Father ratifies His identification with sinners and His consecration as Saviour going to the cross. What a lesson! 'What is it?', you say. It's what we find in 1 Samuel 2:30 - God says: 'Them that honour me I will honour'. The Son was, as the Servant, doing the will that pleased the Father. Mark's understanding, I believe, of the meaning of Jesus' baptism is: a willing acceptance of the task that the Father had given to Him. What has God given you to do? I'll tell you one thing: He has commanded you to be baptised - are you? He has commanded you to remember the Lord around His table - did you? There are many other commands, and
principles, and precepts in God's word; and we please God when we obey Him - but the challenge is, we see from the rest of the Gospel of Mark that Jesus' followers were unwilling to accept this path for Jesus. 'You're not going to the cross! What are you talking about, suffering and dying?' - not only were they unwilling to accept that as His path, but they were unwilling to accept it as their own path, that they would have to suffer, that they perhaps would have to die because of Jesus. Yet, as Paul tells us, this is something that all of us must grapple with as believers - Romans 6:3: 'We are all baptised into the death of Christ'. Some martyrs were literally baptised by their own blood in the death of Christ!

What Mark is setting forth for us, showing the Lord Jesus in His recognition of the Father for doing His will, is that there is no other path in Christianity except death to self. Remember that this book was probably given to believers who were suffering under Roman execution, many of them to the point of death. What Mark is communicating is that just as our forerunner, Jesus, deliberately took on God's will and suffered for it and was honoured in it; if we suffer, we will reign with Him; but if we deny Him, He will deny us.

Fourthly and finally, not only in the baptism of Jesus could we see the Servant of Jehovah's identification with sinners, His consecration as Saviour, His recognition by the Father, but we see His preparation by the Spirit. In other words, His equipment for the work as Messiah and Saviour of the world. We see that the whole Trinity is involved here. Of course, at the beginning of creation the whole Trinity was involved, God said: 'Let us make man in our image'. Now, as we come to the new creation, the whole Trinity again, at the beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, is involved, saying as it were: 'Let us save man'. One commentator put it like this: 'Not only the Son loves His followers enough to suffer the pangs of hell in their stead; but also the Spirit fully cooperates by strengthening Him for the very task; and the Father, instead of frowning upon the One who undertakes it, is so very pleased with Him that He must needs rend asunder the very heavens, that His voice of delightful approval of God might be heard on earth. All three are equally interested in our salvation, and these three are One'. Of course, it's a wonderful demonstration of the doctrine of the Trinity - the Spirit coming in the form of a dove, the Father's voice speaking, and Jesus in the Jordan being baptised.

But see the significance of it, verse 10 says that this dove, the Spirit in the form of a dove, lit upon Him. Now that word in Greek for 'upon' is 'eis', which literally should be translated 'into'. It is not the word for 'upon' in Greek, which is 'epi', but the word for 'into', so the Spirit came into Jesus there in some sense at His baptism. Not as the Gnostics believe, that this was just the man Jesus, and when the Christ Spirit came upon Him He became the Christ, and that Spirit left Him before the cross - that is heresy of the most damnable kind. But what is being taught here is that this Spirit of God descending upon the Lord Jesus and actually going into Him was the act of the Holy Spirit, giving to Jesus the dynamic equipment which would enable Him as Messiah to discharge His duties.

Now please don't misunderstand what I'm saying, I know He is the Son of God, but we underestimate His condescension and humiliation when we fail to realise that He did not come to earth as God walking among men, but He came to earth as a man walking among men, to be the Saviour on behalf of God as God's Son. We know from His own words in Luke 4 that He was coming with the Spirit of God upon Him: 'because he hath anointed me', Jesus said, 'to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, To preach the acceptable year of the Lord'. He's coming as the Servant of Jehovah, as a man among men to save men, to satisfy God on God's behalf - and He did it as a man.
Now you might ask the question: why did He need the Spirit of God? Let me say: there was never a time in the life of our Lord Jesus Christ that He was not filled completely with the Holy Spirit. Though He was God's Son, to be the Servant of Jehovah filled with the Spirit already, this was something more, this was something to enable Him to do this great eternal work. We read in the book of Hebrews chapter 9:14 that all the Servant's earthly ministry was, I quote: 'through the eternal Spirit'. Now here's the big issue: if He needed the Spirit of God to fulfil His ministry, how much more do we need Him? How much more do we know Him?

Why is He symbolised as a dove? That's another common question. Thomas Goodwin, the puritan and one-time president of Magdalen College, Oxford, says: 'All apparitions that God at any time made of Himself were not so much made to show to men what God is in Himself, as to show us how He is affected towards us, and to declare those effects that He will work in us'. If there is a creature that symbolises how the Holy Spirit is to affect us and work in us, surely it is a dove. Goodwin goes on to say: 'For a dove, you know, is the most meek and the most innocent of all birds, without gall, without talons, having no fierceness in it, expressing nothing but love and friendship to its mate in all its carriages, and mourning over its mate in all its distresses. Accordingly, a dove was a most fitting emblem of the Spirit that was poured out upon our Saviour when He was just about to enter on the work of our salvation, for as sweetly as doves converse with doves, so may every sinner in Christ converse together'.

I think it suggests more than that, more than just His harmlessness and meekness. It was, I believe, in itself a suggestion of the sacrifice that He was going to undertake on the lowest terms - now not in its intrinsic value, it is beyond measure, the value of the sacrifice of Christ - but as to the capacity of a worshipper. What am I talking about? Well, the poorest Israelite, who couldn't afford a lamb, could come with their offering for sin with a dove, and they were permitted to bring a dove as a sacrifice for their sinfulness. Here is the lowly Servant of God, and it is a dove that lights upon Him.

Isaiah, the Old Testament evangelist said: 'Oh that thou wouldest rend the heavens, that thou wouldest come down, that the mountains might flow down at thy presence'. What is the baptism of Jesus? The heavens were opened to show that the heaven that once was closed because of our sin, shut against us personally, is now opened by Christ undertaking His role as the Servant of Jehovah. Coming from obscurity and isolation for 30 years from Nazareth to Galilee, coming and in His baptism identifying with sinners, consecrating as the Saviour, having recognition from the Father, and preparation by the Spirit, we see Him entering His work.

Our Father, we thank You that the Lord Jesus Christ identified with us. We thank You that He consecrated Himself in Your will to be our Saviour, and was recognised in that consecration by Thee, and by the Spirit's enduement for the task. Lord we thank You, those of us who are saved, that He set His face to go to Jerusalem. Yet Lord, there may be others here this morning, and they have never seen the wonder that Christ was made sin for us. May they see it today Lord - but for all of us, You have given to us Christ as our example, may we in turn identify with those lost in sin, may we consecrate ourselves to see them won. May we know the recognition of God in that task, as You honour us and endue us with an outpouring of Your Spirit personally and corporately in this place. To the glory of Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.
Now let's turn again to Mark chapter 1, and we'll read verses 12 and 13 again: "And immediately" - and we saw, didn't we, how important that word 'immediately', or 'right away', or 'straight away' is in Mark's Gospel. "Immediately the spirit driveth him", the Lord Jesus, "into the wilderness", or the desert. "And he was there in the wilderness forty days, tempted", or tested, "of Satan; and was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered unto him".

Let's pray: Father, we thank you for Paul's children's talk, and we take a moment even to remember some of the children in the Fellowship who will be doing the 11+ again this week. But we pray for us all Lord, for we have tests every day of our lives, and so often we feel that we fail You miserably. Lord, as we come to focus upon Your only begotten Son, we pray that we will fix our eyes, fasten our eyes on Him, on His conflict with the devil, and His victory, and that we will be enabled by Your grace to have enough faith to believe in Him for our own present victory. Help us now we pray, and may Your Spirit be abundant upon us now, in the Saviour's name, Amen.

I've entitled the message this morning 'The Servant's Test'. Of course, we saw in our introductory message several weeks ago, months ago now, that this is the Gospel that chiefly takes up the theme of the Lord Jesus as the Servant of the Lord, the suffering Servant. Now there's so much, believe it or not, in these two verses on the temptation of the Saviour in Mark's Gospel, that I'm going to span this particular study over two weeks. So this is 'The Servant's Test - Part 1'. Matthew and Luke's Gospel are much more comprehensive in their account regarding the temptation of the Lord Jesus, but we must resist the temptation to expound their accounts rather than Mark's account. We will look specifically at Mark's account, and why it is the way it is.

I've taught you from the beginning of our studies that Mark has a specific purpose in how he lays out the life of the Lord Jesus, not least in his account of the temptation. There is a purpose in the brevity of his account. Matthew takes several verses and goes into great detail, deals specifically with each temptation as the devil sent them to the Lord Jesus - and yet here we have an account of the temptation that's only in two verses, but there is a reason for that. Mark has an emphasis, there is a point that he is wanting to make, and if we delve into Matthew and Luke to embellish Mark's seemingly short account, we will miss the point entirely of why he records it the way he does. So right away I want you to know that I'm going to pay no attention this morning to Matthew's account or Luke's account, and though they deal with the specific temptations, Matthew in particular, I'll not be looking at that this morning. I want us to get Mark's purpose, Mark's perspective, in how he gives us the temptation of the Lord Jesus.

His point is simply the theme of this Gospel. He wants us to see the Lord Jesus as the Servant of the Lord, and he wants us to realise - remembering that Mark's Gospel was given to the early Christians - that all of us are servants of the Lord as well and, if we are to be servants of the Lord, temptation will be a permanent feature of our lives. That's not all he wants us to
see: he wants us to see that Christ overcame the temper, and because of that we, as the subsequent servants of the Lord after Him, can know victory through Christ.

Now let's remind ourselves of the context of where we find these two verses. We've read it again this morning, John the Baptist - who, remember, was Isaiah's prophesied forerunner of Messiah - has prepared the way of the Lord, and declared that Jesus of Nazareth is God's Messenger. We have also seen that the Spirit confirms this by descending upon the Lord Jesus at His baptism like a dove, then the heavens cleft and are torn apart, and we hear the voice of the Father declaring: 'This is my beloved Son in whom is all My delight'. Now context is extremely important for us to get the point of what Mark is saying - indeed, it's important in any book or portion of the Bible. But here is his point: all of these verses up to now have been commendations of the Lord Jesus Christ as God's Messiah. They have been authentications of Christ's identity. But now he comes in verses 12 and 13, and here is his point: all that makes no difference, who Christ is, who John says He is, who Isaiah says He is, who the Holy Spirit says He is, who the Father says He is - He still must suffer temptation, He still must suffer trial and pain and tribulation to do God's will.

Let me tease it out a wee bit for you, so that you really understand where I'm coming from. Though He has been clearly declared to be God's Son, though He is being declared here as the King who is bringing His kingdom, in a sense, in the wilderness, after this identification of Him, He is not permitted to go back into Jerusalem and live the life of a King, and live the life of the Messiah as the Jews expected it - God doesn't allow Him to go back and set up an earthly kingdom, He must stay in the wilderness! In spite of who He is, He must be in the desert, He must be tempted of the devil, and of course Mark's great theme is that He must go to the cross. In other words, He must do God's will in God's way, and God's way was the way of suffering not the way of force.

So what is the lesson for all of us today as servants of the Lord? It is simply this: there is no such a thing as an un-tempted servant of God. The testing of the Servant of the Lord in Mark 1 should convince us of that fact. Indeed, it is true that the greater service, and the more we accomplish for the Lord, the greater will be our suffering, our testing and temptation. One of the greatest temptations - and I'll deal with this, perhaps, next week - is not so much the temptation to immorality, but the temptation to try and do God's will in another way other than His way: the temptation to choose an easier path. That, in essence, is what this temptation of Christ was - but we'll look at that next week.

But what can we learn from these two verses in the time that we have this morning? There are three things that I want us to learn. Next week, in the will of the Lord, we'll look at the fact that the servant's testing can be an agonising experience: He was 40 days tempted of Satan with wild beasts in the wilderness. Then we'll look, God willing, at how the servant's temptation is lonely: He was in the desert, He was alone, the wild beasts surrounded Him - and yet there was divine aid, the angels ministered unto Him. But we'll leave that to next week - the first thing I want you to note this week from the Servant's test is that the Servant's temptation was immediately after a spiritual high. It came right after a spiritual peak or zenith in the life of the Lord Jesus, and it's the same in our experience as well. It came after His baptism, and we learnt - if you can remember it - that His baptism was the public identification with salvation, the Saviour saying: 'As I'm going down under the water, I also have a baptism to be baptised with on the cross. I'm identifying with you as sinners, because in a little while, 3-and-a-half years, I'm going to identify with your sin on the cross and take it as if it's mine'. It was His consecration to that great work of saviour-ship as Messiah, but it was also recognition of the Father: 'This is my beloved Son in whom I am well
pleased'. It was also preparation and unction of the Spirit, the Spirit was strengthening Him as a man to accomplish the task which God had set Him.

Now note, look at the words of the Bible in verse 12: 'And immediately' - immediately He was baptised, at once He was driven by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness to the temptation. Now one scholar has said this, and I think it is very apt: 'This statement, 'and immediately', is less temporal and more theological' - less temporal and more theological, what does that mean? He's not wanting us to grasp the time of it in the sense of how quickly it happened, but he wants us to grasp the theological truth of the chronology of His temptation. In other words, it was after this spiritual peak that He was driven into temptation. Here is a truth that we must get if we're ever going to survive temptation: the servant's temptation often is immediately after a spiritual high. There was no interval between the glory of His baptism and the hardship of His temptation, and incidentally if we were to turn to Mark chapter 9 we would find out that the same is the case in His transfiguration: 'And as they were coming down', having seen the glory of the Lord Jesus revealed to them, 'he charged them to tell no-one what they had seen, until the Son of Man had risen from the dead. So they kept the matter to themselves, questioning what this rising from the dead might mean'. So, whilst we see a glimpse of His glory in transfiguration, the Lord was still labouring this point: 'Look, it's not all about the glory just now, but I've got to go to the cross, and I've got to die and rise again'. It's the same in His baptism, it's not all glory, and identification, and clarification from God: this Servant must suffer.

Though He was a King, He is God's suffering Servant, this is God's path for Him - and can I say: this is God's path for us. In a moment the Holy Spirit carried Him from light to darkness. In a moment He went from knowing the Father's smile to Satan's wile. It was as if, in an instant, after the heavens being opened, that all hell was opened upon Him. Does that tell us anything? Of course it does: it tells us that the experience of all of God's servant's ought to be the same, and is the same. I wonder are you going through this? You've heard the expression: 'I feel in my life that I take one step forward and two back. I have a mountaintop experience, but the valley is just round the corner'. We experience this, we get a blessing and it's not too long, in fact probably the next moment, when we get a discouragement or a curse even. This is outlined for us, this is the experience of God's Servant, the Messiah - but it will be ours as well: we are often tested immediately after a spiritual highpoint. Elijah found it in the valley after his great victory on Mount Carmel.

There is a spiritual principle in this that I want you to grasp, because it's so important and vital if you're ever going to overcome temptation and face it the way the Saviour did. I think, in measure, it's outlined in Luke 12, where the Lord Jesus said after telling a parable: 'Everyone to whom much was given, of him will much be required; and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more'. What is this principle? Now listen carefully: the more spiritual you become, the more testing you will experience - did you hear that? The more Christ-like the Holy Spirit will conform you to, the more you will know excruciating temptation. Now I think, by saying that - I hope you've grasped it - I have uncovered how, at times, as Christians, we have a wrong perspective relating to temptation. Perhaps with some of us we have this in our heads, that the more spiritual we become the stronger we are to face and to overcome temptation. In a measure that is true, but we often equate that with: 'Well then, that means you'll have less temptations, or your temptations will be less strong' - that is wrong! The holier you are, the more temptation you will face!

Now the test of whether you have this incorrect perspective or not, could be an answer to this question: how do you view God's servants who fall into sin? How do you view them? Are you
scathing? Do you castigate them? Do you gossip about them? But suddenly, when you realise that those who perhaps are in the frontline of the battle - and I know that that's maybe not a good term, for we're all in the battle - but when we realise that those who are more holy, and do more for the Lord, face the devil's hordes in a more intense way, should we not have a little bit of sympathy? A little bit of grace? A little bit of compassion? Think about it: this was the greatest temptation ever, I believe that, and yet it was immediately following the greatest event ever - up to now at least - in the life of the Lord Jesus. The greater the event, meant the greater was the temptation.

Have you learnt that lesson: that the Servant's temptation was immediately after a spiritual high, and so it will be in your life. Whenever folk get baptised here in the church, and we have baptismal classes, I often warn them that Satan will go up a gear or two after their baptism. I have found that in my own experience, because you're identifying - it's a highlight, spiritually, in your life. I remember a young man, and his car was his pride and joy, and I remember in the kitchen in the old building I was warning the folk that were getting baptised before the event: 'Now, be careful, Satan will come in with temptation, and try you and test you'. I can't even remember the car, but it was a slick one - and right after the baptism, somebody he noticed going out had taken a key or a coin and gone right up the side of the car and scraped it all. Friends: do we realise this, even in countries where there's great persecution towards Christians, it's not when they profess faith with their mouth that they start to get persecuted, it's when they get baptised. It is tantamount, in some nations, to suicide in the sense that you're sealing your death warrant when you get baptised, because it's a public identification with Christ and the devil hates it.

Now you might be sitting there thinking: 'Well, why does it have to be like that?'. I mean, I would love it in my Christian life if I could stay on the mountaintop all the time, and there was no valley at the other side, if it was just going up and up and up and up, until we got to glory - that's not the way it is. It wasn't the way it was for the Lord Jesus in His trial, it's not the way it will be for us - but why? Are you thinking - you should be - why does it have to be like that? Well here is the second thing I want you to learn about the Servant's test that will help us in that regard: the Servant's temptation was arranged by the Spirit. The Lord Jesus' temptation was arranged by the Holy Spirit. Now both Matthew and Luke indicate that the Lord went into the wilderness under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, but Mark is unique in his use of this strange word in the Authorised: 'driveth him into the wilderness' - and that really gives the sense. He was driven into the desert by the Spirit.

Incidentally, if you look down at verse 34 of chapter 1, this word is used of the Lord Jesus expelling demons and devils from folk. It is used again in the same context in verse 39, verse 43 - expelling demons! But here it is used of the Holy Spirit as expelling Christ into the wilderness! In Matthew 21 verse 12 it's used of the Lord Jesus driving and casting out the traders from the temple. Now that's the sense of the word in Greek, it has the idea of an external force against an unwilling object. Now whilst that is the sense right throughout the New Testament, that is not the whole sense here in relation to our Lord Jesus. There is the aspect of an external force, that is the Holy Spirit, but the connotation here is that the Spirit compelled the Lord Jesus forcefully and He was obedient. But I want you to grasp this aspect of how the Spirit compelled Him, not against His will, but nevertheless the Spirit drove Him to that place of testing.

What is the significance of it? Well, we'll see, hopefully, in a bit more detail next week in James 1 that the Bible is clear that God tempts no one. God cannot be tempted with evil, and He doesn't tempt anyone else with evil. Yet although that is the truth, God by His Holy Spirit
is sovereign in how He arranges our temptations. The Spirit led Christ into the wilderness to be tempted, and the Spirit leads us in our lives into places where He tempts and tests and tries us. First Corinthians 10 tells us: 'no temptation has taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not let you be tempted beyond your ability; but with the temptations he also provides a way of escape, that you may be able to bear it', or that you may be able to endure it. Now the only way that verse could be true is if God has some kind of control over our temptations, and He does: the Holy Spirit arranges them.

Now think about this for a moment: the same Spirit that anointed Jesus at His baptism, is now the Spirit that is thrusting Him forth into testing. Now why is that? Why does temptation often come immediately after a spiritual high? Why does the Spirit and God arrange temptation for us? Well, I think in one sense the answer is the same for both us and the Lord Jesus Christ. In one sense, Christ was tempted for the same reason as we. Though Christ had no sin - and mark that very clearly, and we might deal next week with how we believe the Lord Jesus could not have sinned, it's not possible to think of that - and yet God's purpose in tempting the Lord Jesus is the same as His purpose in tempting us - or allowing Him to be tempted, I should say, God doesn't tempt anyone. But for arranging that temptation, His reason is the same as it is for us: He is strengthening us for the task that He has appointed to us. Do you hear that? He is strengthening us for the task that He has appointed to us - and He was strengthening the Lord Jesus.

Now please mark: that does not imply that the Lord Jesus was weak. No, no. But these temptations in Christ's life were the culmination of a lifelong process through His childhood, and His adolescence, and His young adulthood, a spiritual strengthening and maturing. It occurred throughout His life until now. The Bible tells us: 'He increased in wisdom and in favour with God'. Hebrews says He learned obedience through what He suffered. Now before I go on any further, and before your mind runs away with itself, let me say that, like many truths in the Gospels, there is a holy mystery regarding this truth of the Lord's temptation. I'll expand on it little bit more next week perhaps. So keeping in mind for a moment that God cannot tempt, and God cannot be tempted - James 1 tells us this - and yet we believe Christ could not have sinned, yet here He is tempted! We have to believe that His temptation was real, for as we'll see next week He couldn't succour and empathise and sympathise with us if it wasn't. But here's the answer: He was not tempted in His divine nature - remember He had two natures - He wasn't tempted to sin as God, He was tempted by the devil as a man.

Now why is that so important? Because God's purpose in trying Him and tempting Him was in order that He might overcome Satan as a man - that's important. Sure it would be nothing for God to overcome Satan as God, but Christ had to overcome in temptation as a man, without any help from His divine attributes, as a perfect man, as the last Adam, to undo everything that Adam and Eve did in the Garden of Eden. There He is, and because He has been victorious we can overcome the devil also. So in that sense - and I want you to get this please - in that sense, Christ overcoming temptation was God's way of strengthening Christ's hand in the battle with Satan, and the battle against sin. He was the first man ever to resist the devil. He was the first man who obeyed God completely. There He stands in the wilderness, in our place, representing us - and He succeeds where our forefather Adam failed, and now He can give strength to succeed also.

So, therefore the implication of that is that the Spirit arranges our temptations too, to strengthen us. How do you view temptation? How do you approach it? When it comes along do you cower? Are you filled with fear and trepidation? 'No, no, not this again!'. How should you react when temptation comes? Well, this is teaching us, and James teaches us, that we
should count it all joy when we meet various trials, because our testing produces faith and steadfastness, and if we let our testing and steadfastness have its full effect, we will be perfect, complete, and lacking in nothing.

Maybe one of the reasons why you have problems overcoming temptation is because of the way that you’re viewing it? You don’t realise that the Holy Spirit arranges your temptations for your good - that's what the Bible teaches. You’re perhaps not realising that God, think about this, sees it as His will for your good that you be tempted. That's not how we think about it, is it? Well, we need to understand that He has a purpose in our temptation, and it's not that we should fall into sin, but it is that we should grow stronger, that our hands should be strengthened for the task that He has. Let me illustrate it to you like this: imagine a football player, a young man, and he's showing great promise. Suppose, for instance, he's on the second team, and he shows such skill on the pitch that his trainer is thinking: 'How am I going to bring this out of this young lad?'. Now what would the trainer do, do you think? Would he put him down to the third team, and see if his talents would shine there? Of course he wouldn't, he would break through everybody and not break any sweat at that - what does he do? He puts him in the first team where he will be tested as never before. He'll give him the chance to prove himself in the greater test - now look, that is it! That is the Spirit's intention for our temptations: that we should prove our faith, that we should grow stronger.

Whilst the Lord Jesus had no sin, and whilst He was not weak, there is no doubt that in Mark's Gospel this is one of the points that he is bringing to us: this was a test and authentication of who Christ was, and proving the strength that He would have not just to overcome the devil in our place in temptation, but to go all the way to the cross as a perfect man, and be our substitute, and finish the work! Now whilst that is the case, the Servant's temptation was arranged by the Spirit, the converse is also true - for He was tempted of the devil. So the third point this morning - the first one was: the Servant's temptation was immediately after a spiritual high; the second: the Servant's temptation was arranged by the Spirit, and so will yours be - the third is the other side of the coin: the Servant's temptation was instigated by Satan.

We found, and it is true, that God sovereignly arranges our temptations, He tempers them, He'll not give us anything that we can't handle - though the devil tells us so often that we can't handle it, and that's often why we fall on our face - but God is sovereign, God is measuring these tests out for us. Though He does not tempt anyone Himself, He sovereignly arranges them - but though that is the case, it is the devil himself who instigates our temptation. If God is arranging it for our strength and for a steadfast faith, the devil, the opposite, instigates temptation for our failure and our disaster. We must keep that in mind. It is very clear in the book of Job - read the book of Job if you never have, and study it in detail because there you have this tension. The Lord said to Satan: 'Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and an upright man who fears God and turns away from evil. He still holds fast his integrity no matter what you have done to him up to now'. So there is God arranging the temptation of Job, and yet Satan comes in and Satan answers the Lord and says: 'Skin for skin, all that a man has he will give for his life, but if you stretch forth your hand and touch his bone and his flesh he will curse you to your face'.

So there's the two, and you've got to have the two: God is arranging it, and yet Satan is instigating it. God is doing it for our strength, and yet Satan is doing it for our failure. You must beware, because Satan is real, and Satan is a fearful foe. As Luther put it:
'For still our ancient foe
Doth seek to work us woe,
Whose craft and power are great,
And armed with cruel hate,
On earth is not his equal'.

So we should beware of Satan, and we should know that we are not his equal, and that's why we should not lead ourselves into temptation - though God can arrange it, we're not to run into it! We're not meant to flirt with it! We're not meant to look for it, or be in the place where it will come before us! No! We're meant to flee from Satan! But though we are not his equal, praise God, Christ in the wilderness was more than his equal, and because He defeated him there, and defeated him at the cross, He has made us more than conquerors!

Satan is a defeated foe, but let me say before I leave this point - and I'm almost finished - this is one of the great paradoxes of spiritual life. You see the trial you're going through? You see the temptation? God has allowed that, and indeed God has put His stamp on it that it should come into your life. He has arranged it by the Spirit that you'll not have too much, but you'll not have too little. Yet there is Satan, and he is operative in trying to pull you down as a child of God, trying to discourage you, trying to depress you, trying to discredit you. This is the tension right throughout the Christian experience, and it's a mystery - life is a mystery, and the Christian life is a mystery. Joseph found it in the pit, then he was in Potiphar's house, then he's in the prison, then he comes to the Palace - up, down, up, down, mountain, valley, mountain, valley - and at the end of it all God's word says: 'As for you', Joseph said to his brothers, 'you meant it for my demise, you meant it for evil, you meant it to destroy me that I might fail my God and my family; but God meant it for good'.

Now let me ask you, because this is vital, this is why I wanted to spend so much time on this this morning, because if you're ever going to overcome temptation you've got to see that there is this tension in the Christian life: it's not all sunshine and roses, as that stupid song says! It is a battle! It is a fight! The Holy Spirit arranges temptations and trials, even the very cross has this paradox in it - you remember the apostle saying: 'This Jesus delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men'. Do you see the two things? God had predestined and planned before the foundation of the world that Christ should go to the cross and die for sinners, and yet wicked men took Him by their hands and put Him to death.

What temptation are you facing today? What temptation have you been subjected to? Maybe you've failed so many times you wonder is it possible to have victory at all? Can I say to you: yes, yes it is possible, indeed it is inevitable through, and only through, the Lord Jesus Christ, and only by facing your trials and your temptations the way He did. How's that? By recognizing that to suffer tests and temptations is part of what it is to be a servant of God. We can expect testing, especially after spiritual climaxes and zeniths, it will come! Also: we will overcome when we understand that although the devil wants us to fall into temptation, God has willed it for good, and therefore we ought to rise to the occasion, and realise that God is going to give us the gift of strength when we overcome, and He will lead us from strength to strength.

Is that your perspective? Is it Mark's? Can I read you, as I close, a hymn - it's not one we're going to sing - John Newton, that great slave trader that was converted and then wrote 'Amazing Grace', and then became a vicar in the Church of England, he wrote a wonderful hymn about the confusion that many have regarding trials and temptations in the Christian
life. People who think that 'This shouldn't be happening to me! I'm a Christian, I'm a child of God, why is it happening to me? Surely I should be delivered from all these hardships now that I'm one of God's children?'. They fail to realise that this is not just happening to you because the devil has instigated it at times, but it's happening because God's Spirit has arranged it for your good, for your strength, for your faith, for your victory. It follows the progression of his thought in that struggle, listen to it:

'I asked the Lord that I might grow
In faith, and love, and every grace;
Might more of His salvation know,
And seek, more earnestly, His face.

'Twas He who taught me thus to pray,
And He, I trust, has answered prayer!
But it has been in such a way,
As almost drove me to despair.

I hoped that in some favoured hour,
At once He'd answer my request;
And by His love's constraining pow'r,
Subdue my sins, and give me rest.

Instead of this, He made me feel
The hidden evils of my heart;
And let the angry pow'rs of hell
Assault my soul in every part.

Yea more, with His own hand He seemed
Intent to aggravate my woe;
Crossed all the fair designs I schemed,
Blasted my gourds, and laid me low.

Lord, why is this, I trembling cried,
Wilt thou pursue thy worm to death?
'Tis in this way, the Lord replied,
I answer prayer for grace and faith.

These inward trials I employ,
From self, and pride, to set thee free;
And break thy schemes of earthly joy,
That thou may'st find thy all in Me'.

God willing, next week we'll look at two more aspects to the Servant's test.

O Lord Jesus Christ, who as man on this earth was completely victorious over Satan, help us in our temptations. Lord Jesus Christ, who defeated him through shedding Your precious blood on the cross, give us power to overcome him. Lord Jesus Christ, who said to Peter: 'Simon, Simon, Satan hath desired to sift thee as wheat, but I have prayed for thee that thy faith fail not', pray for us, strengthen us and send Your grace. Now unto Him that is able to keep us from falling, Amen.
We're going to turn together in Mark's Gospel, Mark chapter 1. Last week, if you weren't here with us in the Iron Hall, we entered into chapter 1, at the beginning of the temptation of the Lord Jesus and - remembering that Mark's Gospel has the theme that this is the Son of God that is the Messiah, the King of Israel, and yet He comes as suffering Servant, and the path He trods is not one of glory, but one of humiliation and suffering - and we saw that this Servant has to be tested, and tempted, and tried, just like those He was coming to save; but, of course, differently, because He is completely victorious and completely sinless in this test. Yet there are many issues that we need to grapple with, and hopefully this morning we'll take a bit of time to do that.

So this is 'The Servant's Test - Part 2', and we'll read just verses 12 and 13 as we read the context last week. "And immediately", that is immediately after He was baptised in the Jordan, "the spirit driveth him into the wilderness. And he was there in the wilderness forty days, tempted of Satan; and was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered unto him".

Now I want to read two other texts, keep your marker there in Mark 1, and turn with me to Hebrews 2, and then we're going to look at Hebrews 4. Just two verses, one from Hebrews 2, verse 18; and then Hebrews 4 verse 15 - taking 2:18 first, speaking of our Lord Jesus as a Merciful High Priest the writer says: "For in that he himself hath suffered being tempted, he is able to succour them that are tempted". Then chapter 4 and verse 15, again on the subject of our Great High Priest: "For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin". Back to Mark chapter 1.

Now you will remember from last week that we highlighted the fact that Mark has a purpose in the brevity of his account of the temptation of the Lord Jesus. When we go to Matthew's account and Luke's account, they are both longer in how they record it. It's not that Mark is lazy, or he doesn't pay attention to detail, there is a reason that the Spirit inspired him to be so brief in his account. We saw, as we read the rest of the chapter, at least the verses before 12 and 13 in chapter 1, that there is a context to the account of His temptation, and that context begins where John the Baptist declares John the Baptist himself as being the forerunner of the Messiah, who is declared by John the Baptist to be none other than Jesus the Nazarene. He would be the messenger that Isaiah foretold, and John is preparing the way for Him.

Then we saw also that as the Lord Jesus is baptised, that the Spirit comes upon Him in the form of a dove, and declares that He is indeed that One that Isaiah prophesied, the Servant of Jehovah. Then the Father confirms that, and the heavens cleft, and we hear this voice: 'This is my Beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased'. So you have right throughout the beginning verses of this chapter affirmation, declaration, confirmation that this is Jesus the Messiah, this is the Son of God, this is the King of Israel coming in His kingdom in one sense. Yet the point of why we have, in verses 12 and 13, His temptation is to show us that as Christ was confirmed to be Messiah in the wilderness, He's got to stay in the wilderness. He's not allowed...
to go back to Jerusalem and get in a flash palace and set up an earthly kingdom by force, an Imperial State - no! He has to stay in the desert, He has to be tried and be tempted. He must do God's will in God's way, and God's way was the way of suffering, not the way of force.

What a lesson we saw last week in that very fact: that as Mark is writing this Gospel record, remember it is given to Christians, and they are suffering, they are being tempted, they are being tried. He wants to communicate: as our Lord was tempted and tried so will we be, temptation will be a permanent feature of the servant's life - but the wonderful message that we have inherent in this account is that Christ was victorious over temptation and the devil, and so can we be in Him. But we saw implied within this account that Mark is getting across to us that the greater our service for the Lord, the greater will be our suffering and our testing and our temptations. Indeed, the temptation that we will have in our life - which I believe was the temptation that the Lord Jesus had been given by the devil - was to take an easy road, an easy path. That was not God's road, that was not God's path.

So we learnt last week, if I could just recap very quickly, that this temptation, and indeed every servant of God's temptation, will be immediately after a spiritual high. Sometimes we have a wrong perspective when it comes to temptation. We think that the holier we become the less tempted we will be - no! It is, in fact, the opposite: here we have, I believe, the greatest temptation ever, and yet this greatest of temptations was immediately following what was, up to that point, the greatest event ever - the baptism of the Lord Jesus, and the Father and the Spirit's declaration of Him. Right after a spiritual zenith and highpoint and peak, there is this valley of trial and suffering and temptation - and that is the way it will be in life. We'll not be very long on the mountaintop until we experience a valley - that is the way God has planned it.

We see that it was God planned it that way in one sense when we look - and our third and second point last week was that though temptation is instigated by Satan - and we must say that very clearly, James 1 tells us that God does not tempt anyone with evil, God does not tempt us, it is the devil that tempts us - yet at the same time, though it is Satan who instigates our temptation, God arranges or you could say rearranges circumstances in our life for His glory. I would be strong enough to say it is God who arranges, because here we have, at least in the Lord's account, it says that the Spirit drove Him into the wilderness. God was sovereign in this test, and it wasn't just in the Lord's test that He was sovereign - you look at Job, it was God who, as it were, incited Satan into going into his life and tempting him to try and destroy him. God said, and we heard it around the table, He pointed out to the devil: 'Here is Job, my servant, is there not anyone like him in the whole earth, as righteous as he?'. He, if you like, was goading Satan to try Job, and God told Job in the midst of all his trial that there was a purpose in this, and Job could say: 'When He has tried me, I shall come forth as gold' - and he wasn't talking about the devil, he was talking about God.

So there is a mystery here, and whilst Satan is definitely the prime mover, the first cause in the sense of the one who comes and tempts us, God is sovereign over all things and God uses temptations, even in our lives, to strengthen us for the task ahead. Now what, we asked last week, what is our reaction to temptation? Is that how we view it? Often we think: 'Oh, here's the devil coming again, and he's coming with this carrot-on-a-stick that I can't resist! I'm not strong enough! God, why are you allowing this to happen? This shouldn't be, why don't you just take these things away from me, these tantalising things?'. Yet we fail to see that, as the hymn we sang last week says: when we resist a temptation, that will help us another temptation to win - it causes us to be stronger, grow stronger for the task.
Well, we must move on, and I want to spend some time this morning - and I think it’s going to take us into next week, there’s so much in these two verses that we have to spend time on them - and the point that I want to dwell on this morning is that the servant's temptation can be an agonising experience. That’s all I want to say: the servant's temptation, test, can be an agonising experience - and it was for the Lord. We know that because it's communicated to us by a graphic descriptive scene in the wilderness. If you look at verse 13, there are a number of words that bring this picture to our view: He was in the desert, an arid wilderness; He was there 40 days; He is tempted by Satan; and He is with wild animals.

Now the desert, or the wilderness, in the Jewish mind and the Jewish thought was always viewed as a place of danger and peril. It was a gloomy place, in fact we know from the Gospels - Matthew 12 and Luke 8, where Jesus teaches on the subject of demons - that the desert and the wilderness was seen as an abode of Satan and his hordes, it was the realm of the devil. So right away what is communicated to us is that the Lord Jesus has been thrust, by the Spirit of God, into that place. Mark tells us He is there 40 days, Matthew tells us He was fasting for those 40 days. He is also among wild beasts. Now the Jordan valley and the adjacent wilderness was known as a haunt for many wild beasts. There were hyenas, jackals, panthers, believe it or not even lions! At one time lions were not scarce by any means in Palestine - in fact, lions are mentioned in two thirds of the books of the Old Testament Scriptures. It's quite possible there were lions in our Lord's day, when He was in the wilderness. Nevertheless it said that there were wild animals, and the mention of that is simply, I think, to underscore the idea that this wilderness was a scene of abandonment, a scene of peril - or, it was the opposite to the idyllic paradise scene where our first father, the first Adam, was tempted way back in the beginning.

Now I don't want to go into that too much, because I'm going to reflect on that perhaps next week. So the wilderness, wild animals, 40 days there, it's trying to get us to see that this was a traumatic experience. Then, to add to it, and it's very easy to skip over this, He was tempted by Satan. Now we can be tempted by the world, and not directly by Satan; we can be tempted by demons, and perhaps not directly by the evil one - but He was tempted by Satan. Now some scholars believe that the present participle that's used here, that's simply 'being tempted', 'being tempted' is there to modify what is an imperfect verb, which is the word 'was'. He was being tempted - now what Mark doesn't want us to think, some believe, is that this is something that happened way back then, and it's something that only happened during those first couple of the 40 days when He was fasting, and maybe He had a break of a couple of days, and then the devil came back to Him before the 40 days were over and so on. He wants us to modify this idea of 'was tempted' with 'being tempted', in other words this was a continuous thing: He was continually being tempted during the 40 days He was in the wilderness.

I think that's what he's getting at. Now, of course, the temptations in the Lord Jesus' life didn't stop after the 40 days. We know that the Scribes and Pharisees often on occasions came and tempted Him, tried to test Him. But it's interesting - and you should note, by the way, in the Bible, the things that are left out, as well as the things that are put in - Mark does not mention that Jesus was victorious over this temptation, isn’t that interesting? Mark does not mention that there was any end to the temptation, whereas Matthew does - the devil left Him, fled from Him. Now, of course, victory is implied in this account, for Jesus is the victorious suffering Servant; and of course there was a protracted period in the wilderness where He was tempted; and yet what I think Mark is trying to get across to us is that this was what the whole life of the Man of Sorrows was going to be. He was being continually tempted and tested in His life. Yes, He was victorious, but the application in Mark's record is that this
temptation and testing didn't cease in the wilderness after 40 days had transpired, and he also implies that though He was momentarily victorious over the devil there, His final victory had not come yet. It would have to come at the cross. It is very instructive, I feel, what Mark doesn't tell us.

But why am I labouring on this? I'm making a point, and I'm spending all of this morning's message to make this point, because I feel, at times, that there is a danger that we think the temptation of the Lord Jesus was a kind of act, like a facade, a shove-on, that it wasn't real. We might even think it was easy for Him, sure He was God's Son! Now this account communicates graphically that this testing that the Servant of Jehovah went through was of mammoth proportions. There is no doubt about that, that's what the language communicates. But here's the problem that we have, and it is a problem: we've already said that God cannot tempt anyone with evil, but James also says in James 1 that God cannot be tempted with evil. Now Christ was God, and yet He was tempted - at least that's what the Bible says. God cannot be tempted with evil, yet Christ was tempted.

Now here's how some people attempt to answer that predicament: they say, 'Well, He wasn't really tempted as we are tempted. It wasn't real temptation'. In other words, it was just to try and prove who He was. Now that is an aspect of it, but is that a satisfactory answer? Then other people in the other extreme, they say: 'Well, it was real temptation, and in fact it was as real as our temptation', and they go to the point of saying, 'Well, He could have sinned, and if He couldn't have sinned, then it couldn't have been real temptation'. Of course, they say He didn't sin, but: 'If there wasn't that option there, well, how could you say it is temptation at all?'. Here we have a seeming dilemma, and it has led to a theological debate over the peccability and impeccability of Christ, that simply means: could He have sinned in the wilderness, was it impossible for Him to sin?

Now let me say before I say anything more that there is a mystery here, as there is, I think, with every doctrine in Holy Scripture to an extent. Whilst there is a mystery, we still must grapple with and find agreement between the truths of Scripture, because we say so bombastically that the Bible doesn't contradict itself - and yet so often we are timid to try and hammer these things out. I believe that there are two equally scriptural truths that must be harmonised in this event of the temptation of Christ. Here's the first one: Christ could not have sinned. Now that is clear, and I'm not going to spend time going into that because that is not the big dilemma, I think, that is there. If you want verses for that: 'They could find no fault in Him', 'He was the spotless Lamb of God', and so on and so forth. We could spend all morning on that one. Yet although He could not have sinned - we must maintain that - the second biblical truth which is also equally as clear, I would say, is that He had to be truly tempted. He had to be! Because if Hebrews 2:18 that we read is true: 'For because he himself hath suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted'; if Hebrews 4:15 is true: 'For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses; but one who in every respect has been tempted like as we are, yet without sin' - how can He sympathise with us if His temptation was not real?

Now let me say that there are no watertight answers that satisfy every question in this dilemma. I'm sure that my explanation won't satisfy a lot of you too - but I believe there is an explanation, a biblical explanation, and I've been greatly helped by a man called Wayne Grudem in his Systematic Theology on this point, but I believe that the explanation and the answer is found in the two natures of our Lord Jesus Christ. He had two natures. He was God, and we've already established that, and therefore if He was God that means He had a divine nature. Yet He also shared in our human nature, that's what the nativity and incarnation is all
Yet whilst He was Immanuel, God with us, we must see that in all of the Gospel record and the Epistles the Lord Jesus Christ did not come into this world to live as God among men. Mark, particularly, shows us that He came to live as a Man of Sorrows, coming to suffer for His people's sins. As someone has put it: 'Jesus Christ is the condescension of Divinity, God come down; and the exaltation of humanity, bringing man out of his sin to God'. But this is what I want you to see: Jesus had to come to obey God perfectly in our place as a man, and if He had to do that, He had to do so as a man and a man alone.

Let me explain it a little bit more: this meant that the Lord Jesus coming - yes, with a divine nature, but also with a human nature - had to obey God in His human strength alone. Now let me explain why that had to be: imagine if the Lord Jesus called upon His divine powers, which He could have done, to make His temptations easier for Himself. How would He have obeyed God? He would have obeyed God as God's Son alone - but He had to obey God fully, completely as a man. I believe an element of the temptation was that He should use His divine attributes to overcome in that regard. You look at them, they're miraculous - turn stones to bread, cast Yourself off the Temple. The temptation, in one aspect, was tempting the Lord to, if you like, cheat a bit and not face as a perfect man what the devil was throwing at Him; to, in some way, make His temptation a little bit easier. Now here's a passage that I believe is helpful for us to understand this particular truth, it's Philippians 2, if you turn to it, and the translation I'm going to read out of in this regard is much more explicit in what Paul is trying to get across to us concerning the humiliation of the Lord. Philippians 2 verses 6-8, speaking of the Lord's condescension: 'Who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped', he's not denying He was God, but He didn't grasp at the use of His divine attributes, 'But made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant', and a suffering Servant at that, 'being born in the likeness of men: And being found in human form, he humbled himself, by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross'.

Now that is helpful because there is a difficulty here: some people say, 'If this was really real temptation, then you have to say He could have sinned'. Now let me explain this to you. Others say: 'Well, if He is God, it cannot really be real temptation, because God cannot be tempted with evil'. The answer is in His two natures. Here it is: if the Lord Jesus Christ only had a perfect human nature, like Adam in the beginning, and He was facing the devil here in the wilderness, He could have sinned. Did you hear that? If He only had a perfect human nature, like Adam, and faced the devil in the wilderness as He did, He could have sinned. Yet He also had a divine nature - yes, He didn't grasp at the use of it in the temptation, and though He was not to draw power upon it for our sakes, it was still there; and because it was still there it was like, if you want to put it, a moral strength, a kind of backstop that prevented the Lord Jesus Christ from sinning. He could not have sinned, because His divine nature was there; and yet because He faced temptation in human, perfect though it may be, strength alone, and though He didn't draw upon His divine supernatural powers, it was facing temptation as a man. Do you see it?

Now I know I may not explain all the answers, or questions I should say, and yet I think it's the best explanation - but the amazing thing of it all, while we theologise about it, is that - and if we miss this, we miss everything that's for our heart this morning - He chose to face temptation not in the strength of His divine power, but as a human with perfect faith in God. Now let me clarify one point, lest I be misunderstood: we must also assert that though Christ was truly tempted, His temptation was not exactly the same as ours. What do I mean? Well, He had a human nature, but He did not have a fallen, depraved human nature that was naturally drawn to sin. In other words, the psychological process that He went through in
temptation, it was not identical to the one we go through. Here's how James puts it: 'Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God', for God cannot be tempted with evil, He himself tempts no one: but each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire' - that did not happen with Christ. He did not have a desire for sin, He did not have a fallen human nature. Then desire, James says, 'When it has conceived, gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is fully grown, brings forth death'. The Lord did not have that lust after sin.

You see, for us there are outer stimuli to sin, outer factors, and that is Satan and the world. But we also have an inner urge to sin, and that is our fallen sinful nature that urges us to follow sin and temptation. Jesus did not have it, no inner urge! As the hymn writer put it:

'We have a Priest who suffered,  
Knowing weakness, tears and pain,  
Who like us was tried and tempted,  
Unlike us without stain'.

Yet Christ still had the outer voice of Satan tempting Him. He had fasted 40 days, and that temptation was very real. He had a sense of need, He was hungry. He was conscious of an outer urge to satisfy that need - the devil, telling Him to do it. He had a supernatural power to supply that need if He so desired, so He was conscious of real temptation - and the battle was to resist that outer voice. We must never think that it was a breeze for Him. It would have been a breeze for Him if He had faced it as God, but He faced it in His perfect humanity. I believe this was the greatest temptation ever, and it was agonising! Perhaps, could I suggest to you, that the horror of this temptation was heightened because of the sensitive innocence of His perfect humanity.

Now why does all this matter? Some of you're sitting there maybe thinking: 'You're going in too deep this morning, and you're just confusing folk and giving them questions'. I'll tell you why it matters: because as difficult as it is for us to comprehend, Scripture affirms that in these temptations Jesus gained an ability to understand and help us in our temptations. That's why it matters. Though He didn't sin, and He couldn't sin, and whatever His temptation was, it was apart from sin; it was real! That's why He suffered when tempted, so that He might be able to help those who are tempted. That's why we have a Great High Priest who can sympathise with infirmities - that word is 'weaknesses' - for He, in every respect, has been tempted as we yet without sin.

Do you not think it's important? I'll tell you why it's important: because temptation will be an agonising experience for all God's servants, but the wonderful thing is that we have a sympathetic High Priest. Why? All because He didn't choose an easy road. When we go the hard road, following Christ, and we endure persecution and sufferings of all sorts because we obey Christ, isn't it wonderful to know that whatever we go through He knows and He understands? You can't underestimate what that means. Now remember, Mark was probably written to Christians suffering persecution under the Emperor, or who would suffer persecution in a day that was very near - do you not think that it mattered to them that Christ suffered tests, that He suffered trials, that He shed tears, that the devil tempted Him? Does it matter to you? Oh, it matters to me!

I read a story from the New York Times Magazine. Nancy Rhian, the reporter, told a story she'd heard 25 years earlier from a friend just simply called 'George'. This was the story: in those days work crews marked construction sites by putting out smudge pots with open
flames. George worked on one such site, and one day George's four-year-old daughter came to work with him. She got too close to one of those sites, smudge pots, and her trousers caught fire like the straw man's stuffing. The scars ran the length and breadth of Sarah's legs, and her legs looked like a jigsaw puzzle. When she was in the third grade she was asked the question: 'If you could have one wish, what would it be?'. This is what Sarah wrote in her little report: 'I want everyone to have legs like mine'. Now what was that? Well, when we suffer, just like Sarah, we want others to understand, don't we? We wish they would know what we are going through, we want them to be like us, why? Not out of some kind of sick gratification, but we want them to be able to identify, understand what we're going through!

Therefore He had to, Hebrews 2:17 says, be made like His brothers in every respect, so that He might become a merciful and faithful High Priest and the Servant of God to make propitiation for the sins of the people. That's why He had to take flesh and blood, He wasn't walking around doing an act, He was a real man! He was God, yes, but He was man, and He was tested in all points, in all respects, like we are. Now specific temptations, I know, vary with time, and sometimes we get perplexed about that verse and we think: 'Well, He couldn't be tempted the way I'm tempted because those things weren't around in Jesus' day'. Well, all our temptations match the categories of the temptation the Lord faced: the lust of the eye, the lust of the flesh, the pride of life - that's how He was tempted. But you know, you can be more specific than that, because if you reflect on the life of the Lord Jesus for even a little space, you begin to see that there were similar tests, similar temptations that He faced that we face.

He stood at the grave of Lazarus and wept, bereaved. His family deserted Him and forsook Him, is that where you are? His brothers thought He was mad. We don't read of His father recorded in the Gospels after the Temple event at the age of 12; and probably His mother, Mary, was widowed, and He had to assume the chief role in the home - and there He is, that was a single parent family, whatever way you want to describe it! Here's the Saviour fitting a place in this human family as a young lad, that other young lads wouldn't experience, so that He might experience what we experience. Have Christians offended you and betrayed you? How do you think He felt when Judas kissed Him on the cheek, and he calls Him 'friend', and at the cross all the disciples forsake Him? They questioned His parentage: 'You're illegitimate!'. Public opinion was against Him. He was misrepresented, He was lied about, He was abused verbally and physically - and that's only some of the list. You know, when we see that though those sufferings and temptations and trials are not efficacious in the sense that it was only the cross that could take away our sins, it's only the cross can save our soul, yet look: He's doing it for you! He didn't have to do it, yet He did it, and that will get us through. The writer to the Hebrews says it will, it should give us confidence because of this, because He took flesh, because He suffered in the same respects as us yet without sin, because He sympathises - let us then, with boldness, confidence, draw near to the throne of grace that we may receive mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.

I heard a lovely story about a man called Rev H. C. Trumbull. Mr Trumbull was preaching, as he often did, in the prisons to some of the inmates. On this one occasion he said: 'The only difference between me and you is owed to the grace of God'. He was identifying with them as sinners. Afterwards one of the prisoners came to him and said: 'Mr Trumbull, did you mean what you said about sympathising with us, and that the only thing that makes a difference in your life is the help that you've got from God? That's the only thing that's made you to differ from us?'. When he received an affirmative answer from that man, this is how the prisoner responded - listen to this very carefully: 'I am here for life, but I can stay here more contentedly now that I know I've a brother out in the world'. Do you know something?
scene for us, if we are the servants of God, is a scene of suffering, of temptation, and of trial - but we ought to be able to say, as we look at our Saviour in the wilderness: 'I can stay here more contentedly, because I know I have a Brother in heaven who sends grace and mercy for my need and my temptations'.

The hymnwriter - and we're going to sing it - Michael Bruce put it well when he said:

'Though now ascended up on high,
He bends on earth a brother's eye;
Partaker of the human name,
He knows the frailty of our frame.

Our fellow-sufferer yet retains
A fellow-feeling of our pains;
And still remembers in the skies
His tears, and agonies, and cries.

In every pang that rends the heart,
The Man of Sorrows had a part;
He sympathizes with our grief,
And to the sufferer sends relief.

With boldness, therefore, at the throne,
Let us make all our sorrows known;
And ask the aid of heavenly power
To help us in this evil hour'.

Father, we don't want to dwell any longer on our particular and very specific temptations, we want to dwell on Him, O Lord, who endured, who triumphed; and at the cross defeated sin, death, and the devil; who now dispenses at Your right hand on high grace and mercy. Lord, here we are, and with boldness in our need - and our need is great, and You know our hearts, You know what we struggle with, You know what we face, You know our tests - Lord, give us the grace to overcome, to grow stronger for the task You have for us, and in consequence grow more like our Suffering Master. Amen.
Let's turn together to Mark's Gospel chapter 1, Mark chapter 1 - and if you haven't been with us in previous weeks, we are taking these Sunday mornings a series through Mark's account of the life of the Lord Jesus in his Gospel. The last two Sunday mornings, and three inclusive of this morning, we're looking at two verses, verses 12 and 13, that comprise in detail and yet in fullness the account Mark gives of the temptation of our Lord Jesus - or, as we have titled it, 'The Servant's Test'. So this morning's title is 'The Servant's Test - Part 3', and we'll just read verses 12 and 13: "And immediately the spirit driveth him into the wilderness. And he was there in the wilderness forty days, tempted of Satan; and was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered unto him".

Now let me recap for a moment or two on our last two weeks. We pointed out in our first study of the temptation that there is a purpose in the brevity of Mark's account in comparison with the likes of Matthew and Luke's account of the temptation. The reason is found in the context. First of all we find John the Baptist declaring Jesus the Nazarene to be that messenger that Isaiah prophesied, and John prepares the way for the Lord. Then we find in the baptism of the Saviour that the Spirit confirms this fact by descending upon Him in the form of a dove. Then the heavens opened, and the Father declares Him to be His only beloved Son in whom He is well pleased. Then we find, immediately after the baptism, the temptation, or the testing of the Servant of the Lord. I emphasised to you that I believe that Mark's point is that the Messiah, the King, the Son of God, has been declared in the wilderness, but this One is God's Suffering Servant prophesied in the Old Testament Scriptures. He's not allowed to go back into Jerusalem and set up a kingdom and a throne as we would understand that, but He has to stay out in the wilderness, in the desert, and He must suffer. It doesn't matter who He is in that sense, God's will for Him, God's way for Him was not one of force, one of splendour, one of majesty, but rather one of suffering, testing and temptation.

Now His whole temptation was - and we haven't time to look at the individual aspects of it - but it was a temptation to choose an easier path, not the path of suffering, not the path of humiliation and trial. Now we'll look into that in a bit more detail in a few moments, but we learned from the Servant of the Lord's temptation, first of all that this test came immediately after a spiritual high. We emphasised how, at times, we can have a wrong perspective concerning temptation and testing. We tend to think that the holier we become, the more like Jesus we are, the less we will be tempted, the less we will struggle with sin - but, in fact, Jesus shows us that this is the opposite, the contrary is the case: that the greatest temptation ever is here, and yet it's immediately following the greatest event ever up to this point, the baptism of the Lord Jesus. So we can expect to be tested and tempted immediately after great spiritual zeniths in our experience.

Then the second and third points that we looked at in our first week were these: though temptation is instigated by the devil, Satan it was here, and we find in God's word in James 1 that God doesn't tempt anyone with evil, yet God was sovereign in the arrangement of this test of the Servant of the Lord, and He is also sovereign in the arranging of our life's affairs. We have God's word that He does not allow us to be tempted over that which we are able. We
see it in the life of Job, we used illustrations from the life of Joseph to show that God in His sovereign purposes allows temptation to come into our lives not for the same reasons as the devil - he wants us to fall - but God wants us to be strengthened, to be fortified through victory over temptation for the task that He has for us in this life. We applied this by asking the question: how do we react towards temptation? Do we cower from it? 'Oh, it's coming from the devil' - and it is coming from the devil, but do we fail to see that God has a purpose in it as well? He has allowed it into our lives so that we might overcome, and in overcoming have strength to overcome again and again and again, and do God's will in our lives.

Then last week we looked at how the servant's test can be an agonising experience. This, of course, was communicated by the graphic scene that is painted for us here in these verses. The Lord Jesus was in the wilderness, He was there 40 days. He was not just tested by a devil or some demon, but by Satan himself. He was with the wild beasts, and all this imagery is there to convey to us that this was an agonising experience. I spent a lot of time emphasising this, because I feel that sometimes we are in danger of thinking that the temptation of Christ was all an act! That He wasn't truly tempted, that it wasn't real - as if it was easy in some sense for Him! If you want to know about that, I haven't time to go into it this morning, get the recording of last week. We found that the explanation of these difficulties is found in the two natures of the Lord Jesus Christ. Christ could not have sinned because He was God's Son, and yet at the same time He had to be truly tempted if He is to succour those who are tempted, if He is to be a Great High Priest to us, who is able to sympathise with our weaknesses. It had to be real, and yet He couldn't sin. We applied that by saying that temptation will often be an agonising experience for all of God's servants. We will have to, from time to time, go the hard road that Christ knows all about and understands - and yet, through it all, we know that He has gone before us, and He can give us strength to overcome just as He did.

Now our fifth and final point - which was to be the fifth point in my first sermon three weeks ago, but we have broken it into three now - is that the servant's test or temptation is lonely, but there is supernatural aid. The servant's temptation is lonely, but there is supernatural aid. I get this point from the closing words of verse 13: 'and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered unto him'. Now, let me say first of all: when we speak of loneliness in temptation, I'm not talking about the feeling of shame that we often have when we are tempted with sin. Let me explain: sometimes when you're tempted with something that seems irresistible to you, you say to yourself, 'I must be the only person that struggles with this particular thing. I must be the only one who has this problem. Other Christians must be stronger than me, that they're able to overcome this particular type of sin and iniquity'. Maybe the loneliness is so great in your particular temptation that you feel: 'I could never share the struggle that I have with this particular temptation with anyone else, they just would not understand. I feel so alone'.

Now let me say right away, on the authority of God's word, that that type of loneliness in temptation is an unnecessary loneliness. We're going to spend this morning looking at how you can be lonely in life's tests and temptations, but that type of loneliness is a satanic deception. It is an attempt of the devil to keep people under subjection to sin, and prevent them seeking help from other Christians. Of course, as I've taught you on many occasions, you have to counteract Satan's lies by the truth of God's word. What is the truth of God's Word regarding those issues that I have already mentioned? Here it is, 1 Corinthians 10 verse 13 that we have quoted several times in these services: 'There is no temptation but such as is common to man'. There is no temptation coming to you that has not been experienced by other people, and is not common to others in humanity. So right away, there is that lie of the
devil that you’re the only one struggling with this and having problems in this area, it’s blown completely out of the water. God’s word is saying to you that there has no temptation taken you, but such as is common to man. Your temptation, however unique you feel it is to you, is common to other people.

But here’s another string in your bow when it comes to those lies, and this is far greater in its weight. It’s found in Hebrews 4 verse 15, and we’ve already quoted it: ‘We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses; but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin’. Not only is temptation, and your particular type of temptation, common to other men; it was common to Christ! Now perhaps not specifically in relation to the exact thing you’re tempted with, but we looked last week at how the Lord was tempted in three areas: the lust of the eye, the lust of the flesh, and the pride of life. We don’t have time to go into all the ramifications of that, but those are the three general types of temptation that any of us can be tempted by - and He was tempted in those ways! So don’t believe the lie of the devil that you’re something special in a negative sense, with the struggles that you have and temptations and tests that are in your life, it is common to man, it was common to Christ - and therefore it should be no surprise that it’s common to you! Therefore you should not feel alone in that sense, because you have the companionship of other Christians - though they don’t often talk about it and admit it - and you have also, more importantly, the companionship of Christ. So you, in your test and temptation, you ought to be offering help to those who are tempted, because you struggle with similar things, and also you ought to be seeking help from other Christians - but far greater than that: you have been offered the help and the sympathy, the succour and the encouragement of the Saviour Himself. You’ve got His companionship.

Do you seek that in temptation? I think sometimes we’re nearly afraid of the Lord Jesus when we are tempted with sin. We’re afraid that He wouldn’t want to talk to us about all those grubby things. That’s another lie! He wants to come alongside us and help us with our struggles, and He understands as a man, though apart from sin. A good illustration I heard of, related to this, how the Lord Jesus sympathises with us and is with us in our struggles with sin. Imagine that you were walking through a field, and all of a sudden you pierced your foot. Now instantly, physiologically in your body, the nervous system kicks into action. Your nervous system will notify of the wound in the foot - but who will it notify? Well, it notifies your brain - if you’ve got one! If your brain is not conscious of that notification, you won’t feel any pain in your foot. It has to go straight to the brain. It seems as if the brain is suffering, because the brain is the centre of the entire nervous system, it is the centre of all your human sensation. So instantly, on receiving the message from the afflicted member, the foot, the brain, as it were, comes down into the foot - as it were, it enters into a perfect sympathy with that other member of the body.

What an illustration of the body of Christ! When we are suffering, we ought to feel the suffering of our other brothers and sisters in Christ. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12: ‘That there may be no division in the body; but that the members may have the same care one for another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together’. If there is someone struggling with trials, testing, temptation in this place, the other members ought to be a help to them. Yet, what a wonderful blessing it is to know this morning that our Lord Jesus Christ, as the Head of His body, actually like the brain coming down to the foot and entering into a perfect sympathy with that pierced member, can enter into all our problems, all our struggles, all our trials, all our temptations apart from sin. Does that not encourage you? If you want a verse for it, it’s found in Acts 9:4: ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’ He was persecuting the church, murdering Christians; and yet Christ,
when He appeared to him on the Damascus Road, levelled against him the crime of persecuting Jesus.

Is that not an encouragement? We ought not to be lonely in that sense. We've got the companionship of other Christians who should be there for us. You should be there for other folk, they should be there for you - and praise God, we have Christ, a Great High Priest who is there for us, and enters into all our struggles with us. But in saying that, there is a loneliness in testing and temptation, and one aspect of it is that there is a loneliness which is a trial in itself. Your trial might be being lonely, but then in the other regard there is a loneliness that is derived from other types of tests and temptations, it's a secondary fact and yet it is so real as well. I believe you can see both of those types of loneliness in testing in the suffering Servant, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Let me explain: first, Jesus knew loneliness as a trial in itself all through His life. Therefore He can sympathise with us - we'll be thinking soon about how there was no room for Him in the inn, how Herod was intent on murdering Him, how when Joseph and Mary and the baby Jesus went into Egypt He would have been separated from His wider family circle, how when Joseph probably died - and we have that from inference, from the lack of mention of Jesus' earthly guardian on the earth after a certain age of the Lord Jesus - the Lord was living in what we could only term as a single-parent family. He was in that struggle, and aspersions would have been cast on His birth and on His mother for how He must have been born if they disbelieved the virgin conception. Then when the Lord Jesus came into adolescence, and became older, He probably assumed the responsibility for the leadership of His family after the decease of His father. He was earning a living as a carpenter in the carpenter's shop as a young man, perhaps robbed of some of His childhood. Maybe He was caring for His younger brothers and sisters, bringing them up - and yet later we find out that they actually, His brethren and sisters, forsook Him, thought He was mad. So what we are seeing here as we get this picture is that the Lord Jesus knew loneliness as a trial all through His life. He knew loneliness in family life.

You've heard the expression: 'I'm surrounded by people, and yet I feel so lonely'. Sometimes that's how we feel. I wonder is that how you feel today? Here's the Lord Jesus, I know people think: 'How could He know what it's like to be a husband when He was never married? How does He know what it's like to be a father or a mother when He never had children?'. He acted like a father in that home, He acted like a parent bringing up these children. Not only did He act like a father and a husband, but in this sense He knew what it was to be forsaken by all, even in His family. Yet He did not have His own children to rear, and to bring a heritage to His name, and to bless His soul as children do. Yet He never had a companion in life, a wife, for He never married. In fact, He had no house, He had no home, He had loneliness continually in His life. Then there was loneliness in His ministry, for we read that the disciples forsook Him, and His friends betrayed Him, and His own people crucified Him. There on the cross we hear Him cry out: 'Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?' - His own Father and God forsook Him!

Do you want to talk about loneliness? He knew loneliness as a trial all through His life, but He knew loneliness in temptation of His life, in the actual temptations He endured. He knew an awful sense of loneliness because of them. Now you look at verse 13: 'He was being tempted' - and I showed you I think last week, or the week before, that this is in a continuous tense, which means that His testing and temptation didn't finish in the wilderness. This is the Gospel of the Suffering Servant of Jehovah, His whole life is to be one as a Man of Sorrows, of suffering trial and temptation. But it's this phrase I want you to notice in verse 13 as well: 'He was with the wild beasts'. Now here is this archetypal temptation, the temptation of Christ,
and it's described that He is alone with the animals in the wilderness - what does that mean? It means His mother was not there. It means there was no prophet like John the Baptist preparing the way for Him there in His temptation. It means there were no disciples round about Him, encouraging Him or praying for Him. It means there was no adoring crowd waiting on the next wonderful word or miraculous miracle. He is in His test, in His temptation alone. He must ascend the mount of temptation alone. He must endure it alone. He must overcome alone. He must descend from it alone.

If we had time, we could look at the many aspects in which Christ's temptation in the wilderness parallels the temptation of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. But let me say that the temptation of the Lord Jesus was far greater, more difficult than Adam and Eve's. Think about it for a moment: Adam and Eve had each other, they had fellowship with one another, they could encourage and rebuke each other. They weren't fasting, not 40 days, not even for one meal. God said: 'Of every tree of the garden you can eat, there's only one I don't want you to eat of' - so they could eat anything except this one tree! By contrast, the Lord Jesus had no human fellowship. In the wilderness He had no food to eat, and after He fasted 40 days and 40 nights, the Bible says He was hungry. Now I ask you: have you ever heard of a loneliness like this? Jesus knew loneliness as a trial all through His life, but He also knew loneliness in these specific temptations of His life. He knew loneliness like no one. The poet said:

'Alone, yes, Jesus was alone,
In that great stretch of sand and stone;
And later in earth's noise and din,
Alone since He was free from sin.
Men who gathered to be taught
Oft failed to reach His inmost thought.

Still later 'neath a darkened sky,
They listened to a lonely cry
From One upon the accursed tree:
'O, why hast Thou forsaken me?'
We pause and pray: 'Lord, help us guess
The depth of that great loneliness'.

Now here's the application: He's going up the mount of temptation, led by the Spirit. He is being tempted by the devil. What's happening? He's going on with God! He's going God's direction! He's batting away, as a holy man, all of these temptations to take an easier route, an easier road, and because He's going on with God in God's way He is lonely. If we are to go on with God, we'll experience it too. Someone once said to me: 'Have you ever climbed to the top of a mountain? The higher and higher you get, the fewer people are there with you'. Maybe at the top, at the pinnacle, you're left there on your own. It's the same in the Christian life: the great temptation is to take an easier route, an easier road. Some temptations will make you lonely, or perhaps loneliness, my friend, is your specific temptation and trial - being on your own. Now here's the wonderful message that I want you to grip today: the servant's temptation and testing is lonely, but there is supernatural aid. There is! It is found in these words at the end of verse 13: 'He was with the wild beasts, and the angels ministered unto him'. Angels were ministering unto Him!

Now, we don't have time for a study on angels in this meeting, save to say that Hebrews chapter 1 verse 14 gives us an interesting insight into what their purpose is. The writer says:
'[Angels] Are they not all ministering spirits, sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit eternal life?'. What does that mean? Angels are our helpers. Now if you think about this, from the beginning of the Bible to the end, we don't have time to go through every instance, but remember Hagar? She knew what loneliness was. She was an outcast into the desert, Abraham and Sarah had cast her out, and in Genesis 16 there is Hagar with Ishmael her son, and we read that the angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness. She's in the wilderness, she's cast out, she's tested and tempted and tried, and an angel finds her. When we look at the Exodus, that is the first exodus of the people of God out of the bondage of Egypt from their first wilderness experience, what is it that leads them out? It's an angel. I believe it's the Lord Jesus Himself, the Angel of Jehovah - but there is an angel leading them out of the wilderness from their testing and their temptation.

A parallel story, very akin to the Lord's temptation, is that of all the Elijah - and he's in the wilderness too. He's being fed in the barren desert by an angel - 1 Kings 19 tells us: 'He lay down and slept under a broom tree or a juniper tree, and behold, an angel touched him, and said, Arise and eat. And he looked, and, behold, there was at his head a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. And he ate and drank, and lay down again. And the angel of the LORD came again the second time, and touched him, and said, Arise and eat; for the journey is too great for you'. There is Elijah saying: 'I alone am left! I'm the only one doing anything for God!' - and in his loneliness and his testing, God comes through an angel. Elisha and his servant are shut up in a place called Dothan, their enemies are pressing upon them, and the young man starts to shake and his knees knock, and he gets fearful - he doesn't know whether God is going to come through for them or not. In 2 Kings 6 it says that: 'Elisha prayed and said, O Lord, please open his eyes that he may see. So the LORD opened the eyes of the young man; and he saw: and, behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha'. Yes, it was a lonely test, but there was supernatural aid, there were angels.

I was reading this week in my devotions, and I couldn't help apply it to this truth, about the three Hebrew children who were alone in the fiery furnace of persecution - and what do we read? The Emperor says: 'But I see four men unbound, walking in the midst of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the appearance of the fourth is like a son of the gods' - or an angel, or some supernatural being - it was Christ! God's Angel! Then we find Daniel alone, cast into the den of lions - all alone, prey to those wilds beasts. In Daniel 6:22 the Emperor asks how Daniel could have survived, and Daniel says: 'My God sent His angel, and shut the lion's mouths, and they have not harmed me'. Praise God, He still has His angels, and even in the Christmas story Joseph was afraid, he felt all alone, he didn't know whether to take Mary to him as his wife because he feared that she had betrayed him. In a dream God's angel comes to him in all his fear and loneliness in that situation, and says: 'Fear not to take Mary as your wife'. Fear not! An angel!

Coming back to our Lord, and though we laboured the fact last week that He faced temptation as a man - He did, on His human strength alone, He had no earthly companionship. All these things that I have detailed for you were His experience with the wild animals in the wilderness, and yet He was not left to fight on His own. There was divine aid! The angels ministered to Him. We might feel like the loneliest person in the world in our particular circumstances, but we are not bereft of divine aid - we've got the angels as well! There is no indication, by the way, that these angels were withdrawn from the Lord in His life through all His experience of temptation. We have no reason to believe that divine aid will be withdrawn from us, and through our trials, though they come, and temptations, we don't need to be lonely because we have His companionship! We've got the angels, we've got the other
members of the body, we've got the Lord Jesus Christ our Great High Priest, we've got the Holy Spirit who Jesus said: 'I will come to you', in the Holy Spirit, 'and I will send another Strengthener, Comforter to you'. We've got all these things, and even though we might be bereft of any human companionship at all, there is divine aid.

Samuel Rutherford was locked in a prison in Scotland for his faith, and he was cut off from family and friends and all human companionship, and this is what he said: 'If God is with you, you will lack neither company nor comfort'. If God is with you, you will lack neither company nor comfort! The poem puts it well that I read this week:

'Is there a secret path of life,
Which you must tread alone?
A Coastguard walk with danger rife,
A walk which must be done.
You think it is a narrow way,
And only room for you:
Your Father is just there today,
For there is room for two.

Is there a secret cave of grief,
A dark and dreary place?
Are you cut off beyond relief,
Where wild sea waves embrace?
You think you are alone, sad child,
That none can come to you?
But in that cavern, lone and wild,
There always will be two!

Are you in secrets none can know,
Alone upon the sea?
Where unknown wins around you blow,
Tempted as none may be?
Your Father is upon the deck:
Alone? It is not true!
Though battered, beaten, half a wreck,
The lone boat still holds two!

Dear child, there is no secret place
Of work, or want, or woe,
But your Father's smiling face
Is there! You cannot go
Into the closet of your life,
But it will still be true:
When most alone 'mid cam and strife
There always will be two!'.

The servant's temptation is lonely, but there is supernatural aid. Can I conclude all these three messages by pointing out this: the Lord Jesus Christ's baptism was His expression of His willingness to do the Father's will. Satan's temptation was not motivated to get Christ to commit immorality, as much as to deter Him from choosing God's perfect will. The Father's will, the Father's way was one of suffering, was one of trial, was of temptation and loneliness
- it was the hard path of obedience. It's always the temptation of the servant of the Lord to choose the easy way out, to avoid the Calvary Road, but He chose it - and He chose it for you, and He chose it for me. Here's the question: will you choose that road for Him? Will I?

C.T. Studd was in Africa, and he only went to Africa as a missionary in his fifties. He spent ten years, also, in China, and seven years in India. To go to the mission field C.T. Studd had to give up much wealth, a life of ease, friends and a career. Instead of having, at 50 years of age, like some of you, a very robust constitution - C.T. Studd had seven serious diseases ranging within the tall skinny frame of his body. No doctor would grant him a permit to go, but he went. He lived apart from his wife for many years, and only saw her on a number of occasions because of her health, before she passed away into the presence of the Lord. In Africa he lived in very spartan quarters, he had a small room, a mud floor, a simple rope bed, a chair, a desk - this is the founder of what we know today as WEC, the Worldwide Evangelisation Crusade. Near the end of his life he was heartbroken. His home committee who were encouraging him and meant to support him, they threatened to take over the heart of the African mission. Now eventually that was averted, but that sense of betrayal in his heart by some of his one-time supporters almost broke his heart, to such an extent that it just didn't seem to heal. He only got release when he came to his death, but what I want to point out to you is that his own words reveal the extent of his bruising, his suffering, his loneliness. Here's what he said: 'Sometimes I feel, and especially of late, that my cross is heavy beyond endurance, and I fear I often feel like fainting under it - but I hope to go on and not to faint. My heart seems worn out and bruised beyond repair, and in my deep loneliness I often wish to be gone - but God knows best, and I want to do every ounce of work He wants me to do'. Here's what his biographer says, which is profound: 'Steep was the ascent to the end of C.T. Studd's life. This pathway never laid its victory through fame or popularity, but taxed the conqueror with the full price always demanded of lonely aggressive pioneers. Who', he asks, 'follows in his train?'.

This was the way of the Suffering Servant. It has been the way of all God's subsequent suffering servants. Is it our way? Is it my way? C.T. Studd wrote these words near the end of his life: 'Don't seek a long life, Christ had a short one. Don't live in luxury, Christ lived and died poor. Don't live in pleasure, Christ pleased not Himself. Don't live for fame, Christ made Himself of no reputation. Don't live at ease, Christ suffered for you the shame and scourge of the cross. Don't lose your opportunity and inherit an eternity of shame and regrets hereafter'. Though it be lonely, may we all choose the Calvary Road.

Our Father, we know that the Lord Jesus did not suffer for suffering's sake, He endured the cross, despising the shame, for the joy that was set before Him. We believe we are His joy, and will be that joy when we are glorified in Him in heaven one day. But Lord, help us to realise that our suffering is not just for suffering's sake, for the suffering of this present age is not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed in us one day. Help us to consider Him, who endured such suffering, lest we faint in our faith. If there is one here without Him, help them to see that they cannot face this life apart from Him. May they repent of their sin and embrace Him as the only Saviour, as we ask the blessing of the Lord Jesus Christ, who is no longer the Man of Sorrows, but has been given a name above every name, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

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Transcribed by Andrew Watkins, Preach The Word - December 2006
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Now we take up our study again at verse 14, and we will be looking only at verses 14 and 15 in our seventh study, which I have entitled 'The Servant's Task Begins'. Verse 14: "Now after that John", that is John the Baptist, "was put in prison, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God", or, "preaching the gospel of God, And saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel".

Let us pray: O teach me Lord, that I may teach the precious things Thou dost impart, and wing my words that they may reach the hidden depths of many heart, for Christ's sake, Amen.

As you will know, if you were with us, as I said, in recent weeks, the victory has been won in the Servant's test - the Servant's test being the temptation of our Lord Jesus that Mark deals with very briefly, but of course we know that there was a reason for that. The Lord Jesus was being tested as God's Servant, and He won. Now we find in verses 14 and following, indeed right throughout the whole of this Gospel record, the Servant's task begins. The test has been passed, and the task starts. Now we noted, I think in our second message on this study, that Mark appears to be keen, dare we say even impatient, to get to the beginning of the ministry of our Lord Jesus in verse 14. We saw how quickly he skips through various very important things in the life of the Lord that other gospel writers deal with in more detail: the ministry of John the Baptist, the baptism of the Lord, and the temptation. Of course there is a reason for that, and even in the ministry of the Lord Jesus he skips over the record of the Judaean ministry of our Lord that John deals with in John chapter 1 through to chapter 4. It comprised of a year or so of the life and ministry of the Saviour, yet he skips over it and goes straight to the Lord's great Galilean ministry. Then, after he deals in some detail with His Galilean ministry, he makes a beeline to the last week of Jesus' life that led to Calvary, the cross.

So Mark is skipping over a whole lot of biographical detail of the Lord Jesus that other gospel writers deal with - only John, though, dealt with the Judaean ministry - and we've got to say that there has to be a reason for that. We found in recent weeks that there have been reasons, and the reason is that Mark has a specific message that he wants to preach to us. Because of that he is selective in the material that he uses to that end, and it is the message that Christ, though He is the King, the Messiah of the Jews, He is coming to build His kingdom as the Suffering Servant.

So we have seen the preparation for the task: He is baptised, His inauguration in the task - the heavens open, the Father pronounces that He is His well beloved Son. He has taken on Himself the task at baptism by voluntarily going through the waters to say: 'I'm going to be the Suffering Servant, I'm going to travel the road to the cross and die for men's sins and the glory of God'. On the Mount of temptation He has proved Himself worthy of the task, overcoming the devil. So the beginning of the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ has been accomplished. Nothing remains for this Suffering Servant, but to begin His task. From here on, verse 14, we have an account of the ministry of the Lord Jesus: His ministry of
preaching, teaching, healing, casting out demons - all leading up to His great accomplishment, the triumph of the cross and three days later rising from the dead.

Now here is, I believe, Mark's point in the two verses that we have to consider this morning. His point is this: the Servant has a work to do - the Servant has a work to do! All the preparation for the work has been done, and the affirmation in the work has been achieved, the temptation of the devil to cause Him to avoid completing the work has been avoided itself. Testing has been endured to show that He is good for the work, but all of that has been leading up to one thing, one aim and one purpose, one goal, and that is that Christ may accomplish the work which the Father sent Him to do - the divinely appointed task that would bring glory to God.

Of course we know this because the Lord Jesus said, did He not, in John 9: 'I must do the works of him who sent me while it is day: night is coming, when no one can work'. John 17 verse 1: 'I glorified you on the earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do'. The Servant had a work to do, the Servant must serve. Now we have seen how this gospel of the Suffering Servant has great application to us, because we are all servants of God - different from Christ in many regards, and yet we are His servants and also servants of the Living God. The New Testament echoes this same principle for us: that we are God's servants, and our task on this earth is to serve as well. Second Timothy 2:21: 'If a man therefore purge himself from these', that is, things that are dishonourable, 'he shall be a vessel unto honour, sanctified, and meet for the master's use, and prepared unto every good work'. Ephesians 2:10 reads: 'For we are his', God's, 'workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them'. As the hymn writer puts it:

'There's a work for Jesus ready at your hand,
'Tis a task the Master, just for you, has planned'.

So we're going to find out this morning from these two verses many lessons, the first is: regarding the servant's task, there is a work to do. The second is what the work is: what is this work that we are to engage in as servants of God? The third thing is how to carry out that work, and the fourth thing is what to expect when we're faithful in that task. Now we'll not consider those things in that order, but hopefully by the end of this morning we'll have answered them all.

Let's consider first of all, as we look at verse 14, the time when and the place where His task began - the time when and the place where His task began. Look at it, verse 14: 'Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee'. So the arrest of John the Baptist for Mark indicates a time when Jesus had to act. For Jesus, this was the sign that His earthly ministry had to begin. Literally the word for 'arrest' there is the word 'delivered up', or in the Authorised it is the word 'put in prison', it's literally a Greek word which means 'delivered up', 'paradidomi' (sp?). Mark uses this word in many verses, in Mark chapter 9 verse 31 we read: 'For he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, 'The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise". 'He will be delivered into the hands of men', 'paradidomi'. He uses it in chapter 10, chapter 15, three occasions in that chapter alone. So remember that, this word that is used for John being put in prison is the word 'delivered up'. Now that's significant, I believe. It is used by Mark of how Christ, the Suffering Servant Himself, would be delivered up.

Now it's also used of God delivering up His own Son. In Romans 8:32, you know the verse well: 'He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with
him also freely give us all things?'. It's also used of Christ delivering Himself up in a voluntary act, by Paul in Galatians 2:20: 'I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave', that is the word, 'paradidomi', 'delivered himself up for me', for my sake. Paul uses it again in Ephesians of Christ delivering Himself up: 'Walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us, and hath given himself for us', that is, delivered Himself, 'an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweetsmelling savour'. Later on, at the end of chapter 5, he says: 'Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave', 'paradidomi', 'delivered himself up for his church'.

So John the Baptist was delivered up, as Christ would be delivered up, as God delivered Christ up, as Christ delivered Himself up - and one of the reasons why Christ delivered Himself up, and was delivered by men and God, and suffered, was, as Hebrews says, that He might purge us from an evil conscience, from dead works - why? That we might serve the Living God. This is what I want you to note: as John was removed from the scene, Jesus' ministry was to begin. Now here's the application for us today, I believe: now that Christ has been removed from our scene in a physical sense, that is the sign that we are now to serve Him.

Is that not what John says in John 14 verse 12, the words of Christ he records: 'Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that believeth on me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do; because I go unto my Father'. The sign for Jesus to begin His ministry was the delivering up of John the Baptist into prison, and the sign for us to begin working and serving for the Lord as the servants of God is that Christ has been delivered up for us to purge us from dead works, that we might serve the Living God. In other words, the sign for you to start a work for God, if you're waiting on one, has been given. Any sign for us that we should be serving happened 2000 years ago on a rugged cross - the question is: are we?

Now we see that Jesus moved from Judaea to Galilee, that's what verse 14 says, after John the Baptist's arrest He moves to Galilee, into the district of Herod. This is highly significant, because Herod is the man that made sure John would get into prison and get his head cut off. What I want you to note is that the Lord Jesus, as He moves from Judaea to Galilee, He's not escaping from danger, He's moving into danger, the danger zone. He's not withdrawing Himself from peril because John was arrested, but He is actually going into the very region over which the man who had arrested John was ruling. Now there are many lessons we can get from this verse alone, and here's the first I believe: the suffering of the Lord Jesus brought our salvation, that is how He served God - but what you must see clearly is that His serving brought Him suffering, and He chose the road of suffering because it was the only road whereby He could shed His blood and save us - but here's the lesson for us: we, at times, to be obedient to God and to serve God, must endure suffering.

I think, and I've highlighted this, and been convicted by it in my own life, particularly when we went through the temptation of the Lord: we often choose the easiest route, even in serving God - the quick, and the fast, and the instant method. So often when we begin to suffer for Christ through obedience or through serving Him, what's the first reaction? I know what mine is: it is to quit! 'I can't handle this! I can't endure this! I can't go on!' - but what we're seeing here in the life of John the Baptist and the life of Christ is: John was delivered up because he was an obedient servant, Jesus now moves from Judaea to Galilee to the danger zone because His ministry was to be the Suffering Servant, being delivered up for God and for men, and He chooses to suffer. The Servant's task is to suffer, and ultimately to die - for except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abides alone.
Now here's a second lesson that is encouraging - what's encouraging about dying? Very little, but there is something that is encouraging, as Campbell Morgan put it: 'Men may silence the voice of a prophet, but they cannot hinder the word of God'. Matthew Henry: 'Note the silencing of Christ's ministers shall not be the suppressing of Christ's gospel. If some be laid aside, others shall be raised up, perhaps mightier than they, to carry on the same work'. So let's sum up what we're saying here from verse 14: there is a work to do. Christ, like John, would be delivered up, but Christ would be raised up, and Christ would ascend up, and then He would send down to us His Spirit as an indication that now is the time to act - and, if we are serving, we will expect suffering; and if we serve, though we suffer, we should be emboldened to serve because even though the enemy might kill us like John the Baptist, even though wicked men might deliver us up like happened to the Lord Jesus Himself, they cannot kill the word of God, they cannot thwart the will of God. Is that not an encouragement? I must say...you look very encouraged!

It's not encouraging, I know, to think about suffering, and think about dying - and I think that shows something about my heart, and the affluent age and materialistic spirit that is about, the love of pleasure and comfort. The need of the hour, I believe, is for sacrificial servants like Luther. The whole of Europe is against him, and Papal Rome, and yet he on the authority of God's Word has to stand firm and say: 'Here I stand, I can do no other'. Boy did he suffer, yet he could write in his immortal hymn:

'And though this world, with devils filled,
Should threaten to undo us,
We will not fear, for God hath willed
His truth to triumph through us'.

Now can you say this? Can I say this?

'Let goods and kindred go,
This mortal life also;
The body they may kill:
God's truth abideth still,
His kingdom is forever'.

I'm not sure if I can say that. We need to be able to say that. There's a great lesson in the time and the place where His task began, but then I want you to note secondly: the nature of the task He began. The end of verse 14 tells us He 'went preaching the gospel of God', or 'proclaiming the gospel of God'. Now the word for 'preach' or 'proclaim' there is the Greek word 'caruso', which means 'making a public proclamation' as a herald, like a town crier - announcing something that is news that is of the utmost importance. So what was the work, the task of this Suffering Servant? Put very plainly, so that you can understand: His work was to preach. That was His task. Now preaching is in disrepute today even in the church, and there are many reasons for this - not least that some preaching leaves a lot to be desired. I don't claim to be something special, but I know that in certain quarters preaching is ill thought of just because preaching is disinteresting at times, and people are just bored! It has caused them to reject preaching altogether, and there is a responsibility on me and preachers and the church to be real and relevant, just as the word of God is. But I think today the most disturbing rejection of preaching is based on the premise that there are better methods than preaching: 'You can reach the lost more effectively in other ways, and by other means'.
Now we have to realise what we're saying if we ever start to think that way: we are contemplating the thought that there might be better methods than Jesus used as His task when He came into the world preaching the gospel of God. That's the implication. I received recently information of an up and coming visit to Ireland of - I'll just call him Steve - and he writes this: 'I'm a full-time gospel illusionist. I use tricks and illusions to present a gospel message. Just to let you know that I have an hour long show, which I am taking to Ireland from 2nd-20th March 2007. The show is evangelism based and is ideal for a church family service, mission week, youth event, social event or Alpha supper'. To this message there was attached some reviews from churches in England and Scotland that he had been round, and this is what one said - very telling, I felt: 'It was great to see people leaving church with a big smile on their faces, clearly having enjoyed their time while also having heard a clear gospel message'.

Now I don't doubt that these people are sincere in their heart, and they could be doing more than we are doing to reach lost people - but there is this insinuation that when we just preach and sing and pray, that people go out of the church with big long faces on - but it's great to see them smiling because really they have been entertained! Now let me say: I admit that there must be ways to supplement preaching, and we don't just do preaching, we do other things, and I think we need to explore some of the things that we do need to do - but we must never supplant preaching. We must never substitute it, because the word of God is clear: 'For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through', the Authorised says, 'the foolishness of preaching', or, 'the folly of what we preach to save those that believe'. This was the work of the Servant of the Lord, He was engaged in it - and indeed all the servants of the Lord down through the ages were, and are, and so must we.

Now you might say: 'Well, this is a very interesting message for preachers'. Well, I know that not everybody is a public herald, like Christ who 'carusoed' the message out, but there is a broad type of preaching that is found in the New Testament Scriptures. It's mentioned in Acts 11:19, where we read: 'Now they which were scattered abroad upon the persecution that arose about Stephen travelled as far as Phenice, and Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching', or, 'speaking the word to none but unto the Jews'. Now the word used for 'preaching' there is the Greek word 'laleo' (sp?), which means 'to speak' - some people have called it 'gossiping the gospel'. Now these believers weren't all preachers, heralds, public people - but as they were spread through the persecution that came from the martyrdom of Stephen, wherever they went, in the marketplace, in the neighbourhood, in the town, they were gossiping the gospel.

Now you mightn't be a preacher in the technical sense, but do you do that? That's our task as servants of God, but Mark also gives us the theme of Christ's preaching - and I want you to note that, I believe, it is similar to the message that John the Baptist preached at the beginning of the chapter. If you want to look into that a bit more, get the second message in this series: 'John the Baptist, and The Beginning of the Gospel' - we've no time to deal in too much depth with what Jesus preached here, but it's important to note the subject matter of His preaching - for all the servants of the Lord in this place who go about preaching, and for all of us who 'laleo', who gossip the gospel. I have a great fear at times that if you sat the average Christian down and asked them: 'Give me in three short points the tenets of the Gospel that makes it different than any other false gospel, what is it?', that they couldn't give you them. I wonder could you do that? What would you say? 'Ask Jesus into your heart' - that's nice, and sentimental, but that doesn't help anybody. What do we preach that makes the Gospel the Gospel?
The first thing we see in the words of the Lord Jesus is, I believe, if I could say it, it was evangelical. Before He even opens His mouth, Mark says in verse 14 of Him: 'He went preaching the gospel'. Gospel preaching, evangelical preaching is very rare today. In the Reformed camp that we are in as part of the church of Jesus Christ, there is often an emphasis, correctly so, in expositing the word of God, preaching the word of God verse by verse - and that is something that is to be welcomed, and revival often comes when preachers do that. But there has also infiltrated through the back door of that good practice this idea that you don't need to preach a directly evangelistic gospel message. As long as you touch the gospel when you touch it through the verses as you go through a passage, that's enough. Let me say that when Christ came on the scene, His task was to preach the Gospel, Mark says. The word is 'euangelion', which is what we get 'evangelism', 'evangelistic', 'evangelical' from, and it simply means 'good news'.

Now listen: He did not come preaching accusation, He did not come with judgemental denunciation, He came with a proclamation of good news. Now that is highly instructive, I believe. He came telling of the forgiveness of sins through Christ when we repent and believe. So to preach Christ is to preach good news. Let me say that I believe, like many, I'm sure many of you, that judgement, the subject of judgement, God's wrath and hell could be preached more today than it is - but it is erroneous to say of a gospel preacher, as one lady did recently to me - not about me, I hasten to add! - 'I didn't like him, that preacher, he never mentioned hell'. Hell is not the Gospel! Now I admit that the Gospel means little if we do not understand that there is judgement and there is hell, but we've got to understand that if we do not impart good news when we preach the Gospel, we have not preached the Gospel! There must be good news, there must be hope, there must be the note of victory, whatever else you mention.

It was evangelical, here's the second thing: it was God-centred. He preached the Gospel of God. Now 'of God' is the genitive which means it's a Gospel that came from God, it derived from God, it comes from God to men to bring men to God. So we've got to always remember when we're delivering the Gospel that, though it is for the benefit of man, it ought to be God-centred when we deliver it to men. It's for man's benefit, but it must be God-centred rather than man-centred because it is God's work from start to finish. You could go in, at times, to churches - and I'm not being critical here, I just want you to have a discernment about you - and you could hear a whole message about needs and felt desires, and where you are, and what you're doing, and where you need to be, and you never hear God mentioned! This is the Gospel of God! If we preach something but don't mention God, and give God glory, and tell how this is God's plan, we haven't preached the Gospel!

God-centred, evangelical, thirdly: it's based on scripture. Here we come to the words of Christ in verse 15: 'The time is fulfilled'. What the Lord was saying here is: 'I am acting now, doing the Father's will, to bring to fulfilment all God's promises that have ever been given'. Now the only difference between Jesus preaching here and John the Baptist a little earlier, is that John was pointing forward whereas Jesus has a note of fulfilment. John saying: 'He's coming', and what Jesus is saying is, 'It is here'. All the moments that God has pointed forward to, the prophets, the patriarchs, all the types and the analogies all pointing forward - 'Now the day has come, in this awesome moment, I have fulfilled it'. As Paul said in Galatians 4:4: 'When the fullness of time was come, God sent His Son'.

Now what lesson can we get out of that in our preaching and in our witnessing? Well, it's simply this: we must preach the scriptures. That's what the Lord was saying, He was linking what He was about to say with all the scriptures that had already been given. We must speak
on the scriptures. Here's the other thing: we must have a confidence in the scriptures, because He was able to be confident to say 'I am He', that is in effect what He's saying, 'the fulfilment of everything before is now here'. No matter what doubt anyone casts today on the word of God, we must preach scripture with confidence, just as Christ. If we are preaching the Scriptures, we will be preaching Christ, because He sets Himself up here as the fulfilment of all of the word.

It was evangelical, God-centred, based on the scriptures, and fourthly and finally: it challenged urgent decision - it challenged earnest and urgent decision. You see by Him saying: 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand', He was simply saying that the time is now! The time it all has been pointing to, the time that our people have been waiting on, the time of times that never shall be again - it's now! You see that word for 'time'? It's a different Greek word than is used for the time that you're worried about just now...! It's a word that means 'opportunity', the opportunity is here! That word for 'proclamation' that we looked at, 'caruso', it also literally means 'to herald loudly'. So get the picture here: Christ is heralding out in a loud voice: 'It's here, your urgent opportunity, the time is fulfilled, the kingdom is at hand!'.

Now no one has a definition of the kingdom of God in the New Testament specifically, but it means 'God is active now'. God, in His authority, is invading human history to redeem mankind. God's great countdown in history is now over, as if the time for blast-off has come, the rule of God is about to begin on the earth! Now I know that there is a future aspect to that that is yet to be, but what Christ was saying here is: 'God's kingdom has come near you!'. Where had it come? Was there a new throne that Christ was sitting on in Jerusalem? No. Did He restore everything that is promised in the Old Testament Scriptures? No. What is He talking about? He's saying: 'God's kingdom has come near in me, Christ!'. We must preach Christ!

But this, if I can tie all that we have said together this morning together, the servant of the Lord not only is to be crucified himself - speaking of ourselves - but he and she is to preach Christ and Him crucified by bringing a message of repentance that is not new, it is the same one the prophets preached, and the apostles, and the evangelists, and we should be preaching: 'Repent!' - that means 'change your mind', the word is here, about your sin. Start thinking differently, see how it's harming you, see how it's going to damn you one day, it's robbing you of all the good that God would give you. Repent and believe, have faith, embrace Christ - it's necessary to trust and rely on Him alone for salvation. Turn from your sin, turn to Him by faith, that is conversion! Can I ask you today: have you repented? Truly repented with a sorrow that causes you to hate your sin, and turn from your sin, and flee to Christ? Do you urgently urge others to do it?

That's the servant's task, it is our task. There is something for you to do - first: die to yourself, even if it means to obey the Lord, to be persecuted, and to suffer for your service, do it and then preach a Suffering Saviour! Our task is to spread the good news, to challenge men and women, boys and girls to repent and believe the Gospel! As I thought about that, I couldn't help think of John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, who said: 'The world is my parish'. On horseback and whatever else he could get, he went across the whole of the British Isles, and right over to America, preaching the word of God. One of his most famous sayings was: 'Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can'. During his ministry he travelled over 4000 miles a year - before cars and trains and planes! He preached, in his
lifetime, approximately 40,000 messages - and that's why his brother could say when he wrote that hymn, and I think he must have thought of brother John:

'O, that with my latest breath
I may but gasp His name,
Preach Him to all, and cry in death:
'Behold, behold the Lamb!' .

That's your task, and it's mine - the question is: are we doing it?

Father, we thank You that, as we sang at the very beginning of our worship, that God ruleth on high, almighty to save, and still He is nigh, His presence we have. Lord, we thank You that we have been redeemed and saved in a day of opportunity. We thank You that still Christ is near by His Spirit, and because of that we can be endued with power to serve and to reach others with this same message of Christ, the good news, and sins forgiven. Lord, help the limp hands that hang down, the feeble knees that bend and tremble, and give us the spirit of the Suffering Servant - whatever opposition we face - to preach Him to all, and cry and death: 'Behold, behold the Lamb!'. Amen.

Transcribed by Andrew Watkins, Preach The Word - January 2007
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Now we're turning in our Bibles again to Mark's gospel chapter 1 for our eighth study in this series in the gospel, and this morning we want, in the time that we have, to look at verses 16 to 20 under the heading 'The Call to Follow and Fish'.

Verse 16 is where we take up our reading: "Now as he walked", that is, the Lord Jesus, "by the sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew his brother casting a net into the sea: for they were fishers. And Jesus said unto them, Come ye after me, and I will make you to become fishers of men. And straightway they forsook their nets, and followed him. And when he had gone a little farther thence, he saw James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, who also were in the ship mending their nets. And straightway he called them: and they left their father Zebedee in the ship with the hired servants, and went after him".

Now last week, if you were with us in the morning, we looked at verses 14 and 15 at the beginning of our Lord's earthly ministry. We saw that the Lord Jesus' task was to preach the Gospel of God, and we had outlined for us the content of that Gospel: repentance and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ and His saving message. But the application to what we learned last week was that there is something for God's servant to do - this is the gospel of the suffering Servant and, whilst it outlines the life of our Lord Jesus, it has instruction to give us as servants of our God today. We, too, have something to do. We have a task, and we saw last week that our task is the same as our Saviour's in that we too are to proclaim the Gospel of God, and even though we may not be public preachers, we can gossip the Gospel to those who we come in contact with.

But if we follow our Lord's example we will not just be public proclaimers of the gospel as He was, and as pastors and evangelists, missionaries and preachers are and always have been; but we also will be those who are engaged in personal evangelism. That's what we see this morning from verse 16 to 20; that our Lord was not just used preaching to the great multitude, but He also knew what it was to speak to individuals and to bring very definitely, intimately and personally into their life His claims and His call. We see that in Andrew and Peter's, James and John's experience - but what we're also going to see this morning is not only that there is a responsibility upon us as the servants of God to proclaim the gospel, there's something for us to do, but there is something for the hearers of the word of God and the Gospel to do - that is, obey the word of God. We have a great example of this in the life of Andrew, Peter, James and John as they are called by Christ as His first disciples - how they respond to the call in obedience.

Now let me say: we all, as believers in the Lord Jesus, are called; and we are called not only to be saved, we are called to serve. We will see this morning that we are called to be His disciples. There are many lessons that we're going to learn from Christ's call and from the disciples' response. Let us look first of all at Christ's call - what can we learn from Christ's call? Well, the first thing I want you to note is that it was a gracious call. The Bible says in verse 16 that 'He walked by the sea of Galilee', and He saw them, and then He called to them. Now the first thing that shows us this was a gracious call, I believe, is that He came to where
they were. Now first of all He came to them, they did not essentially come to Christ, but He came to them and where they were.

Now the gospel of John tells us that Andrew and Simon had met the Lord Jesus already a few months ago, and in fact they started following Him then at the very outset of His ministry. It was at the baptism of the Lord Jesus by John the Baptist, when He was declared to be the Son of God not only by John's witness of him, but by the Dove coming down, the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove, and by the declaration of the Father from heaven. At that baptism John said: 'Behold the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world', and these two brothers, Peter and Andrew, followed the Lord Jesus, it would seem, from that point on. Now something happened that made them go back to their nets, something that made them pause in their following of Christ. It may have been the arresting of John the Baptist, but now Christ comes to them again where they are, by the sea mending their nets, and He calls them graciously again to permanently follow Him.

Now I fear today that in the church, with evangelistic glasses on, we ask questions that relate to our experience rather than what relates to the experience of those in the Bible. What am I talking about? Well, as soon as I look at this passage, I think to myself: now where were these two chaps saved? Were they saved when they followed Christ at His baptism, and are they now backsliders because they've gone back to their nets? Or are they being called to salvation here? Now let me say that it's not like that, it's not to be viewed in those simple terms. Some people think to themselves: 'Well, they were saved at the first call when Jesus was baptised, and then this second call is for to serve the Lord Jesus in being fishers of men'. Other people say: 'Well, this is not to be seen as a call to service at all'. In fact, one commentator says this: 'It is a mistake to attempt to apply these words to all disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ'. 'This wasn't a call to service', this person is saying, 'this was a call to apostleship - and we, therefore, cannot follow them in this call to be fishers of men'.

Let me say: it is a mistake for all of us not to apply these verses of the Bible to our lives. Often we love wrongly to divide the word of truth, in order to put it into compartments that suit us. Whilst there is a distinct call to serve as an apostle, or a distinct call to serve as a pastor, an elder, a teacher, an evangelist, or a missionary - because those are gifts from God that only He can give - I believe there is no such distinction in Scripture between the call to be saved and the call to serve. You cannot split that one call in two. The call to be saved is the call to serve. The call to be saved is the call to discipleship. We have created, in evangelicalism, language that is unhelpful at times. You, if you're a Christian, are a disciple. The call of Christ in the gospel is not simply a call to get all your sins washed away and get a safe ticket to heaven, it is the call of discipleship.

People ask, even me in my position and others like me: 'When were you called?'. Really I ought to ask the same question back: 'Well, when were you called?' - because we're all called! If we are saved, we are called! Now here's the lesson that I want you to see: He came to them, and Christ is always, constantly, graciously calling us to obedience. He's always asking us to go a little further, and when we go back to our nets or we get distracted by other things, He is constantly coming to us and saying graciously: 'Come on a little farther with Me'. He came to them, but graciously He came to where they were.

Simon and Andrew were working as fishermen on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, in other places in the Bible it's called Lake Gennesaret or the Sea of Tiberius. It was an inland sea about 12 miles long, 6 miles wide at its widest point. It was 690 feet deep - now that makes it the deepest freshwater vicinity on the whole of the planet, nowhere else deeper. Many of the
towns and fishing villages on its shores, their thriving industry was fish. The waters teemed with life. Josephus, the Jewish historian, who for a time was governor of this Galilee, he states that in his day 330 fishing boats sailed the waters of the lake, and various kinds of fish were taken which are not found elsewhere. Of course, fish was the staple diet of the day. People maybe only ate meat once a week. The fish was mainly salted in order to preserve its long life, and fresh fish was a delicacy in Jerusalem and in places like Rome. But this salt-fish industry, it was big business in Galilee, transporting all this fish to various parts of the empire. Here is James and John, cleansing, mending and folding their nets in preparation for the next night's fishing, and Christ is coming to them where they are, in the midst of their daily occupation, and calling them - not only to salvation, but to service. He's calling them to be disciples!

I wonder has Christ come to you, asking you to follow Him? To follow Him is not just to be saved, it is to serve, it is to continually, constantly in your life go that little bit farther in following Him. It was a gracious call, He came to them, He came to where they were. Here's the second thing: it was a demanding call, 'Come follow Me'. Someone has said that that has the sense of a military command, sharp: 'Follow me!'. To follow Christ is discipleship, to follow Christ is demanding because it means the breaking of all other ties to follow one Master as His servant. If I could put it in our vernacular, like this: it means to drop everything! That's what it is to follow Him.

Now we have invented a gospel - and it is, I believe, a false gospel - that you can be a Christian without being a disciple. I believe the New Testament knows nothing of that. Dietrich Bonhoeffer called that type of doctrine 'Cheap grace'. He knew what he was talking about, of course. He opposed Hitler in the Second World War, and because of his opposition on April 9th 1945 - a month before the Germans surrendered - he was hanged. A little before that in 1937 he wrote a book entitled 'The Cost of Discipleship'. It was a call to a more faithful and radical obedience to Christ, and it was a severe rebuke of comfortable Christianity - much of which, in Germany, it has to be said, was willing to tolerate or even comply with Adolf Hitler. This is what he said in this book 'The Cost of Discipleship': 'Cheap grace is preaching forgiveness without requiring repentance. It is baptism without church discipline. It is communion without confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ living and incarnate. The call of Christ on our lives, if we are Christians, is demanding. It is the call to be a disciple. It is the call to follow'.

Are you following? I'm not asking 'Did you ask Jesus into your heart?'. I'm not asking 'Did you sign a decision card, stick your hand in the air, or pray the sinner's prayer?'. I'm not despising those things, but none of those things are mentioned in the Bible - none of them. What is mentioned is that we are to be disciples - that's demanding.

Thirdly, His call not only was gracious, demanding, it was equipping: 'Come after me and I will make you to become fishers of men'. One man has said: 'He commands as God commands. He makes of these fishermen something new'. It has been well said: 'God doesn't call equipped people, He equips people who He calls'. The old puritan put it like this: 'Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers. Pray for powers equal to your tasks'. Christ calls us as disciples, yes it is a demanding call, but it is an equipping call. He doesn't leave us to our own devices to do His work, but He gives us everything we need because Christ makes fishers of men - but let me add this: only Christ makes fishers of men. Education is not to be despised, as often it is in evangelical circles, but education will never make you a fisher of men. Instructional training in a seminary or a college or university will never make you a fisher of men. Seminars and workshops in churches will never make men and women fishers of men.
and women. Theology will never make you a fisher of men. Someone has put it well: 'The invitation here to the disciples was not, 'I have a theological system which I would like you to investigate, I have certain theories that I would like you to think over, I have an ethical system I would like you to discuss with me'. No, it was 'Come after me! Follow me, and I will make you...'. He's saying: 'Come with me! Learn of me! Enrol in my school, my university, my course of discipleship and I will do it'.

Can I ask us this morning: are we being discipled by Jesus Christ? Are we? Are we in His school? Are we with the Master, at His feet every day? Are we following His commands in obedience? We become fishers of men by following Christ. Let me add to that: it is not by following our favourite preacher. I heard someone say not so long ago: 'What we need today is to get back to the days of D.L. Moody, we need to get back to W.P. Nicholson's era, or Willie Mullan, we need to reciprocate what they were doing' - that is utter nonsense! These were men of God, yes, but Christ makes fishers of men, and Christ can make us fishers of men if we follow Him! The more we follow Him, the more we will become like Him, the more successful we will be in winning others to Him. Our responsibility is to follow Him, His responsibility is to take care of the rest and make us fishers of men. Perhaps the reason why there is such lack of fruit in my life and yours is because we are following afar off.

He equips, He trains, but at the end of the day we must fish. He makes us fishers of men, but He will not do that apart from us going out with our rod over our shoulder, and going down to the river or the lake. We've got to fish. Christians are to be fishers of men, pastors, evangelists, elders, deacons, church members are to be fishers of men. This title 'fishers of men' is an older title than 'Bishop', 'elder', 'pastor', 'deacon', 'evangelist'. It's the oldest title a disciple ever knew, because it is the primary responsibility of the servant of God to fish men.

There are many lessons in soul-winning from this analogy of fishing, and I haven't got time to go into them all. There is a book published in America called 'The Ultimate Fishing Book' - it's a book on literal fishing, and it says this: 'To be great at fishing you have to fish'. Are you fishing for men? Here's how it goes on: 'And you need to study fish'. Do we study people out in the world to know and understand where they are, where they're coming from, what they need? Then it goes on: 'You need to study fish so much that you mentally enter the great chain of the life of the fish'. That's what Christ did for us! He came to where we were in our flesh, and we need to go to where the fish are! Now fishing is an art, and this is where we start to learn the great wealth of truth that there is in this analogy. Soul-winning is an art - Thomas Boston, the Scottish puritan, wrote a book all about it and entitled it 'The Art of Man Fishing'!

Now here are some similarities between fishing and soul-winning. One: both require patience. They involve lonely hours, at times, waiting. If you're going to win men it's not going to happen overnight at times, there's got to be a lot of work, groundwork, loving, praying, spending, toiling, preaching - patience. Second: skill is also needed. You need to use baits, lure, you need to have nets that are effective in your fishing. We're not talking about gimmickry here, but we're talking of how Paul said in 1 Corinthians 9:22: 'To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some'. The fish don't jump out of the water and onto the shore! There needs to be skill in knowing what bait to use, what net. Not only is there patience and skill, but there must be discernment. Some people are very unwise in how they go fishing, and great common sense is needed - not only to know who to go to and when to go to them, but to know where the fish are. Skilful fishermen will grow to learn the parts of a lake or a river where the fish go most. Are we going where the fish are? Did you ever hear of a fishing boat
that opened up its doors for all the fish to come in, so that they could catch them? No. They go out into the ocean, risking their very lives, to catch a great crop of them.

Discernment is needed, persistence is needed - you don't need to be easily discouraged in the work of fishing for men. You've got to be hard-working and - I stand to be corrected on this point - but I have never seen a lazy man who God called into his service. They were all at their work. Moses was keeping sheep. Gideon was threshing wheat. Elisha was ploughing. The apostles were fishing. They were persistent, hard-working men. Then fifthly - there's patience, skill, discernment, persistence, but there needs to be a quietness. You don't bring your stereo with you when you're going fishing, unless it's a personal one, because you want to avoid disturbances of all kinds. You see even when you're at the shore? You want to be a little bit detracted, away from the water far enough that you are kept out of sight, because you'll frighten the fish away. That's the way we need to be: out of sight, that everyone might see Christ and not us! Warren Wiersbe put it well: 'Fishers of men' in that day was a common description of philosophers and other teachers who captured men's minds through persuasion. They would bait the hook with their teachings, and catch disciples. It is likely that as many as seven of our Lord's disciples were fishermen. Surely the qualities of successful fishermen would make for success in the ministry of winning souls: courage, team work, patience, energy, stamina, faith, tenacity'.

Christ's call is gracious, He comes to us where we are. It is demanding: 'Come follow Me'. It is equipping: 'I will make you fishers of men' - but at the end of the day, we need to fish. But here is the response of the disciples to Christ's call, and there is much to learn from it too. First thing I want you to learn: it was instant. Mark says: 'And immediately they followed Him'. They forsook their nets and followed Him. Now, if that was me or you, we'd be expecting there to be a pause there for a moment as they weighed this thing up and thought about it for a moment. But Mark tells us - probably, remember from our introduction, hearing it first hand from the apostle Peter who is Simon here - that at once, immediately, they followed! Kent Hughes says: 'Christ came with a radical message, and then a radical call, and these four responded in radical obedience' - instant! I wish my obedience was instant - theirs was.

Secondly: it was absolute. Simon and Andrew left their nets. James and John left their nets and their father. So compelling was the call and claim of Christ upon their life, that all prior claims, interests, lost their validity. Picture the scene now, and the impact of it to those men and their families and those around in the village. This little boat is pulled up on the shore of that tranquil lake, and these two strapping brothers, fishers since they were knee-high to their father, leave their aged grey-haired father and step out of the boat; leave their hired servants; leave what was probably a lucrative family business - and they follow Jesus along the shore! They have a new occupation: not catching fish, catching men! Not mending nets, but mending broken lives!

I want to ask you this morning: is Christ calling you? Is He calling you to leave all that you have previously known in order to serve Him? He's calling every Christian to do that, but many don't hear His call. As you see from Simon, Andrew, James and John, though the cost meant a loss of livelihood, loss of family relationships, loss of general reputation in the community; Christ is still calling men and women on the same terms today: to forsake all and to follow Him! 'So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has, cannot be my disciple', Luke 14:33. Whether your pressure to not obey comes from possessions, or from parents, or from some other preventing factor: Christ's call still demands an instant and an absolute response.
By the way - just to remind you - this isn't for the folk that are thinking to be missionaries, pastors, evangelists, teachers. It's not for folk who think they could maybe be a Sunday School teacher in the church, it's for all of you. Thirdly, in the disciples' response we see it was instant, absolute, but also life-changing. It's very humbling and encouraging to know that the first followers of our Lord Jesus Christ were not great people in the eyes of this world. Paul reminded us in 1 Corinthians 1: 'Ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty'. They weren't rich, they didn't have rank, they wielded no power, but the kingdom of God is not dependent upon those things. It's not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit saith the Lord - and isn't it wonderful that out of such human weakness, God's strength is made perfect in these humble fishermen, in our experience, if we would only follow Christ and allow Him to make us fishers of men? Second Corinthians 4:7: 'We have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us'. First Corinthians 1 again: 'The base things of the world', are what God calls, 'the things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: That no flesh should glory in his presence'. Whoever you are, whatever you've done, wherever you've been - God can use you, if you would follow and fish! Even the humblest person in our midst, the least gifted, educated - it was George Bernard Shaw that said scathingly: 'I have never had any feeling for the working classes, except a desire to abolish them and replace them with sensible people', nice fellow, wasn't he? Abraham Lincoln said, to the other opposite extreme: 'God must love the common people, He made so many of them' - that's more like the spirit of Christ. He came to these ordinary working class fishermen and called them to be His ambassadors. Now can I ask us, in relation to how we fish: have we lost our affection for the common people who gladly heard our Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ? Jesus' vision was: 'Give me twelve ordinary men, and with them - if they give themselves to me - I'll change the world' - and He did.

What you think of me, what I think of you, what we think of others matters little, or what they think of you - all that matters is what Jesus thinks of us, and what He can make of us if we would only but follow Him! Listen to what Kent Hughes - I can't put it in better words, so I'm going to quote him to you - 'The horizon of these fishermen's lives was bound by the margins of Galilee. They knew little more than the deck of their boat, the currents of the lake, and the handful of people in the marketplace. Their conversation consisted of trade talk, local gossip, family affairs, Galilean politics. In a word, they were remarkably provincial, even to the extent of having their own tell-tale accent. Then Christ came, and how their world changed: in place of Galilee came the world. John', here, this John, 'was to become the Bishop of Ephesus! Peter went to Rome, Andrew went as far as Russia! Their hearts were enlarged to take in the whole world! Their minds, once circumscribed and committed to the smallest interests, now overflowed with the deep thoughts - all because of the Gospel'.

Now let's conclude. Someone has well said: 'What every man needs is something in which he can invest his life'. Let us be under no illusion: the Christian is called by Christ to invest his life in discipleship, and discipleship means following, and following means fishing. Don't call yourself a Christian if you're not following - I don't care what you've done, what you've prayed, what you've said! A Christian follows, and a Christian will fish, for He has called us to a task - and in that task those first four disciples and the rest after them spent themselves, burned themselves up, and in the end died fishing for men! They knew the wisdom of Solomon, that 'He that winneth souls is wise' - whoever captures souls is wise. They knew
what Daniel had said: 'Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars will last forever and ever'. Let me say to you plainly: do something lasting, eternal, God-glorifying with your life. May we all start following and fishing, for that is a lasting work that will shine for ever to the glory of God.

Father, we pray that You will teach us to seek first the kingdom of God, and may all of us here this morning - whether we profess the name of Christian or not - may everyone, converted and unconverted alike, go from this meeting like Simon and Andrew, James and John, and follow Christ. But Lord, we pray that all of us will learn what it is to serve as disciples in the task that You have appointed for us to do in fishing for men. May we learn what it is to go out with courage, with persistence, with waiting, hiding ourselves behind Christ and His cross. May we know what it is to catch a great draught of fishes, not because of what we know but because Christ has made us, with His power, fishers of men. Lord, if there are those who Your call is upon to go elsewhere, to go into another field of work, to leave their daily occupation, to be occupied fishing full-time for men - Lord, would You draw them out this morning, send labourers into the harvest field, for there are not many. Thank You for Your word Lord, bless it and write it upon our hearts indelibly, to the glory of Christ we pray, Amen.
We're turning to Mark's gospel chapter 1, and if you're visiting for the first time, or at least for the first in a while, you may not know that we're going through Mark's gospel these Sunday mornings. We're still in chapter 1, though this is our ninth study today, and our title this morning is 'The Servant's Authority'. We're looking at verse 21 through 28: "And they", that is, those who Christ had just called to follow Him and be fishers of men, Peter, and Andrew, and James and John, "And they went into Capernaum; and straightway on the sabbath day the Lord Jesus entered into the synagogue, and taught. And they were astonished at his doctrine: for he taught them as one that had authority, and not as the scribes. And there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit; and he cried out, Saying, Let us alone; what have we to do with thee, thou Jesus of Nazareth? art thou come to destroy us? I know thee who thou art, the Holy One of God. And Jesus rebuked him, saying, Hold thy peace, and come out of him. And when the unclean spirit had torn him, and cried with a loud voice, he came out of him. And they were all amazed, insomuch that they questioned among themselves, saying, What thing is this? what new doctrine is this? for with authority commandeth he even the unclean spirits, and they do obey him. And immediately his fame spread abroad throughout all the region round about Galilee".

Now it's very clear from verses 1 to 28 that the paramount theme of these few verses is the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ as God's Servant. Now verse 22, if you look at it for a moment, shows that the people were astonished at Christ's doctrine, for He taught them as one that had authority, and not as the scribes. Now that does not mean that the Scribes did not have authority, because they did - but there was something significant, something intrinsically different about the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ's teachings that made it unique.

So what is the difference between the authority that Christ is showing in His teaching, and the religious authorities? What was so different that made these people realise that Christ was different? This is vital in order to understand what the text is saying to us this morning. Well, I looked up the Oxford Concise English Dictionary for 'authority', and this is at least the first definition that is given in it: '1a. Authority is the power or right to enforce obedience'. So if that's the definition, let us ask: what gave the religious authorities of Christ's day in Palestine the power or the right to enforce obedience from the people? The religious authorities were the Pharisees and the Scribes, but what gave them the right or the power to make people obey them? The answer is very simple: what gave them right of power for people to obey them was position. They were in the position of religious authority. The legal qualifications that came from that gave them, in some form, the right to judge wrongdoers according to God's law and the additions that they had made to it.

So the people's obedience was motivated by fear, fear of the power that these religious authorities had because of their position. But there are two types of authority at least: one is derived from position, but the other comes from respect - I mean an honourable recognition of people that an individual is worthy of our obedience, and therefore, because they are worthy of it, they have a right to it. Now Jesus had the right to command people's obedience
because He was worthy of their obedience. That's how His authority was different than that that came from position, which was the authority of the Scribes and Pharisees.

His authority, Christ's that is, is evident in two ways in our portion today. Here's the first: the authority of His word. Let's look at this. The Scribes would pride themselves in a position. Their authority was derived from that position, and they held to that position rather than the character that they had and the kind of persons that they were. Let me try and illustrate the type of people these Pharisees and Scribes were. They were the type of people to pull rank. What I mean is, like the boss who says: 'It's only my suggestion now, but remember who's making it!'. They are bringing their position to bear weight on the commands that they are giving to people. But Jesus, as we see right throughout the Gospels, He never had to say: 'Do you know who's speaking to you?', or, after He had taught some people, 'Do you realise who I am?'. It was clear to people who was speaking to them, it was clear to them who He was because He spoke with authority, the Bible says. His words, in and of themselves, had the sound and weight of authority.

Because of that, we read in verse 22 that the people were astonished and amazed, literally that word means 'to strike with panic or shock'. One person has called it 'they were thunderstruck by the authority that was in the words of the Lord Jesus Christ'. Now we must ask the question: how were His words authoritative? Well, we have to go right into the scene of the story. He has entered the synagogue early on the Sabbath morning. The synagogues were teaching institutions where people, the congregation, would have been used to the rabbis and Scribes deliberating over the Old Testament law. Every little jot or tittle of that law would be argued and disputed. So they would spend all of their time arguing, debating the tradition of the elders, what they said, and how those traditions, ancient as they were, applied to contemporary personal present circumstances in people's lives. One person has put it: 'The Scribes were notorious for droning on mechanically, arguing and debating over the Torah'.

Often what the Scribes would do, and the Pharisees, if they felt perhaps that the debate wasn't going as well in their favour as it should, they would bring weight to the argument and their position by citing the great authorities of Jewish theological history. So Scribes and Pharisees were people, religious scholars, who were obsessed with quoting 'the authorities'. So maybe if the argument was over divorce or marriage, they would say: 'Well, Rabbi Hillel says this', or maybe over another moral matter, 'But on the other hand Gamaliel says this', or then 'Rabbi Eleazer's testimony and witness of the truth is this'. So they would sit for hours in the synagogue debating in this manner, and bringing the evidences of these religious authorities. But here was the difference between them and Christ: Christ's words implied that there was no debate permitted, there would be no theological discussion or reflection, and Christ needed no proof for His argument or for what He was proposing because He was the authority.

These Scribes and Pharisees were trying to draw water from broken cisterns, but Christ's words were like arrows from the Almighty. What Christ was speaking and expressing was not second-hand theology, these were the very words of God! What Christ in effect was doing for these people was He was bringing God to them in the person of Himself. He was bringing God's absolute claim upon their lives to them, and that is what disturbed them so much - the authority that was in His speech! Now, was it only the words and the way that Christ spoke those words that brought authority to Christ's teaching? Well, I think if we come to that conclusion, we will be greatly mistaken, and it will lead us astray somewhat. Yes, there was authority in His words. Yes, there was authority in the manner in which He spoke them - but I think the salient point here in this passage is that the difference between Christ and the
Scribes was the difference between true authority and false authority. What is that? Well, the false authority that the Scribes had, they claimed it themselves - it was only claimed from their position - but the authority that Jesus had was exhibited, it was manifested, it was evidenced, it was proved. Christ manifested it both in His claims and in His actions.

So Christ not only displayed His authority plainly in the words that He spoke, but the deeds that He did. The deeds that He did equalled the words that He spoke. So the authority was in His word, but that - and do understand what I mean when I say this - that was not enough. There had to be authority in His deeds. This is what we see in this same passage, for this authority in His actions was demonstrated in the deliverance of the man with the unclean spirit. Here we see that a man, verse 23, entered into the synagogue with an unclean spirit - in other words, he was possessed by a demon. Now grasp the significance of this: here is a man in a religious surrounding, and he is overwhelmed by a power that is all-controlling. Someone has said: 'His personality had been damaged to the point that the demon had usurped the core of his self, and even utilised his voice'. The demon was speaking through him! Yet we see in this synagogue that this man who was possessed, and the spirit that possessed him - both of them were forced to acknowledge the superior authority of Christ's power.

Now we will see this in our studies right throughout Mark's gospel, so many occasions of demon-possession where Christ uses His authority as the Servant of the Lord and casts them out. Tempting as it is just now to talk about the phenomenon of demon possession, which we'll have an opportunity to do later in our studies of Mark, we can't take a detour into that and miss the point, I believe, of what Mark is saying here. The authority of the Servant of the Lord was not just exhibited in the words that He spoke, but these mighty actions, and in this specific deed of casting a devil out of this man.

Now note how His authority and His deeds were exhibited. First of all His authority was testified by the demon itself. If you look clearly, you'll see that the train of thought is that once the Lord Jesus Christ, in verse 22, began to teach with authority, that in reaction to what Jesus is teaching the demon made an outburst in verse 24: 'Let us alone; what have we to do with thee, thou Jesus of Nazareth?'. In effect, what the demon is saying later on when he says: 'Art thou come to destroy us?', the demon was saying: 'You have no business with us yet, leave us alone!'. Now it's interesting to note, before we move on, that the demon addressed the Lord Jesus as first of all 'Jesus of Nazareth', which speaks of Christ's humanity, and then the demon said that He was 'the Holy One of God', which speaks in part of His deity. There is a conflict here implied in the passage: it is this idea that the demonic power that possessed this man understood more clearly who the Lord Jesus was in His perfect humanity and absolute deity than these religious rulers, the religious authorities of the day! This demon knew a greater awareness of what the presence of Christ meant.

It's interesting to note the contrast that there often is between the way men address the Lord Jesus in the Gospels, and the way that demonic spirits address Him in titles. Take sick people, for instance, throughout the Gospels. Take Mark as an example, Mark 7 and verse 8, one sick person appeals to Jesus as 'Lord'. In chapter 9 and verse 17 He is addressed by a sick person as 'Teacher'. In chapter 10 verse 47 and 48 He is called by another ill person 'The Son of David'. In chapter 10 verse 51 another person with ailments calls Him 'Master'. But when we look at what the demoniacs and the demons themselves speak as titles to Him, in chapter 1:24 here He is 'The Holy One of God'. In chapter 3:11 a demon calls Him 'The Son of God'. In chapter 5:7, 'The Son of the Most High God'. These spiritual beings identifying Jesus of
Nazareth as the divine Son of God sent into the world to be the Saviour - isn't that interesting?

James gives us a good commentary on that fact of the different titles between men and demons, he says in James 2:19: 'You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe--and shudder!'. Can I ask you: do you know who He is? Is He just Jesus of Nazareth to you, an historical, religious figure? Or is He God's Son? If you recognize that He is God's Son, do you also recognize His authority over you? That's the difference between the demon and the believer in Jesus Christ: the demon recognizes who Jesus Christ is, but refuses to recognize His authority over him as a spirit or the whole of creation - for they want to usurp it. That's the reason why Christ was so unwilling to accept the forced witness of this demon to who He was, and He rebuked him and told him to keep quiet, because Jesus Christ does not want a mere religious or intellectual witness to who He is as a man and as God, but He wants a witness to Himself that comes from the work of the Holy Spirit in the soul of man.

What am I talking about? I'm talking about what Peter said when he said: 'Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God', and Jesus said to Peter 'Flesh and blood has not revealed that to you, Peter, but my Father from heaven'. The apostle Paul in Corinthians tells us that no man can call Jesus 'Lord', except by the Spirit, and that is what Christ looks for in a man or woman, a boy or a girl - not just some kind of intellectual knowledge! Sometimes people say to me: 'I believe Jesus, I believe He was a man but He was also God's Son. I believe He went to the cross and bled and died and rose again three days later. I believe -' but if that is only an intellectual, mental belief, it is worthless! The devil has that belief, these spirits have it, but do they accept the authority of the Servant of God, Jesus Christ, on their lives? Do you?

That's the proof whether or not you are a disciple of the Lord Jesus, that's what makes the difference between you and the devil. Martin Luther, who we've heard much about already, said: 'The life of Christianity consists of possessive pronouns'. What does that mean? Well, it's one thing to say that Christ is the Saviour, to say that Christ is a Lord, that He is a God - but it's a different thing to say He is my Saviour, He is my Lord, He is my God. The demon testified to His authority out of force, I wonder have you done it willingly by faith?

The second way His authority was evidenced in this deliverance of the unclean spirit from the man was: it was attested by the deliverance itself. Not only testified by the demon, but attested by the deliverance. In verse 25 Jesus said to the demon: 'Be quiet', or literally 'Be muzzled'. Now, hallelujah, that means that there is hope for any of us, whatever condition we find ourselves in, whatever sins we have become immersed and been made in bondage to, wherever you find yourself today or I, there is hope because Jesus, with just words, muzzled a demon. Because of the authority of Christ, the devil, sin, wickedness, darkness of every kind can be defeated! Jesus is stronger than Satan, and Satan to Jesus must bow.

Now, Christ was not the first preacher, though He was the best. In the same sense, Christ was not the first person to exorcise a demon, but He was the best - and that is the point of this story. Not only in His teaching did He excel the rest, but in the dispelling of this demon from this man was Christ proven to be completely superior to exorcists of His day. This is why the people marvelled, they had never seen anything like this before. You see, exorcists in Jesus' day would often go to great and elaborate lengths, and go through all sorts of incantations and rituals to try and cast a demon out, even among the Jews.
Josephus, the historian, tells us of an exorcist by the name of Eleazar who demonstrated his ability before Vespasian the Emperor of the day. This is what Josephus says, I quote him directly: 'He put to the nose of the possessed man a ring which had under its seal one of the roots prescribed by Solomon. Then, as the man smelt it, he drew out the demon through his nostrils. When the man had once fell down, he adjured the demon never to come back into him, speaking Solomon's name and reciting the incantations which he had composed. Then, wishing to convince the bystanders and prove to them that he had this power, Eleazar placed a cup or a basin full of water a little way off, and commanded the demon, as it were, out of the man to overturn it and make it known to the spectators that he had left the man'. Now whether that is authentic or not, it matters not - the point is this: this is what people were used to in people attempting to exorcise demons from individuals, but Jesus, with just a few words, cast this man's demon out! This is why the crowd was so astonished, His authority in word and deed was unrivalled.

He silenced this demon to prove that He had come to judge Satan and his world, to strip the evil one of his authority, of his power, of his mastery over humanity. So, His authority of deed was testified by the demon, attested by the deliverance - but here's the third and final thing I want you to note: it was talked about by everyone. In our last verse we read: 'Immediately his fame spread abroad throughout all the region round about Galilee'. Please grasp the whole import of what is being recorded here by Mark: it was because of the authority of His word and His deeds that they were talking about Him.

Now let me ask you a question: why aren't people talking about Christians today like this? Is it because, as one has said, we're selling for more than we're worth? Is it because our lives do not measure up to our words as the Lord's did? Is it because our lives do not measure up to our Lord's words as everyone knows them clear in the Gospels and the New Testament? We are faced today with the task - and I think it is correct to make this direct application - we are given the job of bringing the authority of Christ to others, the kingdom of Christ to others in the Gospel - but are people talking about it? No, they're not! Why are they not? Could it be that we do not have authority in our words, perhaps, because people do not see authority in our deeds? They do not see a difference between us and everyone else.

Richard Foster, I heard him say this: 'You can't preach the good news and be the bad news'. Isn't that so simple? That's what Christians are, sure look at their faces! You'd think they'd just heard bad news at times - all you get is frowns and moaning at times from people who profess the name of Christ, and that's not the way it should be! You can't preach the good news and be the bad news - he goes on: 'One of the biggest problems we are facing today is that evangelism has reached the point of diminishing returns. That is, people have to ask themselves', that is, those we are evangelising, "What am I to be converted to?' because when they look around at those who are identified as Christians, they don't see much difference!'. He continues: 'We are basically, in our churches, taken over with theologies of sin-management, more sophisticated ways of managing our sin, but God can do a whole lot better than that, Jesus came that a whole lot more than this might happen!' .

Ah, we come on a Sunday morning, a Sunday evening, and are we just managing our sin so that when God gets the accounts on the day of judgement, we'll be alright because we asked Jesus to come into our heart so that we can go to heaven when we die? Is that what it's all about? That's not what the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the New Testament is about - it's not about heaven when we die, it's about life now while we live! It's about His life making a difference by the Spirit in our lives, and our lives by the Spirit touching other lives! The authoritative teaching of Christ was followed by powerful acts, and that is what we need,
that's where we are deficient! It is that that will lay hold of a man's heart, it is that that will
grip a person, and astonish them, and cause them to ask: 'What new teaching is this?'.
Actions must follow words! The Scribes peddled a second-hand religion, and it wasn't real to
them, and because it wasn't real to them it wasn't real to others! Kent Hughes puts it like
this: 'Christ's sermons were like thunder, because His life was like lightning'. For Christ, words
and works went together - and that is what gave His life authority. Do you remember
Nicodemus said to Him: 'Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God, for no man
can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him'.

Now let me, as I close this message this morning, bring all these truths together: the
authority of His word, the authority of His deeds, testified by the demon, attested by
deliverance, talked about by everyone - let me apply them very definitely to our hearts this
morning. Here's the first way I want to do it, listen carefully to this: this passage of Scripture
means that the tradition of the authority of the word without the tradition of the authority of
the deed is not Christian tradition. Where does that leave you? Where does it leave me?
Where does it leave this church? In fact, the word without the Spirit is powerless, the word of
God says. The law has the ability to kill, but that is all it will do if the spirit of life in the new
co vent and the gospel does not come - but that is not just a verse on a page in black and
white, the Gospel is incarnational life, it is Christ in you! The Christ in you touching others to
bring them to Christ! That is what Paul meant when he said: 'God has made us ministers of
the new covenant'. He has made us competent to be ministers not of the letter, but of the
Spirit, for the letter kills but the Spirit gives life! Oh, we can quote the verses and the
doctrines, we can blast them through loudhailers - and people aren't listening, because our
lives are not saying the same things! Maybe our lives are contradicting the word of Christ.

Here's the second way to apply this: God-given authority that Christ had in His words and
deeds was given by God to Christ for the purpose of serving others. Did you hear it? He had it,
why did He have it? To serve others, He was the Servant of the Lord, whereas the Scribes
and Pharisees were claiming authority for self-serving influence and interest. That's why it's
hard for people in authority to serve. So much authority these days is abused - we laugh at
the name 'public servant', don't we? You know exactly what I'm talking about! What about in
the church? Power, at times, intoxicates among pastors and ministers, among elders - but any
authority that we have been given, it is given to us not to throw our weight around but to lay
our bodies down for others!

How do our deeds match our words? Earl Radmacher is coming to us at Easter as our
speaker, and I have been in correspondence with him by e-mail just preparing for that visit,
and he sent a lovely story this week that touched his heart, and I hope it will touch yours. It
just concludes everything that I've said today. A few years ago a group of salesmen in the
States went to a regional conference in Chicago. Like many men do, they assured their wives
that they would be home in plenty of time for Friday night's dinner. In their rush, with their
tickets and briefcases in their hands, one of these salesmen inadvertently kicked over a table
which held a display of apples. You can imagine the apples went flying, rolling everywhere -
and without stopping or looking back, they all managed to reach the plane in time, for they
nearly missed boarding - all but one. One salesman paused, took a deep breath, got in touch
with his feelings and experienced a twinge of compassion for the girl whose apple stand had
been overturned. He told his buddies to go on without him, waved goodbye, and told one of
them to call his wife when they arrived at home and tell what has happened, why he had
missed the flight. Then he returned to the terminal where the apples were all over the floor,
and he was glad when he did because he found there a 16-year-old girl who was totally blind.
She was softly crying, tears running down her cheeks in frustration at the plight of how she
was going to retrieve all these apples. The salesman knelt on the floor with her and gathered up all the apples. He put them back on the table, he helped her organise her display the way it was, and as he did this he noticed that many of those apples had become battered and bruised. He put those aside in a different basket, and then when he had finished he pulled out his wallet, and said to the girl: 'Now, here, please take this $40 for the damage we did, are you alright?'. She nodded through the tears, and he continued on with: 'I hope we didn't spoil your day to badly'. As the salesman began to walk away, the bewildered blind girl called out to him: 'Mister', and he paused and turned to look back into those blind eyes as she continued, 'are you Jesus?'. This is a true story. He stopped in midstride, and he wondered, then he slowly made his way to catch the later flight with that question burning and bouncing about in his soul: 'Are you Jesus?'.

Do people mistake you for Jesus? Do the blind people in this world who see no beauty in Him on a written page that they should desire Him, does your life make a difference in theirs to such an extent that the authority of Christ is manifest in order to open their eyes and see Christ exhibited in your words and in your deeds? Only that will make blind eyes see the authority of the Servant of the Lord.

Father, we pray that everyone here this morning will have the witness of the Spirit to the words and works of Christ, that they may know who He is and what He has done for them, and apply it to their lives by faith. We pray that all of us as Your people will, every day, recognize afresh the authority of Christ in our lives - that we are not our own, we are bought with a price. Salvation is not a ticket to heaven, that we can just sit easy in first class, but You have left us here to be a testimony and a witness through our words and our deeds to the authority that is in the kingdom of Christ. Lord, help us, we all fall short. Forgive us when we are nothing but Pharisees and Scribes, debating over this doctrine and another, while others go to hell. Whilst we know that the truth is important, and coming to a knowledge of the truth, Lord, help us to be balanced. Help us not only to have a tradition of the word, but the tradition of the authority of the deed, that others may see us and see not us, but Christ in us. May they be won to Him through our witness. Lord, let this not be another sermon, but make a difference in our lives through this message we pray, to the glory of the One who is the Suffering Servant, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Transcribed by Andrew Watkins, Preach The Word – February 2007

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We continue our series through Mark's gospel this morning, and we want to look at a study today entitled 'A Day In The Life Of The Servant' - and of course the 'Servant' is the Suffering Servant of Mark's gospel, the Lord Jesus Christ.

We're turning to Mark chapter 1, beginning to read at verse 29, taking up where we left off. You remember that the Lord Jesus healed a man with an unclean spirit in the synagogue, and all the people around were talking about this, and then we read in verse 29: "And forthwith, when they were come out of the synagogue, they entered into the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. But Simon's wife's mother lay sick of a fever, and anon they tell him of her. And he came and took her by the hand, and lifted her up; and immediately the fever left her, and she ministered unto them. And at even, when the sun did set, they brought unto him all that were diseased, and them that were possessed with devils. And all the city was gathered together at the door. And he healed many that were sick of divers diseases, and cast out many devils; and suffered not the devils to speak, because they knew him. And in the morning, rising up a great while before day, he went out, and departed into a solitary place, and there prayed" - and we'll finish our reading at verse 35.

Now in the passage we read together this morning, verses 29 to 34, Mark records essentially for us a day in the life of the Servant of Jehovah, the Lord Jesus Christ. Maybe you've never thought about these verses in those terms, but if you look at the previous verses we read last week, you will see that on the morning of the Sabbath the Lord Jesus went to the synagogue to worship. Then we read this morning in verse 29, 'Forthwith', and that again is the use of 'immediately', which is common right throughout Mark's gospel; immediately when they were come out of the synagogue, they entered into the house of Simon and Andrew - that is, in the afternoon. Once the Sabbath morning service in the synagogue was over, they moved on to Simon Peter's house. What we see, first of all, at least in the first half of a day in the life of the Lord Jesus, was that He was constantly serving - that ought to be no surprise to us: the Servant of the Lord constantly serving.

Matthew Henry says of this, particularly in the light of what went on in the synagogue that morning - that was, His authority in teaching, and His authority in casting out the unclean spirit out of the possessed man - 'When Christ had done that which spread His fame throughout all parts, He did not then sit still - as some think, that they may lie in bed when their name is up - no! He continued to do good'. His whole day was filled with serving God and serving others. So, our consideration this morning is: in the afternoon, after worshipping in the synagogue, He entered Simon's house, and we see there the healing of Simon's mother-in-law. I can just imagine how Peter recounted the story - remember that this is where we believe that Mark that much of his material for his gospel, from the apostle Peter. This first-hand experience given to us by Peter through Mark is stunning.

The Bible says that the fame grew of the Lord Jesus and the wonderful works that He could do, and because of that fame this particular day in the life of the Lord ended healing many, casting out many demons. It's interesting to note just in passing that Mark, as he closes his
gospel, tells us of another day in the life of our Lord Jesus. It is also noteworthy to compare this day that we read of this morning with the second day in the life of the Lord. The second day in the life of the Servant of the Lord began with His betrayal, and His arrest in the evening. Then it was followed by an night of mockery which preceded the false trial and crucifixion in the morning, and ending the whole 24 hours or so with His death and His burial in the evening again.

Now I believe that there is a reason why Mark gives us, in these two days, such material. We said in previous week's that the key to Mark's gospel is illustrated in the text Mark 10:45, that is: 'The Son of man came not to be served, but to serve, and give his life a ransom for many'. That statement in Mark 10:45 is almost, if you cut it in half, a description of these two accounts that describe the two days in the life of the Lord Jesus - the one we have, the healing of Peter's mother and subsequent healings of divers diseases and casting out many devils...the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve. The second full day of His betrayal, trial, crucifixion, death and burial...to give His life a ransom for many. Of course, the whole point is this: the days of our Lord Jesus were spent serving.

This day that Mark gives us, of course, is no exception, but gives us the rule of our Master's life. Now we saw last week in verses 21 to 22 the authority that there was in the teaching of Christ, the word of the Lord. Then we saw also in verses 23 to 28 that that authority was manifest and demonstrated in the authority that Christ had over the demonic spirit that was in the man. Now we will see, this morning in verses 29 to 34, that not only had the Lord authority in His words and teaching, and authority over the kingdom of darkness, but He also had authority over sickness.

Now there are two interesting points, and I don't want to take time to deal with them, but they're worthy of note before we go on any further in relation to this account. The first is this: though he said, when Peter and Andrew, and James and John left their businesses to follow the Lord Jesus, that they left all and forsook everything to be disciples of Jesus, we see in this account that Peter still had a home. Now that's interesting in that it shows us that, though they left all, in the generic sense, to follow Christ, they still had family responsibilities - and though they cast off hindrances to following the Lord Jesus, they didn't cast off everything in some kind of mad aesthetic nature, but rather they kept those things that helped the service of Jesus Christ. This is exactly how this house was used: to glorify the Lord Jesus in the healing of Peter's wife's mother. In other words, discipleship never encourages us to be irresponsible. Whether it's irresponsibility toward our possessions, or irresponsibility toward our relatives, or our everyday occupations - discipleship to Jesus never encourages irresponsibility.

Then the second thing of note is that Peter clearly was married. Therefore, the doctrine of forced celibacy - which is, of course, an invention of men - is unnatural, and we don't see it in Peter or the other apostles. It is the cause of many evils, even in our day. These are just things that are interesting in passing. But what I want us chiefly to consider today is: what can we learn from Jesus, what can we learn from the Great Physician, the Servant of the Lord in this day of His life as He heals the sick, as He casts out the demons, what is the nature of a day's service in the life of our Lord Jesus?

Well, first of all I want you to consider that the nature of His service was condescending - and I don't mean that in the negative sense of the word but, as the Lord is concerned, in its positive sense. Now think about this for a moment: how would you be, how would I be after displaying such unparalleled authority in teaching in the synagogue and in exorcising demons?
If it was possible for us to do such things, how would we be after it? Well, one thing I certainly would be would be exhausted! This was a busy morning for the Lord Jesus in the synagogue, and tradition tells us that the main Sabbath meal - a bit like our Sunday lunch - came immediately after the synagogue service at the sixth hour, which was 12 noon. So Jesus was travelling, probably, to Peter's house in order to have that meal; and He would have been entitled to rest after such an exciting and exhilarating experience in the synagogue service. But after that event in the synagogue in the morning, we see that the Lord Jesus is not resting - whilst He may be exhausted and exhilarated - He still spends His afternoon serving others, spending Himself for the benefit of others.

A second way we might feel if we had a morning like this in the synagogue, is that we might find that pride is rising up in our breast. We become puffed up because of the authority of what we said and what we did. We might feel superior and worthy of recognition, honour and respect. Yet, here we see that the Lord Jesus is unmoved, He is still lowly in mind, and He thought nothing of going back from the synagogue to Simon the fisherman's house to eat. Isn't that lovely? It's a wonderful commentary on those words of Paul: 'Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others. Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God', or, 'who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself of no reputation, made himself nothing; and took upon him the form of the servant, and was made in the likeness of men'.

I don't know about you, but it takes me at least a few minutes, if not a few hours, to come down to earth after I've done something noteworthy - that's what we're like, aren't we? We are prone to pride - but who else could condescend from such heights to such depths 'immediately', as Mark would say, only the One who left the right hand of God to be the Servant of both God and men. Only He could go to a poor fisherman's house for His lunch! Further to that, we see that this miracle was of a private nature in Peter's home. The healing of his mother-in-law, the Lord didn't seem to need or seek an audience before manifesting His power and authority over disease. He was just as prepared to heal in a little working-class cottage as in the great congregation of the synagogue. It didn't matter to Him!

Now what's the lesson that we take out of this? The Lord's service, every day of His life, was condescending in nature. In other words, it was selfless service. He came down to the level of the people He was serving. His teaching, His casting out demons, His healing diseases was never used as a means of embellishing Himself, His prestige. It was never used as a platform for His fame. Indeed, He dissuades it! 'Tell no one about this miracle' - He shuts the demon's mouths, and that tells us that Christ in His service was condescending, He was selfless, and we must ask ourselves: how is our service? We must ensure that our service is not self-serving - that's a great temptation - but that our service is like John the Baptist's, the forerunner of the Servant of the Lord, when he said in John 3:30: 'He must increase and I must decrease'.

Christ's service was condescending. Here's the second thing: it was considerate. It was considerate. Now the disciples had not known Jesus for long, but even after a little while following Him they had learned to bring all their troubles to the Master because He was considerate. I wonder how long you have been a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ: have you learned this lesson yet? Bring all your troubles to the Lord! Peter's wife's mother lies sick, sick of a fever, and this is a simple home, a basic homestead - and it's all upset, upside down because this matriarch is now fallen ill. They bring their upset to Jesus. J. C. Ryle, that great evangelical Bishop of Liverpool, said: 'Doctors are to be used when we are sick', and he goes
on speaking of other professionals that we need to use when the needs arise, 'but we must
never forget to consult God first'. It's a hard lesson to learn. In our distress as human beings
we are so prone to run to this one, that one, and the other one. It's not that those people are
wrong and cannot help us - but who do we run to first? Who we run to first tells us an awful
lot about our relationship with our Heavenly Father.

Asa, in the Old Testament, made this mistake. We read in 2 Chronicles 16:12: 'In the thirty-
ninth year of his reign Asa was diseased in his feet, and his disease became severe. Yet even
in his disease he did not seek the LORD, but sought help from physicians'. It wasn't a fault to
seek help from physicians, his problem was he shut the Lord out of his troubles. Jacob, when
he was in trouble with his brother Esau - and Esau had grounds for being angry with him -
what did Jacob do? He turned first to God, we read in Genesis 32:11. Hezekiah the King, in
his trouble, what did he do when he received a letter from Sennacherib? He spread it, 2 Kings
19 tells us, before the Lord. When Lazarus, the friend of the Lord Jesus, fell sick; Lazarus' sisters,
Mary and Martha, sent immediately appealing to the Lord Jesus as their friend, and
said: 'Lord, behold, he whom thou lovest is sick'. Now why did they do all those things?
Because they realised that the God that is there for us, and effectually serves us, is a
considerate God - and His Son the Lord Jesus is the same.

Do we bring to the Lord our problems, our troubles, our burdens? I know that that's
something that is elementary, isn't it? I know that's small fry, we hear that all the time: 'What
a friend we have in Jesus' - but who of us does it, really does it? Who of us takes heed, in
practice, of the instruction of Psalm 55:22: 'Cast thy burden upon the LORD, and he shall
sustain thee: he shall never suffer the righteous to be moved'. First Peter 5 verse 7, we can
quote it: 'Casting all your care upon him, for he careth for you'. Philippians 4:6: 'Be careful',
or anxious, 'for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let
your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all
understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Jesus Christ our Lord'.

'O what peace we often forfeit,
O what needless pain we bear
All because we do not carry
Everything to God in prayer'.

You see here's the point that we could very easily miss: Jesus had become Simon, Andrew,
James and John's friend. They were His companions, and Jesus had become a confidant. So
here Peter and Andrew not only brought James and John back home from the synagogue with
them to their house, but we find that they also brought Christ with them - what a lesson there
is in that. They brought Christ home from the synagogue to be part of their lives, to be part of
their home, to be even part of their lunch! Sometimes I wonder do we leave the Lord Jesus at
the church door when we go home and live our lives, make our decisions, go about our
business? Or do we take Him home from the morning service with us, to be a part of
everything, even our very meal? Do we take Him home to let Him share in our blessings, but
also share with our burdens? This was His service, He was making Himself available to these
simple folk, His ear was open to their appeal, He was considerate.

He was condescending, He was considerate, and this is the reason why He was considerate:
He was compassionate. His service was compassionate. Mark graphically details it in the
actions that the Lord used. He says, as He came to heal Peter's wife's mother, He came near,
He took her by the hand, He lifted her up and the fever left her immediately. The tenderness
of the touch of His hand is there to reveal the compassion of His heart. Love and mercy were
His motivation, and those were always His motivation. That's the great contrast between the Servant of the Lord, Jesus Christ, and those who claim to be the servants of the Lord, and claim divine authority, the Pharisees and the Scribes. So often in the gospel writings we see that when the traditions of men made the word of God null and void, Jesus disregarded those traditions, irrespective of the consequences to His personal reputation, in order that He might display mercy, love and compassion.

The rabbinic rules for visiting the sick - maybe you didn't know there were any! - stated that visitors were not permitted to sit on the bed or on a chair, but had to stand on the floor. They even had rules about how you visit the sick! But the Lord disregards them, and He touches the sick person. We're going to see later on in our study, verse 41, that He even touches this poor leprous man - and His extension of hand was simply an expression of His love, how His love was going out to this wretch who was rejected. I wonder do we reach out like that? What a question! We're big on outreach, aren't we? But I wonder does our outreach involve reaching out in compassion, mercy and love? Note with the Lord Jesus that even if it meant breaking accepted rules of convention, and even His own religion, He did it! He did it to express love and compassion! We need to ask ourselves, as we look at our own service to the Lord in the light of our Lord's service, do we have true perspective when we are seeking to reach out and touch others with the love of God? Or do we confuse man-made convention for biblical principle? Do we even allow the rules of men to prevent us serving? Here's the lesson: we need to always keep the main thing the main thing. So often we get so taken up with irrelevancies or less important things, and we allow those things to prevent us from doing the main thing - and Jesus never allowed that in His service, never!

Now let me give you an example of this: as I went through the commentaries on this passage of Scripture, I noted at least in one of them that the commentator was so taken up with the marriage status of Peter in order to hammer the Roman Catholic Church, that he never left any time to comment on the healing which is the whole point! He missed the wood for the trees. Listen: this is a great danger, that we allow our conservatism, theologically, practically, to swallow up our compassion! Now I'm not suggesting that we ditch our conservatism, far from it. The words of our Lord Jesus are instructive when He speaks about the Pharisees in Matthew 23:23, listen to what He says: 'Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others'. Now He wasn't accusing them in the wrong for tithing their mint and their dill and cumin, He was saying: 'These you ought to have done according to the law', you were right in doing it, but your problem was that you left undone the most important thing - displaying justice and mercy and faithfulness in your service. It's not that they were making wrong points, but they were missing the main point.

We can have doctrine and have it all right, and so we should; and we should have practice as right as we can possibly get it, as long as it's biblically-based and not traditional - but at the end of the day, if you miss the main point, and we don't have justice and mercy and faithfulness in our service, it's all of little worth. Jesus was prepared to disregard man-made rules in order to extend His compassion as He reached out to those who were rejected.

His service was condescending, considerate, compassionate, but this is a wonderful point: fourthly, it was complete. It was complete! Now we saw last week, if you were with us, that many exorcists who moved about in the Lord Jesus' time, they worked with elaborate rituals, incantations and spells when they were attempting to cast out devils. Jesus, in a few words in the synagogue, cast out the unclean spirit - that's why people were amazed at His authority.
Now the Talmud, which is a rabbinical Jewish book of instruction and tradition, actually lays down methods of dealing with what Peter's wife's mother had - a burning fever. This is what it says: 'A knife, wholly made of iron, was tied by a braid of hair to a thornbush'. On successive days these verses were repeated: first, Exodus 3:2-3, this is interesting, 'The angel of the LORD appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush: and he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed. And Moses said, I will now turn aside, and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt'. Then on the second day you were to read Exodus 3 and verse 4: 'And when the LORD saw that he turned aside to see, God called unto him out of the midst of the bush, and said, Moses, Moses. And he said, Here am I'. Then finally on the third day, Exodus 3:5: 'And he said, Draw not nigh hither: put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground'.

Now that's God's word, it's true, but all that is gobbledygook - it's all traditional nonsense, it's like Jewish magic using God's word in this way. Then, after quoting these verses, they used certain magical formulae, and they then claimed that the disease was cured. Now, do you know what Jesus did? He disregarded all this mumbo-jumbo and paraphernalia of popular superstition. In verse 31 we read that He took her by the hand, lifted her up, and immediately the fever left her. It doesn't even say that the Lord mentioned one word. Not a word is uttered! He just takes her by the hand, helps her to her feet, and it is a complete cure! She is cured immediately and absolutely.

Now, if you have ever had a fever, you will know that when a fever leaves you you are in a weakened condition. The Lord didn't heal this woman like the tablets or the doctor heals us, He healed her completely - why? Because after He took her by the hand, she was not weakened, indeed she was strengthened to get up and to serve the Lord and His disciples by making them the meal. The same hand that healed her strengthened her. What a complete service this was! You know, the Lord has healed us, He has saved us from sin - but do we realise that He can also strengthen us to serve, and we are saved to serve? After she was healed she fed Jesus and the dozen hungry men. You mightn't be able to preach a sermon from a pulpit, you mightn't be able to go and be a missionary, but all of us can love, all of us can do something - Jesus serves us in salvation, why? So that we might serve others! I wonder has Christ made you strong? I wonder has Christ raised you to health and strength? Or maybe you have already got it? You're to be very thankful - but do you realise why you have it, why He has restored you?

Some people think: 'Well, it's so that I can do nine rounds every week on the golf course, that's why God has me in health. I'm glad I have retirement health, and it's because I want four holidays every year' - I'm not despising golf, though I'm no good at it, or holidays. I like my holidays as well as anybody, but that's not why you are in health and strength, my friend. You're in health and strength to serve others, to serve completely.

Then fifthly and finally, His service in this day in His life was comprehensive. Condescending, considerate, compassionate, complete and comprehensive. What do I mean? Well, look at the crowd that comes that evening to Peter's door. At night it seemed as if all Capernaum, having heard of this man in the synagogue being healed, gathered at Peter's door bringing sick people, demon-possessed people. The Greek verb indicates that these folk kept bringing people, they kept on coming. Now, as long as the Sabbath was unended, people were forbidden bringing the needy into the streets. They dare not bring people who couldn't walk, or see, or demon-possessed, because it would entail carrying them, and the law said that carrying a burden through a town on the Sabbath day was forbidden. So they had to wait until
the Sabbath was ended - do you see how these people were all strapped with rules and regulations that prevented them serving and helping others?

I can almost see the scene. The law, at least their laws, said that the Sabbath had ended when three stars had come out in the dark sky on Saturday evening. You can see them, or I can anyway, looking out their window thinking of their loved one, their little child with ailments, their friend, their husband, their wife - and they're looking out the window, and they're counting, waiting for the three stars. As soon as they see them, immediately they go to Simon Peter's house. Here they all gather, and how powerful this Healer was: He healed all who were brought to Him. So many there were, no problem was too complex, too messy for Christ to get His hands dirty - that was His service! He's not like us, avoiding the alcoholics, and the unmarried mother, and the divorcees - no! He healed them all!

Boy, there's a lesson there that some of you stuck-up Christians need to learn! That's all it is, some of you: you're pompous, you're proud, you're arrogant - and there are people in the world that may need help, they need Christ! His service was comprehensive, He touched them all - no problem was too difficult for Him. In fact, Mark says that He healed divers diseases. He didn't put a sign up and say: 'If you've got TB or diabetes, come and see me. I can heal all complaints of diabetes and TB' - no, everything! He wasn't setting up one cure for one ailment, He wasn't limited in His power - He healed the sick of every disease. Matthew Henry put it like this: 'For His words were panpharmacon, a salve for every sore'. Oh, you wouldn't think it: that we had a salve for every sore in our possession with Jesus Christ, would you?

What about the man across the street? We've an answer for him - would you think it? We sit here, and I'm guilty of it, we sit here in our holy huddle - and if we really believed that we had the salve for all his sores, and I'm not saying there won't be problems, and I won't say there won't be long nights, and there won't be counselling, and there won't be spending of money and prayers and tears and blood! - but Christ is the answer! He is comprehensive in meeting men's needs. Here's the thing that we see: that the miracle that He wrought in the synagogue, He repeated it in Simon Peter's house. A lot of these quack healers that are about, ask them to repeat a healing - they can't do it, because it's all mumbo-jumbo, a lot of it anyway. I believe God can heal, and uses prayer often to heal - but the difference with Christ's healing was that it was comprehensive, in other words it was constant, it was consistent. Now we can't go about healing as He did, but I wonder is our service constant? Is our service consistent?

Now as I conclude I want to do two things. I want to first of all contrast these two types of healings in this passage. What am I talking about? Well, there is the healing of Peter's wife's mother, and then there is the healing of all those in the crowd. Most of the crowd, I freely admit, all they wanted was for Jesus to do something for them. They wanted some from Jesus. To put it bluntly: they were just using Him, most of them anyway. I can't blame them for that, because if I had a sick child I would be using Him too. Yet they tragically foreshadow millions in our world even today who want Christ for what they hope to get out of Christ, but are not willing to serve and follow Christ. That so easily can be us: we want Jesus for what He can do for us - He can take all our sins away, He can take us to heaven, He can give us a reason to live - but follow Him? Be His disciple? Carry a cross? Lay our lives down for others? So many are like those who Jesus said, after He fed 5000 people in John 6:26: 'Jesus answered them and said, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Ye seek me, not because ye saw the miracles, but because ye did eat of the loaves, and were filled'. Who will we be like? Will we be like the crowd around Peter's door? Or will we be like Peter's mother-in-law? She was
healed and strengthened in order to minister, and those who are saved ought to minister to God and to others!

But then the greatest contrast is with the greatest Servant: how do we measure up in our service? This convicts me to the core. If we were to take the Lord Jesus as our example, a day in the life of His service: we see three times here Jesus healing people, look at it. First He's in the synagogue, equivalent to where we are now; second He's in the house of friends; and third He's in the street. Do you know what that tells me? Wherever there was trouble, wherever there was need, wherever there was people, He was there. He was ready to use His power, He was ready to give what God had given to Him to serve - and the people flocked to Him, why? Because they perceived this in Him, that He was ready, He was willing, He was able to help - and even when He knew that they were only superficial, and they only wanted the loaves and the fish, and they only wanted their loved one healed, His compassion compelled Him! They could get a sermon at the synagogue any week, they could get a Rabbi's opinion on that particular verse of the law any time they desired - but what these poor souls needed was powerful effective actions in their lives.

Well, how is our service? How is mine? What is a day in our life like? We waste so much time on things of no profit, don't we? - and I'm including myself in this. John Wesley, the great evangelist, each evening took an appraisal and a review of every hour of his day to account for whether or not he was really serving the Lord as he should. If we did that, what would our days be like? They would speak for themselves, wouldn't they? If we are serving the Lord with our time, we need to make sure that it's not self-service, that we are actually serving the Lord. What kind of service is our ministry?

The Lord Jesus, every day, was condescending; every day and every moment of every day He was considerate; He was compassionate; anything He did, He did it completely; and when He touched people with love and grace, He did it comprehensively because He made every moment of the day count in the service of, and to the glory of God. May we, by God's help. Let's all pray and bow our heads. Talk about what you've heard this morning around the table. Talk about it among your friends, in your pew. Talk about it, but please, I urge you: do something about it. Do something.

Father, to be like Jesus, to be like Jesus, all we ask is to be like Him. Help us to be more like Him, not just in what we believe, not even only in our words, but in our actions. Help us to condescend, to be considerate, to be compassionate, to serve others completely and comprehensively irrespective of their need or their position or condition - that they may see Jesus in us, as we seek to serve Him morning, noon and night. Amen.

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Transcribed by Andrew Watkins, Preach The Word – February 2007

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Let's turn to the scriptures for our Bible reading this morning, we're turning to Mark's gospel chapter 1 as we continue our series in Mark's gospel. Mark chapter 1, and we begin to read at verse 35: "And in the morning, rising up a great while before day, he went out, and departed into a solitary place, and there prayed. And Simon and they that were with him followed after him. And when they had found him, they said unto him, All men seek for thee. And he said unto them, Let us go into the next towns, that I may preach there also: for therefore came I forth. And he preached in their synagogues throughout all Galilee, and cast out devils", and we end our reading at verse 39.

I've entitled my message today: 'The Servant's Priority of Prayer'. Now, if you were with us last Lord's Day morning you will remember that our title then was 'A Day in the Life of the Servant', and we looked at the fact that the days of our Lord Jesus Christ here on the earth were filled with service to God and service to men. In that little cameo of a day in His life we saw that in the morning He visited the synagogue, being the Sabbath morning, and there He cast out an unclean spirit from a possessed man. Going from the synagogue to Simon Peter's house, presumably for the Sabbath day meal, He encountered Simon Peter's mother-in-law sick of a fever, and He healed her there. Then, when we see what happens in the evening, we find Him serving as a great company of people - Mark says all Capernaum - gathered at Peter's door out on the street: those who were possessed by devils, and people sick of divers diseases, the Authorised Version says, and Jesus healed them all. His days were filled with service.

Now the danger of emphasising that very important truth is that we think that Jesus' days were only spent engaging in ministry to others. There is a danger that we assume that His whole life was nothing but outward activity. We're going to see this morning, here in verses 35-39, that Jesus' day started much earlier than any morning visit to the synagogue or to a sick house. His day started very early in the morning in prayer. Now I want you to note this please, because this was the essential preparation for the Servant's service, the day of service, morning, noon and evening that He was to embark upon - this was how He prepared for it. Indeed, as a human, I believe that without such prayerful dependence upon His Heavenly Father, our Lord Jesus could not have served as He did. I would cast your mind back to our studies in Mark when we looked at the temptation of the Lord Jesus, and we emphasised there that the Lord Jesus in His incarnation and condescension came to be a man, though He was God. He came to live life as a man, in total obedience to God, and in absolute dependence on His Father. John 5:19 outlines that: 'Verily, verily', Jesus said, 'The Son can do nothing of himself'.

Now, we see that this was self-evident in His prayer life - and prayer, of course, is probably the most graphic demonstration of our dependence upon God. When the Lord was baptised, we are told that at that moment, in Luke 3:21, He was praying. When He was transfigured before the three on the Mount of Transfiguration, and appearing along with Elijah and Moses, it says that as He prayed the fashion of His face was altered, Luke 9:29. Before He chose His twelve Apostles, we read: 'He continued all night in prayer to God', Luke 6:12. Even when all
men spoke well of Him and would have Him as a King, in Matthew's gospel 14:34 we read: 'He went up into a mountain apart to pray'. Now listen very carefully: His deity did not render Him independent of the need of prayer. Jesus Christ, the Servant of Jehovah, needed to pray - and, as such, He is our perfect example. He is the blueprint for the life of prayer that we are to live in the Spirit of God, but what we need to note this morning is: this was the preparation for service of the Servant of the Lord - prayer early in the morning.

Now I think it's essential that we take this morning in our series to pause and consider this great truth. We need to note that whilst, at times, it is very difficult to get Christians to serve the Lord; and whilst, as last week, we need to continually emphasise and encourage believers to be involved in some kind of service to the Master; the other end of the scale is equally as dangerous. That is, to be one of those who are almost addicted to activity and often, sadly it has to be said, it is prayerless activity, even in the service of the Lord.

Now don't misunderstand what I'm saying. We saw last week that activity in ministry is so important, and service filled most of the day of our Lord Jesus Christ - but we need, and this is the emphasis in the passage today, to see that Jesus' life was a balanced life. Oh, that we could copy, as our pattern, the balance that He showed. Prayer, in His life, always came before service. Indeed, it seems that the one thing that He interrupted His service to do was to pray. He went from the crowd into solitary places, up the mountainside, into the wilderness in order to pray. Now this is the warning that all of us, particularly those who are heavily engaged in the service of the Lord, we need to beware of becoming so busy that we are too busy to get time alone with God in prayer.

Now let me say that I'm still trying to strike the balance, I haven't got it right yet - but one thing I have observed in my own life, I can't speak for others, is that it is hard if you are constantly in a frenzied hurry, it's very difficult to be still before God in order to pray. Though the Lord Jesus, as we saw last week, was always serving, you never ever see Him in a frenzied hurry. You never see Him in a tizzy. There is a need in our lives, as the servants of the Lord, to become disciplined enough to provide quality time for unhurried, unhindered prayer. For the Servant of the Lord that had to be so early in the morning that it was still dark. So, before His day filled with service, a great while before day, Jesus arose, went to a solitary place, and there prayed.

Now there are many lessons that we can learn from the example of our Saviour today, but the first thing I want you to see that I believe He shows us is the need for unhurried prayer, the need for unhurried prayer - verse 35, the verse that I just mentioned to you. Now remember that we said in our introduction and in subsequent weeks that we believe that Mark's gospel comes in particular from Peter's perspective. The apostle Peter relayed to Mark many of the instances that are in this gospel account, and it would not surprise us that this was relayed by Simon Peter himself: that Jesus was sleeping at his home, probably, during that evening after the great service outside his door to the many people in Capernaum - and, waking up in the morning, Simon noticed that Jesus had disappeared. Very early in the morning when everyone else in the household was asleep in darkness, the Lord Jesus delicately stole out of the house and found His way to the street, and before long He was out of the village ascending a hillside, or entering some remote spot in order to get a place and an environment where He could, in an unhindered way, lift up His heart in prayer to His Heavenly Father.

I imagine Simon probably thought that he was up pretty early, but when he rose he found that the Lord was not there - because of that he initiated a search, probably along with James and John and his brother Andrew, to find where Jesus was. Now in Mark's gospel we see Jesus...
praying only three times, and it’s instructive to note when those occasions are. First, at the
beginning of Mark’s gospel, where the ministry of the Lord Jesus is being defined here in this
verse, we find Him praying - so at the start of His ministry. Then when we turn to chapter
6:46, He feeds the 5000, and we find Him praying to His Heavenly Father, blessing these
loaves and asking for the miracle. It’s not until near the conclusion of Mark’s account, chapter
14, where we find the Lord in Gethsemane, that we find Him again praying. Just as His whole
day was spent in service, and the beginning of His day was spent in prayer, we find that this
is almost like a panoramic view of His ministry: that His life and service started, and ended,
and continued with prayer.

It’s worthy also of noting the setting for each of these three accounts in Mark’s gospel of His
praying - all of them, without exception, were during the night, in the dark hours, and in a
place of solitude. Even in Gethsemane, Peter, James and John were separated from the Lord
as He prayed alone to His Father. Now there are two things that are very instructive in that
fact: that not only on this occasion, but the other occasions in Mark’s gospel, Jesus went out
at night time or the very early hours of the morning, and He went to a solitary place. It helps
us to pray, because we need to have a time of prayer just like the Lord Jesus; a time when
we can get alone for unhurried prayer and for preparation for service. The time was very early
in the morning, Mark says, and that means that it cost the Lord Jesus some sleep in order to
pray in this way.

Therefore, right away, we learn that prayer is not a matter of personal convenience. Prayer is
not something that we just fit in in the spare time that we can get after we do everything else
that seems to be, practically at least, more important - but prayer entails self-sacrifice. It
means that we’re going to have to discipline our lives during the day to make time to pray.
It’s interesting also to note that the Lord probably was up late the night before healing the
sick out in the street in front of Peter’s house, but His late hours the previous night did not
keep Him from His morning appointment with the Father. Now that’s not a rule to burn the
 candle at both ends, that won’t work, but there are times that we do have to make sacrifices
in order to get time alone with God to pray.

In Isaiah’s prophecy chapter 50 and verses 4 and 5 we get a prophetic view of the Servant of
the Lord and His prayer life. There Isaiah depicts the fact that God opened the Servant’s ear
every morning to instruct Him. Listen to those words: ‘The Lord GOD has given me the tongue
of those who are taught, that I may know how to sustain with a word him who is weary.
Morning by morning he awakens; he awakens my ear to hear as those who are taught. The
Lord GOD has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious; I turned not backward’. So Isaiah
shows us that in the life of the Lord Jesus, morning by morning, God opened His ear to
instruct Him concerning what He would do in the day of service that lay ahead. It’s also
interesting to note that this was Sunday morning. He had spent the Sabbath in the
synagogue, in Peter’s house, and then on the street healing, and this was the next morning -
Sunday morning, the day after the Sabbath. Matthew Henry, the commentator, aptly notes
that prayer is not something just for the holy days, it’s something for every day. So Jesus, a
great while before day, rises early in the morning to pray.

The second thing we note is not only the time, but the place: He went to a solitary place. It
infers a desert place. That just teaches us that solitude is important, it's important to get
alone with God. It's not enough to meet corporately as a congregation, though that is
necessary. It's not even enough to meet with your family, you need to have time alone with
God - and often that will entail a solitary place. That's why the Lord Jesus taught in the
Sermon on the Mount that we ought to go into a closet, there pray to our Heavenly Father in
secret. The sad fact is that Jesus Himself had no door of His own to close, so He found His closet in nature, in the wilderness, in the mountaintop, in the garden. I would encourage you to discover and explore the closet, the place of prayer that there is in all of nature. The heavens declare the glory of God, and nature is an unwritten book that helps us get in touch a little with God.

But the point that I want to labour this morning is this, emphasising the time and the place, we need not miss this fact: that the public ministry of the Lord Jesus had to be backed up and balanced with private prayer. It's the same for you as it was for Him, whatever your ministry is. I'm not talking, don't misunderstand that I'm talking about people in the pulpit who preach - no, no, no. People who teach children at children's meetings, Sunday School; you serving your Lord in your everyday workplace - that's what your life is to be, a life of service and sacrifice to the Lord - whatever you do, and wherever you do it, and however you do it; you, if you're involved in a public witness, which you should be as a Christian, it must be backed up by private prayer. Jesus realised that He had to get alone with God, especially because He was so often with people. If we are going to be any use to the crowd like Jesus was, we need to be alone with God. If He was to meet men, He knew that He needed to meet God first.

Now let me ask you: have you learned that lesson? Have I learned that lesson? I think I'm still learning it - to realise that if I'm going to be continually giving out, and you're going to be continually giving out, as Jesus was ministering out, there has to be some time in your day, in your week, in your month, in your year where you take in. Now is it any wonder that the Lord had so much authority, because He was spending time alone with God. When we contrast this authority that Jesus had with the lack of authority that the disciples had, we see the distinction and the reason for it. If you turn with me to Mark 9 you see this occurrence of the disciples' inability to cast out a demon as Jesus did. In Mark 9:28 we read: 'And when he was come into the house, his disciples asked him privately, Why could not we cast him out? And he said unto them, This kind', this kind of demon, or this kind of condition, or this kind of ministry, 'can come forth by nothing, but by prayer and fasting'.

So this was, on a human level, the secret to the Lord Jesus' authority in words and works. He was absolutely dependent on His Father, and that was manifest in the practice of prayer. Now maybe the axiom is too simplistic for you, and I suppose it is in a way because prayer isn't everything that gives us authority in our lives, spiritually, but it's a big lot. The axiom goes, you've heard it: 'Little prayer, little blessing. Some prayer, some blessing. Much prayer, much blessing'. Now, there's holiness involved, and there's faithfulness involved, and there's integrity involved, there's a whole lot of other things involved - but unhurried prayer must saturate our service, that is what Christ shows us: the Servant's priority in His life was prayer. It came before everything.

Now here's the second thing that develops out of that first point, the need for unhurried prayer, and I think we find it in verses 36 and 37. The reason why we need to create space for unhurried prayer - what is the reason? Simply: ministry needs will never go away. What I mean is: there would never be a shortage of sick people, or demon-possessed people for the Lord Jesus to serve and minister to, and it's exactly the same for us. Never will there be a shortage of people without Jesus, and people who have many other needs that we can minister to. I don't know whether you've ever thought of this analogy, but I have: Christian service, in whatever capacity, is often, I feel, like the job of a housewife. They always say that's the hardest job - I have never tried it, mind you, but I have a bit of sympathy. When I say that it's like the job of a housewife, I don't mean that you're dealing with big babies all
the time, but what I do mean is that it's like a never ending story. You women know what I'm talking about: the washing keeps coming, and the ironing never seems to stop. The service of the Lord is like that: there are so many people to minister to, so many opportunities, so many things to be done that the danger is that you keep going and going and going without spending time in prayer, and time before God.

Some of you young mothers, and even older ones, can remember being told: 'Now when the baby goes down for a sleep, you go down for a rest as well' - and how many do it? What happens is before long you're absolutely exhausted, run ragged, and it's the same in the spiritual realm. If you don't determine to order your service, before you know it you won't have a waking moment for time with God. This is the reason why we need to create space in our lives for unhurried prayer - why? Because other things will gladly take its place. Some very legitimate things, let me add, even some very spiritual and necessary things - but they're not the priority things when compared with unhurried prayer.

Now what Christian servant does not feel empathy with these words that, while Jesus was there in that solitary place, verse 36, 'Simon and they that were with him followed after him. And when they had found him, they said unto him, All men seek for thee'. I have a friend who is involved in evangelism, and in order to take a holiday one summer he went up to the County Antrim coast and got a caravan - that's all people knew, that he was going there and he was in a caravan. There was one family that felt they needed him there and then, and they decided to drive up and travel round every single caravan site in that North Antrim coast area, asking at reception was so-and-so staying there. I read a book recently entitled - I read it years ago, but I read it again recently - 'Ordering Your Private World', I would recommend it, by Gordon MacDonald. He relates an incident in his life that talks about how ministry needs are always there, and if we don't order our lives and make room for unhurried prayer, we'll never have time for it.

Let me just recount it to you as he does. He says: 'One Saturday afternoon the phone rang in our home. When I answered, the woman's voice at the other end of the line sounded quite upset. 'I've got to see you right away', she said. When I learned her name I quickly realised that I had never met this person before, and she had rarely ever visited our church. 'What is the reason that we have to visit right now?', I asked. It was an important question, one of several I've learned through experience to ask. Had this been many years ago', MacDonald says, 'when I was young, I would have responded immediately to her sense of emergency and arranged to meet her in 10 minutes at my office, even if I had previously hoped to be with my family or involved with study. 'My marriage is breaking up', she responded. I then asked, 'When did you become aware that it was going to break up?'. She answered, 'Last Tuesday'. I asked another question, 'How long do you think the process of breaking up has been going on for?'. Her next comment', MacDonald says, 'was unforgettable. 'Oh, it's been coming for five years". He says, 'I managed to muffle my real reaction, and said 'Well, since you have seen this coming for almost five years, and since you knew it was going to happen since last Tuesday, why is it important to visit with me right now at this moment? I need to know that'. She answered, 'Oh, I had some free time this afternoon, and thought it might be a good time to get together with you". MacDonald says, 'I said, 'Now I'm going to very candid with you. I have to preach three times tomorrow morning, and frankly my mind is preoccupied with that responsibility. Since you have been living with this situation for several years now, and since you've had several days to think about your situation, I'm going to propose that you call me on Monday morning when we can arrange a time where my mind is in much better shape. I want to be able to give you the utmost concentration, but that's probably not possible this afternoon. How does that sound?'. She said, 'That's a terrific idea". 85
Now here's how George MacDonald concluded, and why I tell that story. He says this: 'Not everything that cries the loudest is the most urgent'. Not everything that cries the most loudest is the most urgent. Jesus knew that truth, He had to hide to have time with His Heavenly Father. MacDonald also quotes Elton Trueblood from his book 'While It Is Yet Day', and this is what he says - and it applies to all of us involved in any kind of ministry - 'A public man', or woman for that matter, 'though he is necessarily available at many times, must learn to hide. If he is always available, he is not worth enough when he is available'. Did you hear that? If he is always available, he is not worth enough when he is available. In other words, we've got to have non-negotiables. One non-negotiable must be unhurried time in prayer with God.

Now what are the practical implications of this? Well, I'll tell you one: we need to make choices. We need to prioritise in our lives: that will mean we need to say 'No' at times to folk. I'm not talking about in order to lie in in bed, or in order to go out round the country entertaining ourselves, I'm talking about in order to spend time with God. Not that leisure time isn't important, it is, and time with our family, that is important too, and we need to prioritise for that. But we need to get over the stigma of trying to please others in the Christian church. Our job is not to stop disappointing people, or not let people down, our job is to do God's will. I'll tell you, other people will gladly manage your life for you, and tell you what to do and when to do it, and what they think you ought to be fulfilling your life for - but you have a greater responsibility to God, and that responsibility to God is to be in unhurried prayer that will feed your constant service for Him.

Though we minister, and though we serve others, if we are to be truly useful to others we must, at times, starve ourselves of others to have time with God. I'm going to repeat that, because this is what we see in the practice of Christ but see very little in Christian service today: though we minister and serve others, if we are to be truly useful to others, we must at times starve ourselves of others to have time with God. You see, we tend to define people - their worth, that is - not only by what they do, but how much they do. Often productivity defines our service, and is misunderstood as success in service - how many things we're involved in, how much we're doing for the Lord, how often we are out doing it. One evangelist I knew had, for a long period of time, seven, or thereabouts, engagements every day. It wasn't long before he hit a brick wall. Richard Foster puts it well when he says: 'A mind that is harassed and fragmented by external affairs is hardly prepared for meditation'.

The church fathers often spoke of 'otium sanctum', 'holy leisure' - it refers to a sense of balance in the life, an ability to rest and take time to enjoy beauty, an ability to pace ourselves. Now this is what Christ's example is asking you, and asking me: do we have otium sanctum in our lives, a holy leisure to spend time with God? Do you have leisurely time with God? E. Stanley Jones once described prayer as time exposure to God, I think that's tremendous. He used the analogy of life being like a photographic plate which, when exposed to God, progressively bore the image of God in keeping with the length of exposure.

Verses 37 to 39 show us that it appears that the crowd that were at Peter's door the night before, returned looking for Jesus. So Simon, and presumably, as I said, Andrew, James and John, searched for Him, 'followed after Him' the Bible says. That word used actually means 'they hunted for Him', and He was difficult to find, because He made Himself difficult to find - but eventually they found Him. They were intent on locating Him and interrupting Him, and Peter - note - mildly reproaches Him and says: 'All men are seeking for You, they're all seeking for You!' - which, to be interpreted in our vernacular, is saying, 'What are You doing
here when there are people looking for You? There are people needing You!'. Or, to be a little bit more cynical, they were saying: 'Come back! Capitalise on the success of last night!'. Simon and his friends seemed to think that Jesus was making a mistake, He was missing a great opportunity that the recent publicity had brought Him. That's often the reaction of other Christians when we want to spend time alone with God. They wouldn't say it or articulate it, but they think it's a waste of time. You must resist that.

It's interesting to ponder why the Lord Jesus did not return to Capernaum. He refused Peter's invitation, and surely one of the main reasons - I think there are many, but the main one must be that Jesus did not want to be known as a mere miracle-worker. He wanted to be known as Saviour and Lord. He shows that the nature of His ministry was to preach the kingdom, and if He wanted more adulation and more amazement from the crowd, He would have went back to Simon Peter's home - but He wanted to see repentance and faith in the lives of men and women, so He began preaching in a tour of the synagogues in Galilee, using the synagogue in the main town as the point of contact with the people. He preaches the kingdom of God, He confronts them with God's claim on their lives, but He goes elsewhere.

This is the point: though He served the crowd, He would not be controlled by the crowd but by His Heavenly Father alone. Make sure you don't let any crowd, or anyone come between you and your relationship with your Heavenly Father - even if that thing is a thing of service, though service is very important. Now we noted that Jesus never separated His words from His deeds, and now we are seeing that Jesus never separated prayer from His work. So often we separate our words from our deeds; and equally as often, if not more often, we separate prayer from our work. May we see in Christ the Servant's priority of prayer, the need for unhurried prayer, the reason why we need to create space for unhurried prayer - because if we don't, something else will take its place. May we all make it our priority today.

Let's all bow our heads. Now I'm not suggesting that you decide to give up some work for the Lord in order to have time for prayer, when maybe all you need to do is set the alarm half an hour earlier in the morning. But maybe there is someone who does need to cut down a little bit of what they are doing, in order to have more time with God. I'm not suggesting that you spend three hours in the morning - whilst that would be wonderful if some were - but if you could get five minutes, or 10 minutes where there are no minutes at present, that would be something that I believe would revolutionise your life, and you would see very quickly an evident change. Start small, this week, tomorrow morning, and see the change that will come into your life and your service for the Master.

Father, we thank You for not only the salvation of our Lord Jesus, but His example. Help us to follow Him in practising unhurried holy leisure, exposed to the presence of God; that we might have power and authority in our service to God and others. Teach us this lesson to take time to be holy, deliver us from frenzied lives, even in the work of God - but help us to have the holy balance that we find in the life of Your beloved Son, through whose Name we pray, Amen.
We're turning to chapter 1 again of Mark, and beginning to read at verse 40, and it is the account of a leper who the Lord Jesus heals: "And there came a leper to him, beseeching him, and kneeling down to him, and saying unto him, If thou wilt, thou canst make me clean. And Jesus, moved with compassion, put forth his hand, and touched him, and saith unto him, I will; be thou clean. And as soon as he had spoken, immediately the leprosy departed from him, and he was cleansed. And he straitly charged him, and forthwith sent him away; And saith unto him, See thou say nothing to any man: but go thy way, shew thyself to the priest, and offer for thy cleansing those things which Moses commanded, for a testimony unto them. But he went out, and began to publish it much, and to blaze abroad the matter, insomuch that Jesus could no more openly enter into the city, but was without in desert places: and they came to him from every quarter".

Verse 41 tells us that Jesus was moved with compassion because of the predicament of this leprous man, and He put forth His hand and touched him. That is very significant, because we know in particular from Mark's gospel that the Lord Jesus delighted in touching needy people. No less than eight times in Mark alone it is recorded that the Lord Jesus touched those who had great needs. Of course, we've already studied one of those, because in this particular chapter when the Lord Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law He took her by the hand, verse 31 says, and raised her up. He touched her by the hand and lifted her. Then we have read this morning how He touches the leper, verse 41. Then when we come to chapter 5, when He heals Jairus' little daughter, we read that He took her by the hand and said, 'Talitha cumi', which means 'Little girl, I say unto you, Get up'. He touched her.

Then when we come to chapter 6 and verse 5, the Lord Jesus has entered His home town of Nazareth, and we read there that He could do no mighty work in Nazareth, save that He laid His hands upon a few sick folk and healed them. Then we find, when He encounters a deaf and dumb man in chapter 7 and verse 33, to heal him it says He took him aside from the multitude and put His fingers into his ears, and He spit and touched his tongue, and then He said 'Ephphatha', and he was healed - but the Lord Jesus touched him in order to heal him.

Later He did a similar thing for a blind man at Bethsaida in chapter 8 and verse 23, we read there: 'He took the blind man by the hand, and led him out of the town; and when he had spit on his eyes, and put his hands upon him, he asked him if he saw ought'. Even in the midst of the busy ministry of the Lord Jesus - and we saw that the Lord Jesus was serving morning, noon and night, so much so that He had to rise very early, a great while before day, in order to have time with God - but even in the midst of all that busyness we read that He repeatedly took little children into His arms, touching them, embracing them: chapter 9:36, chapter 10:16. We read: 'He took them up in his arms, put his hands upon them, and blessed them'. Then finally, in Mark's account at least, we see Him raising up a formerly demonised boy - chapter 9 and verse 27: 'Jesus took him by the hand, and lifted him up; and he arose'.

Now let me just say that in all of these instances where Jesus touched someone in order to heal them, or deliver them, or bless them, there was no need of Jesus to touch any of them.
He didn't need to do it. In fact, we know from other instances that even when geographical barriers of distance were there, the Lord Jesus had only to speak a word and people were healed or delivered, so it was not a necessity that Jesus touched these people in order to make them whole. His word was and is enough. But this is, I believe, the reason why He did touch people physically: He did so simply because He wanted to show that He cared beyond words.

Perhaps there is no incident in the whole of the Bible which more graphically communicates the fact that Jesus' love is beyond words than this incident of the healing of the leprous man. Now why is that? Well, I want us first of all to look at the leper, and then we'll look at the Lord. There are two things that I want you to see regarding the leper, and why this shows more perhaps than any other incident that the Lord cares beyond words.

Two points. First: you need to see and understand the leper's plight, his condition, his circumstances. Now in New Testament times there was no disease regarded with more terror or disgust than that of leprosy. In fact the attitude to leprosy then was almost exactly that to AIDS today in our generation - a mixture of fear that you would contract it, and revulsion of those who have contracted it, or of the symptoms and outcome of the disease. In Jesus' day, anyone who was identified as a leper was reduced personally to a pitiful state of existence in two ways: physically and spiritually.

Now we need to spend a little bit of time on this to understand the significance of what it meant for the Servant of the Lord to touch this man with leprosy. Now let's look physically at what happened to a leper. E.W.G. Masterson, who is quoted by a commentator from his article on leprosy in the Dictionary of Christ in the Gospels, says this - and I'm just quoting verbatim from him because he gives a very detailed account of the types of leprosy that there were. He says: 'No other disease reduces a human being for so many years to so hideous a wreck. Physically there are three kinds of leprosy', he says, 'One: there is nodular or tubercular leprosy'. Here's how he describes it: 'It begins with an unaccountable lethargy, and with unaccountable pains in the joints. Then there appears on the body, especially on the back, symmetrical discoloured patches. On them little nodules form, at first pink, then turning brown. The skin is thickened. The nodules gather, especially in the folds of the cheek, the nose, the lips and the forehead. The whole appearance of the face is changed until the man or woman becomes unlike human, they lose their human appearance and look, as the ancients said, like a lion or a satyr. The nodules grow larger and larger; eventually they ulcerate and from them there comes a foul discharge. The eye-brows fall out; the eyes become staring; the voice becomes hoarse and the breath wheezes because of the ulceration of the vocal chords. The hands and the feet always ulcerate. Slowly the sufferer becomes a mass of ulcerated growths. The average course of the disease is nine years, and it ends in mental decay, coma and ultimately death. The sufferer became utterly repulsive both to himself and to others'.

That is only nodular or tubercular leprosy. Then there is a second that he notes, 'anaesthetic leprosy' it is called. He describes it: 'The initial stages are the same; but in this kind of leprosy the nerve trunks are affected. The infected area loses all sensation. This may happen without the sufferer knowing that it has happened; and he may not realize that it has happened until he suffers some burning or scalding and finds that there is no pain and no feeling whatsoever where pain ought to be. As the disease develops, the injury to the nerves causes discoloured patches and blisters. The muscles waste away; the tendons contract until the hands become like claws. There is always disfigurement of the finger nails. There ensues chronic ulceration of the feet and of the hands. There comes the progressive loss of fingers and of toes, until in
the end a whole hand or a whole foot may drop off. The duration of the disease is anything from twenty to thirty years. It is a kind of terrible and progressive death of the body'.

Then there is a third kind of leprosy, and he says it is the commonest of all, where nodular leprosy and anaesthetic leprosy are mixed. These two problems together! Now, many scholars feel that leprosy in Bible times, as it's defined in Leviticus 13 and 14, is a collective noun designating a wide variety of chronic skin diseases. That may be the case, but certainly what we have just tried to describe is probably what this man who met Jesus experienced and suffered. Great physical ailment, suffering, trial, a pitiful existence indeed!

But there weren't only physical sufferings, there were spiritual consequences of having leprosy, because in Judaism it made you impure religiously. Leviticus 13 and verses 45 and 46 describes what a leper had to do: 'And the leper in whom the plague is, his clothes shall be rent, and his head bare, and he shall put a covering upon his upper lip, and shall cry, Unclean, unclean. All the days wherein the plague shall be in him he shall be defiled; he is unclean: he shall dwell alone; without the camp shall be his habitation'.

Now just imagine this for a moment or two, if you had leprosy, think about what it would be like: that everywhere you went that was a public place, where there were other individuals, you would be shouting 'Unclean! Unclean!'. Going into the supermarket, down to the park, the insidious sense of worthlessness, despair, knowing that others look down on and despise you. Of course, we know that by the time that Jesus was speaking and doing His great works that the rabbis had added a great deal of other rules to God's law. The rabbinical teaching of Jesus' day had absurd strictures regarding the leper. That made it even worse, if it wasn't bad enough for these poor souls! The rabbis said that if a leper even struck his head inside a house, that house was to be pronounced as unclean. It was illegal for a clean person to greet a leper. Lepers had to remain a hundred cubits away from other people if the wind was upward, and four cubits away if the wind was downward. Josephus, the Jewish historian, summarised the condition by saying that lepers were treated, I quote, 'as if they were in effect dead men'.

Now, it was the same in the middle ages, because the church then merely applied the law of Moses to their ceremonies and practices. If you were a leper during the middle ages, the priest would, wearing his stol and carrying a crucifix, lead the leper into the church - do you know what he would do? He would read the burial service over him, because it was believed that that man was already dead though he was still alive! He wasn't allowed to mingle with others in the congregation, to the extent that they devised what they called 'the leper's squint', and it was a little cubicle with a cut in it where the lepers would sit and they would be able to look into the church service away from everyone else. But the point is this: spiritually speaking they were cut off from society, and more importantly from God's community, from Israel, and even in the middle ages from what was then the church.

That was the leper's plight. Now what can we learn from this? Well, Mark's gospel records more miracles than sermons - but that does not mean that we need to conclude that there is no teaching in Mark's Gospel. In fact, all of Christ's miracles were parables in themselves. One author puts it like this: 'For instance, His healing the blind portrayed His illumination of darkened hearts. His calming the storm told of His power to bring peace to troubled hearts. Raising the dead proclaimed His life-giving power. His feeding of the 5000 spoke of His being the Bread of life'. Mark is a book of deep spiritual teaching.
Now when we read the law in Leviticus 13 regarding what it was to be a leper, we see clearly, I believe, that this healing of the leper is a picture of sin, and a picture of the salvation from sin that Jesus Christ, the Servant of Jehovah, can bring. J.C. Ryle is a tremendous expositor, and was a tremendous preacher, and he says: 'It is a radical disease of the whole man. Just like sin, it attacks not merely the skin, but the blood, the flesh and bones, until the unhappy patient begins to lose its extremities, and to rot by inches'.

Turn with me to Leviticus 13 very quickly. I'm not going to read any of it, but I just want to pinpoint a couple of verses to show you how leprosy is a picture, graphically, of sin. Like sin, leprosy is deeper than the skin - verse 3 tells us that leprosy was such. Then verses 5 and 8 tell us that leprosy spread, and sin spreads - sure, sin is everywhere! Then we read in verses 44-46 that leprosy defiles and isolates like sin, it cut us off from others, and in a religious sense it makes us unclean and impure. Then in verses 47-59 there is great guidance and instruction regarding how things worn by a leper and touched by a leper were only fit for the fire, to be burned and destroyed. That's what sin does to us: it makes us only worthy of the fires of God's hell in judgement. Anyone who has never trusted the Lord Jesus Christ is spiritually in a worse state than this man, the leper, was physically. You are, my friend, if you're without Christ, a dead man walking - spiritually speaking!

I wonder if you have ever experienced a consciousness of your sin like the consciousness of leprosy for this man? Maybe it has affected you physically, maybe your sin has taken a dealing with you mentally and emotionally, it's affecting you in your personality, it has affected or is affecting the people that you live with, and ultimately it is affecting your relationship to God. Well, that is just like leprosy.

Here is this leper's plight, and out of his plight we find, secondly, the leper's prayer. He comes to Jesus in this great predicament, and in verse 40 we read that he says: 'If you will, you can make me clean'. Now before we even look at the actual words of his prayer, let me draw your attention to his disposition. He came with great humility, with contrition, Mark tells us that he came imploring and kneeling down before Jesus. He wasn't coming demanding that he should be cleansed and healed. He wasn't coming presuming that it would be his, because this man knew he was a leper, and he couldn't hide that he was a leper - everybody could see and smell that he was a leper! So he was able, freely, to admit what he was - but not only could he see what he was, he recognized who Jesus was. We know that in that he said: 'If you will, you can make me clean'. He recognized the authority of the Servant of the Lord.

Now let me show you what this, in effect, I believe, is: this is what some have described as 'pressing into the kingdom of God'. Let me explain that: in Matthew 11 Jesus said, 'From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force'. What does that mean? It means that this man was determined to meet Jesus, and to know the wholeness that the Lord Jesus Christ could give him - a bit like a woman we meet in Mark 7, the Syro-Phoenician woman, Greek by birth. She realised that she was not a Jew, so she was not in the blessings that Peter was telling the children about of the commonwealth of Israel, she was cut off from them as a Gentile dog. She was unclean, and yet she came, and Jesus was - and I say it reverently - teasing her into actually pressing through by faith into the kingdom. He said: 'I've come to the Jews, not to Gentiles'. He wasn't being harsh, He wanted this woman to be determined, and to push through. Do you remember what she said? 'Even the dogs eat of the crumbs of the Master's table'. When the Lord Jesus heard that, He realised that this woman had got it! She was determined because she knew the authority of the heart of Christ - that is what pressing into the kingdom is, when you realise like the Syro-Phoenician woman, like this leper, that you've no right or claim on
Jesus, in fact everything prohibits you coming into the presence of God - but both of them knew that He was able to deal with their problem. That's what made them press through.

They knew He was able, but the great question is: was He willing? I believe all people in the world who believe in a god, believe in an almighty god - but that's not all there is to our God. God is not only able to do anything, He is willing to meet the needs of the most despised and rejected of men. This leper and the Syro-Phoenician woman saw that though they were dogs, though they were cut off from God and the community, the door was ajar even for them. Christ had come now with grace, not law, though He was fulfilling the law. They saw in Him hope, and that's why he prays.

Now I want you to see the Lord now, see what they saw. If you go away this morning just seeing a leper you've missed the point entirely, I want you to see the Lord. First of all see the Lord's compassion. It says that He was moved, verse 41, with compassion - it literally means He was filled with compassion. Now that describes an instinctive reaction on Jesus' part, and I can only illustrate it by saying that He felt it in His stomach - it's speaking of a gut reaction of pity and sympathy, but more than that, not even empathy. If you've ever had a sick child, a really sick child, you will know exactly what I'm talking about: that gut reaction that goes out to your very flesh and blood, it wrenches with compassion! Now that is the sense here, that He had this stomach-compassion for this man in all his plight and condition. He was moved!

Can I pause for a moment here and ask us as Christians - and I'm asking myself this - are we moved at the plight of the unclean? Are we? Do we pity them, or do we condemn them? 'Tut, tut, you shouldn't be doing that! Tut, tut, look at that! Imagine that!' - that's not the spirit of Christ, 'Ye know not of what spirit ye are of'. He was moved with compassion and, praise God, He is the same yesterday, and today, and forever. Sinners need not fear, He will in no wise cast out any that come unto Him, for He is not willing that any should perish, but He wills that all men should be saved - whoever they are, whatever they have done! My friend, if you're unconverted today and have never come to Christ, you have no need to fear that you're too sinful or you've done too much wrong; for this Christ is a Christ who is moved in the gut toward those who are in such a sinful plight, destroyed and wrecked by sin.

Here's another thing we need to make sure of not missing today: Christ's compassion didn't stop there, it led to action. He was moved with compassion, and it says 'He stretched out His hand and touched him'. The word, I am led to believe, expresses more than just a superficial contact - it wasn't the way that you touch a hot stove. He didn't touch him with a bargepole. The sense of the word is that He took hold of him, that's how it is often translated. So Jesus, at the very least, placed His hand firmly on that leper. Now, I know I want you to see the Lord, but just for a moment I want you to put yourself in that leper's sandals. How do you think he felt? Everybody running away from him. If he had children he couldn't go near them. He had lost, perhaps for years, if married, the touch of affection and intimacy of his wife, much less her embrace. He had not known the soft, tender touch of a healthy hand in years. Do you not think his whole being flooded with ecstasy? He had been starved of human affection! Here is a man who he just hopes might find it in His heart to heal him, and He touches him!

R. Kent Hughes says, speaking of the fact that many are like this today - not in a leprous sense, but in a sinful sense - he says: 'I once counselled a lonely man who was not a Christian. He had no family that cared, he belonged to no church. In describing his loneliness he said that he had his hair cut once a week just to have someone touch him with no
misunderstanding'. I wonder can you identify with that today? There are so many untouchables in our society for one reason or another, and here we see the Christ of God touching this untouchable wretch. Again we see, as we have seen in previous weeks, He spoke an authoritative word - but that authoritative word, 'I will, be thou clean', was spoken in the context of an authoritative deed, because Jesus wanted to communicate that: yes, actions are louder in speaking than words. He touched him because He wanted him to know that He cared beyond just empty, religious words!

I just wonder, because Mark's gospel is the gospel of the cross, it's all leading that way - I wonder if Mark saw that the suffering Servant here is coming to identify again, as He did in His baptism, with man's sins. Just think of how amazed the onlookers were, they were stunned, the disciples were shaken because Jesus - now grasp the import of this - Jesus Himself had now become ceremonially unclean! Apart from that, they probably thought He might even catch the disease. Mark's lesson is the lesson of Calvary: for He, God, has made Christ sin for us, who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him. Is this not a wonderful picture of how Christ was made our sin on the cross, yet He remained unstained by it, untouched, apart from it? The holy law of God drove lepers from society, but here Christ is displaying the sovereign grace of God that drives leprosy away from the leper, and delivers the leper!

You see if we're ever going to affect others the way the Lord Jesus Christ did, we have to learn what it is to contact them, identify with them, and not be afraid to touch them; for it shows that we are a people - yes, of the word - but we are a people of more than just words. The wonder of it all is in verse 42, it says in his favourite phrase: 'Immediately', Mark records, 'He was healed'. R. Kent Hughes says again: 'His feet, toeless, ulcerated stubs, were suddenly whole, bursting his shrunken sandals'. The knobs of his hands grew fingers before his very eyes. Back came his hair, his eyebrows, his eyelashes. Under his hair were ears, and before him was a nose. His skin was supple and soft. Can you hear the thundering roar from the multitude? Can you hear the man crying not 'Unclean! Unclean!', but 'I'm clean! I'm clean!'? All because of the touch of the Servant's hand!

Have you experienced this in salvation from sin? Listen, if you haven't, it is there. Christ is still here in His kingdom power by the Spirit to do works of salvation in your heart, and He can - but He is willing! Able and willing to do it for you! Maybe, like most people here this morning, you have been delivered in this salvation sense - but can I say to you: there is more for you to do.

My final point is the Lord's command, for the Lord didn't just have compassion towards this man, He commanded him to do two things. First: go and get a bill of health from the priest, without which he couldn't re-enter the society and join in worshipping God. Now that would have shown the priest up, because if he admitted that the man was delivered from leprosy, he was admitting that a work of God had been committed - but if he didn't believe in Christ, as a consequence he showed himself as a hypocrite. So it was a test for the priest as well as the man. But the second command was to go and tell no one! Now we know that definitely he didn't obey the second command, and I suspect that he didn't obey the first, going to the priest, either. Either way, the result of the Lord commanding this man was that he disobeyed the Lord, and he went out and told everybody what had been done - and we can understand that a little bit. But what we need to see is that the result of his disobedience detrimentally affected Christ's work.
We read that because of that, His ministry in Galilee was terminated, and preaching in the synagogues as He had begun to do in verse 39 - that was His mission, that's what He wanted to do, that's why He didn't want it published, and a whole heap of lepers coming so that He couldn't get on with preaching the word the way He wanted to. Christ was not seeking a bigger crowd, so He withdrew, Mark says, to a place of solitude, suffering in the wilderness. But here's the point, and we ought not to miss it: if we have been delivered from sin through the precious blood of the Lord, how many of us as healed Christians, because of our disobedience, are hindering the movings of Christ today?

He tells us to speak now, and many of us remain silent. He tells us to do as He has done, and as He would do if He were here, and as we would have others do unto us - and we do, often, nothing. What is Christ's mission? It hasn't changed! Don't you dare dispensationalise all these things to get out of them! He still wants us to touch the untouchables with the love and the grace of God! That is His command to us.

May I read, as I close, Acts 26, where Paul gives his testimony after meeting the Lord on the road to Damascus - and I'm not going to comment on this at all. God gave him at his conversion a heavenly vision, in Acts 26:15 we read: 'I said, Who art thou, Lord? And he said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest. But rise, and stand upon thy feet: for I have appeared unto thee for this purpose, to make thee a servant, a minister and a witness both of these things which thou hast seen, and of those things in the which I will appear unto thee; Delivering thee from the people, and from the Gentiles, unto whom now I send thee' - why did he go? 'To open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me. Whereupon, O king Agrippa, I was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision'.

The heavenly vision is given to us in Christ here, will we disobey, or will we have compassion, fulfil God's commands, and touch the untouchable as servants of God today?

Father, we thank You that the Lord Jesus knew no untouchables. Lord, we thank You that we can say with the apostle that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief. Thank You for touching us by the grace of Christ, touch others even now, Lord Jesus, by Your Spirit. Father, help us to appreciate the touch of the Master's hand to the extent that we will go out and do His work touching others with the same grace, unconditional favour, that He has shown us. Let us not be like the servant, and grab them by the neck when we have been forgiven of greater debts and greater sins. Amen.

Transcribed by Andrew Watkins, Preach The Word – March 2007
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Now I want you to turn with me to Mark's gospel chapter 2 for what is our thirteenth study in this Sunday morning series on Mark's gospel. The title this morning is 'Four Soul-Winners And The Forgiveness Of Sins'. This is a story that is well-known to many of you, and has great gospel applications to it, and also to us regarding how we ought to be soul-winners for the Lord Jesus and bringing others to the knowledge of the forgiveness of sins.

Verse 1 of chapter 2: "And again he", the Lord Jesus, "entered into Capernaum after some days; and it was noised that he was in the house. And straightway many were gathered together, insomuch that there was no room to receive them, no, not so much as about the door: and he preached the word unto them. And they come unto him, bringing one sick of the palsy, which was borne of four", carried of four men. "And when they could not come nigh unto him for the press, they uncovered the roof where he was: and when they had broken it up, they let down the bed wherein the sick of the palsy lay. When Jesus saw their faith, he said unto the sick of the palsy, Son, thy sins be forgiven thee. But there was certain of the scribes sitting there, and reasoning in their hearts, Why doth this man thus speak blasphemies? who can forgive sins but God only? And immediately when Jesus perceived in his spirit that they so reasoned within themselves, he said unto them, Why reason ye these things in your hearts? Whether is it easier to say to the sick of the palsy, Thy sins be forgiven thee; or to say, Arise, and take up thy bed, and walk? But that ye may know that the Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins, (he saith to the sick of the palsy,) I say unto thee, Arise, and take up thy bed, and go thy way into thine house. And immediately he arose, to take up the bed, and went forth before them all; insomuch that they were all amazed, and glorified God, saying, We never saw it on this fashion".

The story of four soul-winners and the forgiveness of sins. Now, as you can imagine, the word spread quickly of this miracle Man who touched lepers, and raised those who are sick of the palsy, and did many great mighty works that we have been reading about in our studies of chapter 1. In verses 1 and 2 of chapter 2 we see the magnetic attraction of Christ at home as well as abroad. In chapter 1 and verse 45 we read there that this man, the leper who He healed, went out and began to publish what Christ had done abroad, 'and to blaze abroad the matter, insomuch that Jesus could no more openly enter into the city, but was without in desert places: and they came to him from every quarter'. So wherever the Lord Jesus was abroad, He had this magnetic attraction.

Now in chapter 2 verses 1 and 2, even when He's at home, or at least someone else's home, He still has this magnetic attraction. People were asking: 'Where is He? Where can we see Him? Where is He to be found?'. Eventually the Capernaum communication network had located His whereabouts, and people were saying: 'He's in so-and-so's house' - probably Peter's house or Andrew's house, that He had been in in chapter 1. That is a lesson to us all:
that Jesus' presence cannot be concealed for long. Before long we read, as Mark says, immediately a great crowd gathered to that house and packed into it, to the very door. The little house was bursting at the seams with people who had a sense of expectancy that something unusual was going to happen in that house, perhaps even happen to them. The atmosphere was charged, they were anticipating that God would do something.

Now why is that? Luke tells us in Luke 5:17 on another occasion: 'the power of the Lord was present to heal them'. When Christ was there, wherever He was - in the wilderness, in the home, on the street - there was power, the power of God to heal men's and women's lives. Praise God we can say, as the church of Jesus Christ in the 21st century, that the case is no different this very day early in March 2007: that the power of God is still present in Christ, who died but is risen again, and who is present in the preaching of the Gospel to heal men's and women's lives. It's still the case that wherever God moves in power today, people are attracted. They will come to that place. People are still intrigued, and ask the question: 'What kind of power is this? We've never seen anything like it!'. That's what they said in verse 12 in Jesus' day.

Maybe you have come into this meeting this morning, I don't know your circumstances, and you are intrigued by the power of God. Maybe it's the power of God that you have seen in another person's life, just like these people saw in the leper's life, and in the demoniac's life, and in the life of Peter's wife's mother - but you have never experienced it in your own life, and because of that you're curious, you're searching. If that's the case, that's tremendous, and it's great to see you here with us today. But what I want you to notice is that Jesus didn't immediately give this crowd of people in Peter's house what their curiosity demanded, rather He gave them what they really needed. They wanted to see a miracle, they wanted to see a healing, but Jesus, it says here: 'He preached the word to them', verse 2.

There's a lesson here for all of us, whether we belong to the church of Jesus Christ or we're not converted, Christ is and was the greatest miracle worker of all - and yet He felt that His primary responsibility was to preach God's word. What was the message He preached? Well, let me remind you of it in chapter 1 verse 14: 'After John was put in prison, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, And saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel'. The Bible, from cover to cover, is filled with that message, Old and New Testament alike - that God requires all men everywhere to turn from their sin, that is what repentance is; and to believe the gospel, that is the good news of the Lord Jesus: that God sent His Son into the world not to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. That's why He died on the cross, that's why He rose three days later, that's why He ascended to heaven, that's why He's coming in a day that we do not know but we believe is very soon.

As the church of Jesus Christ today, may I remind you that that is our responsibility. In a day and age where healing crusades are advertised all around us, and you could go to many a healing crusade and not hear one word about the good news of Jesus dying on the cross, rising again, or the need that is upon a sinner to turn from sin and believe the gospel - we need to cry it out! It's not that we demean healing, I believe God can heal and does heal, but the primary thing that men need is a healing of the heart, the salvation of the soul. Sinner this morning, if you're here with us and you're without Christ; and saint, your greatest need too is the word of God - for a miracle might heal the body, but as Hebrews 4:12 says: 'The word of God is quick', alive, 'and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart'. The thing that you need most is God's
word, for it will spiritually diagnose your greatest sickness, and surgically remove the cancer of sin from your soul. It is God's word that will apply the healing medicine of the gospel.

Sadly some people, like this crowd, run to meetings to get healing, or to get wealth. You turn cable TV or satellite television on, the God Channel and all the rest, and you hear all these false prophets talking about how God wants you to get rich quick. Healing, health and wealth gospel, it tantalises people. There are others who are intrigued about the future, and they run to meetings about prophecy - not that there's anything wrong with prophetic meetings, but often it's just the motivation: 'I want to know the future!' - and sometimes for individuals it can be no different than why a person goes and looks into a crystal ball, or gets their palm read or their tea leaves interpreted! Yet perhaps deep in their hearts they have never had the healing of the gospel through the preaching of the word of God!

Maybe you're here this morning and the obstacle to your conversion has been that God just hasn't given you your demands. You've gone here, there and everywhere, and maybe prayed much about something, and God just doesn't seem to want to answer your prayers. Could it be that God is trying to bring you to the point of learning the lesson that He wants you to put first things first, and that is to obey the word of God in the gospel, to repent of your sin and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. Have you done that? You need to do it. That's God's message to you today, that's why you're here, that's why you're hearing this.

Next we encounter in Capernaum some characters which I've called 'the concerned quartet', or 'the concern companions' of this man with the palsy, the paralysed, handicapped man. Like the rest of the crowd, they had heard the commotion caused by the power that Christ had displayed that we read of in chapter 1, and they immediately thought of their poor friend. 'Our friend needs to be healed, like that leper was healed, or that demon-possessed man was healed'. So they brought their poor friend to Jesus. Now there's tremendous teaching in this for those of us here this morning who are Christians, because here was a man who, in a sense, had a need - but his need was hindered because he couldn't get to Jesus because of the crowd that was around Him. We are the crowd that's around Jesus today, aren't we? We are the Christians, we are the folk in the house. Could it be that at times we, as believers and members of the church, can be a hindrance to those who are the most needy in coming to Jesus?

We need to ask ourselves the question today, as we look at these four companions of this paralysed man: do we bring people nearer to Christ, and help people get nearer to Christ, or do we necessitate that they do spiritual gymnastics in order to get nearer to us, let alone get nearer to the Lord Jesus? Now, praise God, there are still some concerned souls who will improvise, who have imagination to overcome hindrances of the crowd around the Lord Jesus Christ. These four that bore this man to Jesus were ingenious with their faith. They climbed the outside stairs to the roof of the house, they uncovered a portion of the roof, and they lowered the man down to the ground - bringing him nearer to the Son of God. Now can I challenge you this morning, believer in Christ: how many people have you lately brought near to the Son of God? Some of you never think of even bringing someone near to the place where the word of God is preached.

Now I want you to note in verses 3 and 4 that the faith of these four men was visible. That's very significant, because we read that Jesus saw, in verse 5, their faith. James goes to great pains in his epistle near the end of the New Testament to tell us that faith without works is dead, and Jesus here saw their faith. James tells us that Abraham was justified by works. Now we are justified by faith alone in the spiritual sense, but what James was talking about was
that his life and faith was evident and justified before men in the life that he lived and the works that he did. Others could see it, just as Jesus saw the faith of these four individuals. I imagine that a smile came to the Lord Jesus' face when He saw these men digging through the roof, because He recognized action as the manifestation of faith that could not be hid - just like Jesus' presence could not be hid in the house. This was faith that laughed at any barriers or obstructions, that was prepared to bulldoze them down, as the hymn puts it: a faith that laughs at impossibilities, and cries 'It shall be done!'.

Let me confess something to you here today: I get tired of hearing people say: 'Look, all you need to do is preach the word of God, and God will do the rest'. I know there's an element of truth in that, and I believe strongly in the sovereignty of God even in salvation, and I know it's the entrance of God's word that brings light - but that's not the responsibility of the preacher or the Christian over, once we deliver God's word. Listen to what James says in James chapter 2 and verse 18: 'But someone will say, 'You have faith and I have works'. Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works'. What James is saying there is that it is all well and good saying that you have faith but your life doesn't show it, but the better way to preach and proclaim the Lord Jesus and the wonder and power of the gospel is to go to someone and say, or not even say, but show by your life that you have faith in Christ. It's not enough just to preach, we've got to live the word of God. There has to be visible faith in our lives.

Now may I ask us all today, including myself: what visible acts of faith do I need to do, do you need to do, in order to bring others to Christ? What visible acts of faith - like the carrying of this palsied man by these four friends - what do you need to do? What do I need to do? There is something that needs to be done more than preaching. Now I can't give you specifics this morning, because, well, that would be foolish to start off with, but we wouldn't have the time to do that. What I can do is give you the general characteristics of what these four men did, and you can apply those general characteristics to think what you might do, based upon what these four men did.

Here's the first thing that we might have to do to bring others to Christ: we might have to expend our energies. I'm sure it was no easy task carrying this man up those stairs, and letting him down through the roof. They had to get past the crowd, they had to get up the stairs, they had to dig at the roof, and then they had to lower him down, taking the weight and the strain. It's the same with soul-winning for us. We might get tired doing it, and tired in it, we might have to be put out at times for it. It will cause inconvenience, inevitably, but we must expend our energies. The problem is: a lot of us don't want to do anything that will drain us or inconvenience us.

Another thing that might happen is that it might entail climbing to uncomfortable dizzy heights that we are not used to. Maybe it's going to places that we don't like, or visiting situations that we're just not practically used to. It might even be in a spiritual sense that we have to climb to heights that we have not known, in prayer, in fasting, in spiritual warfare and wrestling - not against flesh and blood, but against spiritual entities in order to win people for the Lord Jesus. One thing it will certainly involve that it involved here, it will necessitate co-operation with others. Now in the work of God I have found, and all of us I suppose at times are guilty of wanting to be the mighty man of God - and the reasoning behind that simply is that we want glory for ourselves. Yet when God's people work together, just like these four men co-operated, we find that no man gets the glory, and God has it all. In a day of individualism we need, as the church of Jesus Christ, to be united together in the local
assembly, but even united with those who preach the gospel further afield. The more we work together the more we will see souls being won for Jesus.

It meant here also that these men had to be too self-conscious. Self-consciousness had to go out the window as they went through the roof! They had to forget about being embarrassed, people thinking they were mad. They had to even disregard those who thought they were doing something wrong. This was vandalism in one sense! Often when we reach out to those who need saved, and as we saw last week we begin to touch the untouchables, just as Jesus did the leper, people think we're doing something wrong - but we have to be prepared to live with that and disregard it! How often did the Scribes accuse Christ of doing something wrong because He disregarded some of their interpretations of the law, and contravened their traditions? But He went ahead!

It will also entail us being sacrificial. In other words, it will cost you to see people one for Jesus. How would you have felt if this had been your roof that someone was digging through? There's a lesson here: we will have to make sacrifices to bring other people to the Lord Jesus. But here is my problem: I want to make sacrifice on my own terms, not on another's. I want to give when I see fit to give, I want to give to the extent that I'm comfortable with, but the owner of this house had no prior warning that these four men were going to dig through the roof! But he obviously went with the flow - now that's tremendous, and we don't even know the name of the owner of this house - though it might have been Peter or Andrew - but why did they just stand there and let those four men dig through the roof? Well, I have a hunch: because Jesus was in the house! When Jesus is in control of something, good things have got to happen.

Now I imagine that if this had been any ordinary afternoon and hoodlums were starting to tear this man's roof off, he would have had something to say or even do about it - but when Jesus was moving in the house, whatever happened had to be right. So, whoever this owner was, he had obviously consciously, or unconsciously in the spirit of the moment, given up everything to Jesus' presence in his home. That's often the problem: we have little compartments for our lives - and 'that's the religious and spiritual end', but 'this is my end', and it's the car and the house, and it's the pension and it's the retirement, and it's the holiday. 'Christ, You can have the Sunday, and You can have the Monday, and You can have the Wednesday, and You can have the Thursday, and You can have wee bit more than that - but all that is mine, and You're not touching it'.

Friends, in the early 1900s there was a move of God here in Belfast through the preaching of W.P. Nicholson, and many of the shipyard men came down the Ravenhill Road to Ravenhill Presbyterian Church not too far away from here. The history stories tell us that the railings of the church were pulled down, and some of the windows were broken as these men were teeming in to hear God's word, as Jesus was in the house. Now do you think the presbytery - I don't know the history of it, maybe they were - but do you think their primary concern was the windows and the railings? No, Jesus was moving in the house, so it had to be right. It was right, and if Jesus is moving in our house and in this house, it might mean that we have to make some difficult decisions according to the greater need. Let me ask you: was the greater need for this man's roof to remain intact, or for this paralysed man to meet Jesus? What was the greater need? Was it the financial consideration that was pre-eminent, or the personal predicament of this paralytic? We need to ask ourselves: are we willing to make sacrifices in order that others can bring people to Jesus? If that means giving, if it means lending, if it means relinquishing things, so let it be.
R. Kent Hughes in his commentary on Mark tells a bit of the story of Francis and Edith Schaeffer, and he says: ‘Few Christians have impacted the church more in our day than did Francis and Edith Schaeffer, but it was at a cost. Schaeffer wrote in his book, 'The Church at the End of the 20th Century', these words' - listen - 'In about the first three years of L'Abri', which was their Christian Fellowship group, 'In the first three years all our wedding presents were wiped out. Our sheets were torn. Holes were burned in our rugs. Drugs came into our place. People vomited on our rugs. How many times have you had a drug taker come into your home? Sure, it is a danger to your family, and you must be careful - but have you ever risked it?’. Have you ever risked it? The secret of this man, whoever he was, who let Jesus come through the roof was: it had already been surrendered. If we have surrendered lives to the Lord, it means that at any time, in any way, we are willing to pay any price to bring others to God - and that’s the message of the cross.

You see, this is the gospel of the cross, Mark's gospel, who tells us in his key verse: 'For even the Son of man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many'. He is the Suffering Servant of Jehovah, and we are to be His servants, and do as He did, and give our lives for others, and serve others - not wait to be served ourselves! As Paul said in 2 Corinthians 8:9: 'Ye ought to know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, who was rich, yet for our sakes became poor, that ye through his poverty might be made rich' - and he speaks that in the context of financial giving to the cause of the gospel, that we ought to become poor that others might be rich through the good news.

Someone has nicknamed these four friends: 'Sympathy', 'Cooperation', 'Originality', and 'Persistence'. All those things are needed if we are to overcome the hindrances to bring others to Christ: sympathy, cooperation, originality and persistence. Oh, I ask you today: are you hindering or helping others come to Christ? Do you know what I find? Most people who are stuck not coming to Jesus, have been stuck by a Christian that has not lived up to their testimony. Mark Twain turned away from Christianity, it is reputed, because he heard Christians condoning slavery, using foul language, and engaging in shady deals. Some historians believe that Mohammed agreed with the Jews and Christians that there is one true God, but he was turned off that one true God by their lives. Brian Goodwin comments: 'A little more love to Christ and to others might have changed the course of history for what is now the Muslim world'. It has been reported about Gandhi that he once said: 'If it weren't for Christians, I would have become one'. The message was great, but their lives didn't measure up!

We see this spirit in verse 6 in the Scribes, and it would be very easy to miss this statement. The Scribes were sitting - now just imagine that for a moment or two! In a house where there was standing room only, these boys were sitting down. They weren't there, they didn't know how to serve the needy, they were a hindrance rather than a help. Now we find in this section of Mark's gospel from chapter 2 to verse 6 of chapter 3, that we have five accounts that are all marked by controversy. Jesus and the disciples are challenged by the Pharisees and the Scribal interpreters of their tradition because they are contravening the accepted norms. Here again in verses 6 to 12 in this first account of controversy, the Scribes question the Lord Jesus' authority to forgive this man's sins.

He said to him, as they let him down before Him: 'Thy sins be forgiven thee', and they said, 'Who does He think He is, speaking such blasphemy? There's none who can forgive sins but God'. Now we have witnessed already in this gospel in verses 21 and 22 of chapter 1 that Jesus had authority in His teaching. Then in verses 23 to 28 of chapter 1, He had authority over demons; in verses 29 to 34 of chapter 1, He had authority over sickness; and also in
verses 40 to 45, He had authority to touch the leper and heal him. Now we see the Servant's authority to forgive sins - but here's the point: the Pharisees said, 'Who can forgive sins but God?', and Jesus replied, 'Which is easier to say to this man, 'I forgive your sins', or 'Arise and walk'?' - and He told him to get up and walk. Do you know what He was telling them? It's easy for anybody to say 'Your sins be forgiven you', and these Pharisees and Scribes had an assumed authority because of their position and the tradition of the culture in which they lived - but Jesus demonstrated His authority through miracles, through His mighty words, through the touch of His hand. What He was saying is: 'Anybody can tell you your sins are forgiven you, but I'm going to tell this man to get up and walk, and that proves that I have authority on earth to forgive men's and women's sins'.

The point was: He didn't just claim it, He demonstrated it. By God's authority He rose this man to walk, and He proved that He not only had God's authority, but He had the very nature of God in Him, He was God's Son. In that the Pharisees and Scribes were right: only God can forgive sins. Praise God, Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever, and we can still - those of us who are converted - say, 'Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me praise His holy name; and forget not all His benefits, who forgiveth thy sins and healeth thy diseases'.

You see Jesus has authority to forgive men's sins on earth. You don't need a priest, you don't need a Pope, you don't need a minister, all you need is the Lord Jesus Christ - and that gives confidence to the Christian to go serving, to go knowing that all power has been given unto Him. We can go and take this gospel and it will reach those, and if we touch the untouchable with it, they will be healed just like lepers. But it brings certainty to the sinner in believing, that if you believe in this Christ, He has authority to cleanse you from all sin, past, present and even future.

This man's sins may have been connected to his suffering, we don't know for sure - but Jesus dealt with the primary problem first, He dealt with his sin. You might be here this morning, and you're suffering in your life because of sin, because of habitual sin. It's not hard to work out: if you drink too much you suffer for it, if you smoke too much you suffer for it, if you gamble too much you suffer for it, if you sleep around too much you suffer for it. The wages of sin is death, and the way of the transgressor is hard, and my friend: it's no use looking to God and praying the odd prayer that God will take your problem away if you won't let Him take your sin away!

Jesus came to this man and dealt with the real problem. Can you see him rising? Lifting his bed, the crowd 'Ooohhing' and 'Aahhing', the four looking down from the hole in the roof 'Yahooing', jeering! Do you think the man danced? Probably, and skipped out of the door! Did the crowd follow him as he waltzed down the road home in joy, and shouting to the glory and praise of God? Because it was more than a bed he carried out of that house that day, or even a new body, he was born again because Jesus has the authority on the earth to forgive sins. His body would decay one day again and lie on a similar bed, but now his heart was new and there was a well of water springing up unto eternal life. My friend today, whoever you are, you can go out of this same house with the same Jesus, and the same power, and the same joy, and the same life by the same way: faith.

Have you turned from your sin? You say: 'I haven't got the power', He'll give you the power to do it if you're willing. Have you believed in the Lord Jesus, and the Lord Jesus alone, and said: 'Lord, I'm sorry for my sin, and I want You to save me, save me now'? Do that today, by faith, sincerely from your heart, and He will forgive your sins, for He alone has the power.
Believer this morning, this is exactly how we must confidently serve others, with the knowledge that Christ has power on earth to forgive sins. Let me leave you with His parting words to His disciples, He said unto them: 'All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world'.

We might have to expend our energies, we might have to climb uncomfortable dizzy heights, we might have to cooperate with others we don't agree with fully, we might be self-conscious, we might be embarrassed, people might think we're mad, they might even think we're doing things wrong, we might have to be sacrificial and make difficult decisions - but that's why God's word says: 'Be content with what things you have'. What do we have? The Lord has said: 'I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee. So, go', Jesus says, 'make disciples, and whatever you lose, I'm with you always'. Is that enough? You see, that's the problem for us: that's not enough - it ought to be enough. It was enough for four soul-winners who saw this man experience the forgiveness of his sins.

Lord, give us a faith that can be seen, give us faith with works, works of faith - not in the flesh, not legalistic works, but works that are inspired by Your Spirit, works that You have taught us are foreordained from the beginning of time for us to do after our salvation. So, help us to be open and willing, and waiting to find out what they are, and do as occasion serves us in order to bring lost men and women and boys and girls to the feet of the Lord Jesus to experience the power and authority that He has to forgive sins. Lord, if there is someone who has never had their sins forgiven, and they're with us now, may the Lord Jesus say to them: 'Thy sins be forgiven thee'. Amen.
N ow let’s turn in our New Testaments to Mark chapter 2, and we are looking this
morning at 'The Saviour To Sinners' found recorded in verses 13-17. Mark chapter 2
verse 13: "And he went forth again by the sea side; and all the multitude resorted unto
him, and he taught them. And as he passed by, he saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the
receipt of custom, and said unto him, Follow me. And he arose and followed him. And it came
to pass, that, as Jesus sat at meat in his house, many publicans and sinners sat also together
with Jesus and his disciples: for there were many, and they followed him. And when the
scribes and Pharisees saw him eat with publicans and sinners, they said unto his disciples,
How is it that he eateth and drinketh with publicans and sinners? When Jesus heard it, he
saith unto them, They that are whole have no need of the physician, but they that are sick: I
came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance".

Last week we entered chapter 2, and I think I said to you that from chapter 2 verse 1 to
around chapter 3 verse 6 each account of the Lord Jesus moving in Palestine is marked and
tinged with controversy, and that is the particular note that is struck right throughout these
five records. The reason being that Jesus and His disciples are challenging the Pharisees'
norm, their unwritten rules, their interpretations of the law, and their particular interpretive
traditions. Because of that the Pharisees challenged Jesus and His disciples, and in this
account they are challenging Him for eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners in

Now, what was Jesus doing with a bunch of tax collectors and sinners in Levi the tax
collectors' house? Well, simply He was there because He had called Levi, and we saw in
verses 13 and 14. He had said 'Follow me', and Levi followed, and Levi welcomed the Lord
Jesus into his home, and served the Lord Jesus there. It’s interesting, isn't it? That's the way
we all should be when Jesus calls us. When He calls, we should follow; and when we follow,
we should be welcoming the Lord Jesus into our lives and into our homes, and we ought to be
serving Him there just as Levi did.

Now Jesus' behaviour caused a storm. It was unthinkable for a rabbi, or even any decent Jew,
to frequent such a home, and pow-wow with a rabble like these tax collectors. So the
Pharisees were aghast, and they asked the disciples, not having the guts to ask Jesus
themselves, verse 16: 'Why does He eat with tax collectors and sinners?'. Now you ought to
be asking the question: why was it such a big thing to the Pharisees to see Jesus and the
disciples eating with this motley crew? So I have to tell you a little bit about tax collectors,
and why they were so despised in Jesus' day.

The title 'tax collector' became euphemistic for the scum of the earth. Though the Lord Jesus,
of course, would not have subscribed such a view to a tax collector, even the Lord Jesus
understood how tax collectors were seen in His generation. For in Matthew 18, when He
addresses His disciples concerning future church discipline, He says in verse 17: 'And if he
shall neglect to hear them', that is the offender, 'tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to
hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican', a tax collector. So
the Lord Jesus understood that a tax collector was seen as an outcast of society, but why were these so despised? Well, the Romans in the Roman Empire collected taxes of the nations in their empire through a system that was called 'tax farming'. What was that? Well, it was a bit similar to the farming out of franchises, like filling stations, or fast-food restaurants and newsagents. The Roman government would have given a district a fixed tax figure, and then they would have sold the right to collect those taxes to the highest bidder.

So the buyer was to hand over the assessed figures that the Roman government set every year, but they were allowed to keep anything that they had collected over and above that assessed, fixed figure. Here's where the problem came, because most of the ordinary Jewish people weren't given a record of what they were expected to pay in the Roman taxes, so there was great potential for the tax collector to tell them a figure that was extortionate over the figure that was due. Now the system in Palestine at that particular stage consisted of two groups of taxes. The first was stated taxes, that comprised of poll tax - men aged 14 to 65, women from 12 to 65, had to pay simply for breathing. That was very unpopular, that's why Margaret Thatcher became so unpopular not so long ago, because of this poll tax that taxed you just for being alive. Then there was another stated tax, a ground tax, and that required 1/10 of all grain, 1/5 of wine and oil production to be given over. In some places there was also exacted a tax on fish, and that possibly was the case here in Capernaum where the fishing industry was very strong.

Not only was there the poll tax and the ground tax, but there was an income tax that came to about 1% on all that you earned. Now in those stated taxes there wasn't much room for extortion on the part of the tax collector, but where he could fiddle the figures a little bit was in the second type of tax, and that was duties. This was wide open to abuse. There were separate taxes for using roads, there were taxes for docking in the harbours, there was a sale tax on certain items sold, as well as import and export duties - and believe it or not, taxes were even paid on carts. Even a wheel on a cart, a rickety old cart being pushed down a road, could be taxed by a tax collector.

So envisage this: you're wondering down the road with your wee bag of shopping on your cart, and all of a sudden you meet a tax collector. He stops you and he asks you to empty the bags and see what you're buying, and unpack your big bundle, perhaps, on your back - and he charges you anything that he wants. A figure comes into his mind, he charges you. Now if you can't pay it, do you know what he does? He says: 'Oh, I'll lend you the money', and then he gives you the money and he puts extortionate interest on it, and therefore you are in his pockets. These tax collectors were trained extortionists, and you can imagine how they attracted a criminal element right away. Most tax collectors were thugs.

So we can see why they were despised. First of all they were dishonest individuals. Most collected far more than they were required to pay the Romans. So a Jewish tax collector was not only siding with the enemy, the Romans, but further oppressing his own people by lining his pockets in the process of helping the enemy. All that a loanshark means to us today, is what a tax collector was in Jesus' day. John the Baptist recognized the extortion of the tax collectors. In fact, when we look at Luke chapter 3 and verses 12-13, we read these words: 'Then came also publicans to John the Baptist to be baptized, and said unto him, Master, what shall we do? And he said unto them, Exact no more than that which is appointed you'. Don't rip off the people!

Now a great illustration of the type of extortion that a tax collector was guilty of is found in the character of Zaccheus, and he was a chief tax collector. He was a boss with other tax
collectors below him. He amassed a considerable wealth in the Jericho area, and the reason why we know this is that in Luke 19 where we have the account of his conversion, his statement to the Lord Jesus of repentance is amounting to an admission of the vast extortionate practices that he was involved in. Look at verse 8: 'Zacchaeus stood, and said unto the Lord: Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have taken any thing from any man by false accusation, I restore him fourfold'. Now that implies that he could restore him fourfold. Matthew Henry, the Puritan, in his old commentary says: 'A faithful, fair dealing publican was so rare, that even at Rome one Sabenus, who kept a clean reputation in that office, was after his death honored with this inscription on his grave: Here lies an honest publican'. It was hard, yea even impossible, to find an honest publican - that's why they were despised: because they were dishonest.

But not only were they despised because of dishonesty, they were also disloyal. You see, the provinces of the empire were considered by Rome as booty. They plundered physically those nations by their armies, but they also plundered them financially by tax collectors. So for a Jew to be a tax collector in Palestine was to be a traitor, to be a defector, a turncoat, a collaborator with the occupier. Now you will know, I'm sure, that the bond between Jew and Jew is usually far more close than it is between members of other races, since the Jew is usually isolated and persecuted for his nationality and his religion. So you can understand how awful it was for other Jews to see a man of their own nation siding with the enemy to rip them off. They were seen, as one has said, as lackeys of the Romans, much as the French hated Nazi collaborators during the war.

In the eyes of the community this disgrace extended to your whole family. So the likelihood is that if you were a tax collector, your family hated you as well because of the shame that you brought upon them. Tax collectors, therefore, were hated and despised because they were dishonest and disloyal, but thirdly they were defiled. You see, a tax collector was regarded in the Jewish religion as ceremonially unclean on account, first of all, of his continual contact with Gentile sinners, and also for his need to work on the Sabbath day collecting taxes. So the rabbis taught, in their religious interpretation of the laws of Judaism, that you should not talk, walk, and above all you should not eat with a tax collector. Now I hope you can understand the import of what we read in verse 16, that 'when the scribes and Pharisees saw him eat with publicans and sinners, they said unto his disciples, How is it that he eateth and drinketh with publicans and sinners?'. They could not understand Jesus.

Now the response that Jesus gives is the core, I believe, of the truth that the Holy Spirit wants us to get in his account. The truth is, verse 17, Jesus reacts and says after hearing what they say or perceiving what they have said: 'They that are whole have no need of the physician, but they that are sick: I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance'. What was His answer? Jesus is come to be a Saviour to sinners. Now if you hear nothing else that I say to you this morning, hear that: Jesus has come to be a Saviour to sinners. So therefore His point is: 'Who else would you expect me to be with?'.

In verse 17 Jesus identifies two types of people: the well and the sick. What He is doing is, He is saying that the well don't need a doctor, do they? But the sick do! The logic of His illustration is simply: because doctors exist to help sick folk, generally speaking doctors are surrounded and taken up in the company of sick folk. Therefore it follows that it is the sick folk that get the help of the doctors. He was obviously illustrating how the Pharisees considered themselves to be the righteous ones. They were whole, they were well, in other words they were without need of any help and assistance. This was righteousness used in this verse in an ironic sense, Jesus is not talking about people who are genuinely good, but people
who think they are good because of their self-righteousness. Also of course the Pharisees considered the tax collectors sinners, they were the sick ones. We feel that it is implied that the tax collectors themselves considered that they were sick - I think that's a vital point: they saw themselves the same way as the Pharisees did, as sick and in need of help. But here's the vital point: the Pharisees considered themselves well, when really they were sick. The sinners considered themselves sick, so Jesus made them well, because - here it is - Jesus has come to be a Saviour to, what? Hello? Sinners.

Now this is evidenced in this portion of scripture over and over again and again, but there are four things that I want to highlight where we find proof that Jesus has come to be a Saviour to sinners. The first is in Levi's conversion. Levi is sitting at the Tollgate on the great West Road from Damascus to the Mediterranean, and this would have been also the customs office at Capernaum. It was the landing place for many ships that traversed the Sea of Galilee, or coasted from town to town. So here he is, a tax collector collecting taxes for Herod Antipas, and the verse says that he was sitting, verse 14: 'sitting at the receipt of custom' - that is the Greek word 'epi', which you could translate properly as 'on'. He was sitting on the seat of custom, and this was an elevated platform or bench which was the principal feature of the toll office. So when you were getting to the toll, like you do on the motorway down south or across the water, you see this person on an elevated platform - well, this was greater than this, these people were sitting up high and you had to pay them your money if you were wanting to get through.

You would have seen there, up in that high place, a despised Jew; one who was despised because he loved money more than God, he loved money more than morals, he loved money more than his religion, he loved money more than his fellow countrymen - yet this is the man Jesus approaches and calls! 'Follow me!' - that was more than an invitation, that was an imperative statement. It means that He is issuing a command: 'Follow me!', and the verb 'follow' is in the present tense, so that means that Jesus was commanding Levi to begin an action and continue that action habitually. If I could put it like this, He says: 'Start following me, and continue as a habit of life to follow me'. This wasn't a wee dander that Jesus was inviting Levi to take with Him, or 'Look into these affairs my life, and my miracles, and my words, and see what your conclusion is' - no, no! Follow me now, for the rest of your days, follow me! Do you know what it literally means? The Greek language indicates that this command was 'Follow with me', 'Follow with me' - so the idea is not 'I'll lead you, and you follow behind', but 'Be my companion'. Jesus is literally saying to Levi: 'Accompany me'. Now imagine this, feel the weight of this: the perfect, spotless, incarnate Son of God is saying to a despised, dishonest, disloyal, defiled tax collector, 'Accompany me'. 'Be in the same way as me', is how it could be rendered, 'Walk the same road as me'.

Luke tells us in his record of this event that Levi left everything behind at the seat of custom, and followed Jesus. He left his luxury, his affluence, his sin, all those things that he was accustomed to, to walk the road that Jesus walked - a road of suffering, of holiness, of separation and self-sacrifice. Now here is the salient point: Jesus has come to save sinners, but Jesus calls sinners to repentance. They have to leave their sin, and leave those selfish things that keep them from Christ. Matthew left them, and in a moment - I'm sure Mark loves this fact - immediately. I wonder how close you are following Christ today? Do you know the evidence that you have really started to follow Christ in the beginning is how you're following Christ now? That's the evidence: examine yourself now, and see whether you be in the faith.

Here is Jesus wanting a man that nobody else wants. Here is Jesus wanting as His companion somebody that everybody thinks they are justified in hating as an enemy! Why? Jesus makes
him whole, though he is sick. Now of course you should know by now that we're talking about Matthew, we know that from other gospel records. Possibly, just like Saul, and like Simon, Levi's name was changed to Matthew as Saul was to Paul, and Simon to Peter - by Jesus, perhaps. Do you know what Matthew means? 'Gift of God', that's what it means. This man who was a stigma, a shame upon his people, is going to be a gift of God to them - how do we know that? Because he penned Matthew's gospel, the gospel to the Jews.

Jesus is come to save sinners, and then secondly we see it evidenced in Jesus' company. Levi organises a meal in his house to introduce his friends to Jesus. This wasn't modern evangelism by the way, this is happening now in the first century. So here is a crowd that Jesus could not have contacted in the synagogue because they wouldn't be allowed in, and He meets them in Levi's house. It says that 'He sat at meat with them' in the Authorised Version. Now that could be translated, 'He reclined at the table with them', that is the literal sense. There He is reclining in the Eastern way at the table with them - now what does that convey to you? I'll tell you what it conveys to me: He was comfortable with them. I'm not saying He was comfortable with their way of life, but He was comfortable to be there. The danger is that as Christians today - if you like alliteration you'll like this, there's five C's in this one - we can live in cloistered Christian communities of comfort and convenience. Cloistered Christian communities of comfort and convenience, communities where we don't need to befriend non-Christians in order to introduce them to Jesus, where we hardly ever have a non-Christian in our home unless he's doing some DIY work around the house - and then as soon as we can get it done, pay him the money and get him out.

Jesus never partook in any of these sinner's sins, and we must say that - but we must be like the Lord Jesus Christ and get among people like this, who Jesus was among. I don't know who ever taught this years ago: 'When you get saved, young man, young woman, you need to give up your non-Christian friends' - that is nonsense! Now yes, you need to be careful who your best friend is, and who your peers are, and who your role models are, and who is rubbing off on you - but if you give up all your non-Christian friends, who are you going to bring to Christ? Sinners were there because, it says of them too, 'They followed Him'. Now here's the big question that I'm asking myself, and I want you to ask yourself, and we need to ask as a church: why is it that the crowd followed Jesus to Levi's house, and the Pharisees didn't? I mean to converse with Him, and follow Him in the sense that Levi and the rest of them followed Him. Because Jesus came to be the Saviour of sinners, and these sinners knew that they were sick - the Pharisees didn't!

Now here's the third evidence: the fact that Jesus came to be the Saviour of sinners is evidenced in the scribal controversy that was there. 'He eats and drinks with publicans and sinners', the Pharisees said to the disciples. Do you know what 'Pharisee' means? It literally means 'detached one'. These Pharisees were religious separatists, and they separated from all those who were not their co-religionists, or hadn't the particular rabbinical interpretation of the law that they had. In other words, they were self-righteous, they were people who majored on externals, what you did outwardly rather than what was going on internally in the heart. They were following the letter of the law, but there was no spirit of the law in their actions or their words. They were legalists, they felt that they could earn God's favour by their righteous living, and because of that they became a 'holier than thou' crowd with not a little bit of arrogance.

Now Kent Hughes in his commentary says these words which I think are very apt for us today: 'Perhaps none of us espouse such pharisaical beliefs, in fact we loathe them, but many of us live them out nevertheless. We come to Christ and in our desire to be godly we seek out
people like us. Ultimately we arrange our lives so that we are with non-believers as little as possible. We attend Bible Studies that are 100% Christian, a Sunday School that is 100% Christian, prayer meetings that are 100% Christian. We play tennis with Christians, and eat dinner with Christians. We have Christian doctors, Christian dentists, Christian plumbers, Christian veterinarians, and even our dogs are Christians! The result is that we pass by hundreds without ever noticing them, or positively influencing them for Christ. None of us are Pharisees philosophically, but we can be practically. Do loansharks, cheats, prostitutes flock to my house, to my church? How would I react if they did?'

Did not Jesus pray in John 17 and verse 15: 'I pray not that thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil'? We are meant to be in the midst of the world, in the midst of worldly people, praying to God that He will keep us from the evil, but that we might win some from the fire. C. T. Studd, that old missionary, said: 'Some want to live within the sound of church or chapel bell, I want to run a rescue shop within a yard of hell'.

Jesus came to be as Saviour to sinners, and then fourthly and finally this is evidenced in His divine commission, the commission that Christ was given. He says: 'I came because the whole have no need of a physician, but they that are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance' - verse 17. 'I didn't come to people who are whole', that is 'people who are strong' literally is the word, 'people who are able' - that's people who think they are able, think they are strong, think they're righteous. Now don't get Jesus wrong here, it's not that He has no use for moral people, or He doesn't like good citizens and upstanding individuals - but He's talking here about people who think that their morality will commend them to God! Jesus can't do anything with somebody like that.

He came for the sick, that is the same word as 'diseased' in chapter 1 verse 32, literally 'those who are having it bad', those who are having it bad. Sinners. Now when this word 'sinner' is used here, it doesn't mean essentially a transgressor of the law, it means an outcast, a notorious individual in the society, a stigmatised person - those that the Pharisees and the religion of the day despised. Those are the ones who Jesus came to save!

Now, let me show you in the closing moments how Christ Himself illustrated this. I could tell you a load of stories about this, that and the other, but He told plenty of stories about this, and we need to see them again. Look with me at Luke 18 and verse 10: 'Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners' - was he looking at the tax collector? - 'unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess. And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner. I tell you', Jesus said, 'this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted'.

Turn with me then to Matthew 21, to another story, verse 28: 'But what think ye? A certain man had two sons; and he came to the first, and said, Son, go work to day in my vineyard. He answered and said, I will not: but afterward he repented, and went. And he came to the second, and said likewise. And he answered and said, I go, sir: and went not. Whether of them twain did the will of his father? They say unto him, The first. Jesus saith unto them, Verily I say unto you, That the publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you'.

108
Luke 15 is a portion of Scripture that we all know, many verses of it off by heart. Look at the introduction, perhaps, to this record which we ignore half the time, verse 1 of chapter 15: 'Then drew near unto him all the publicans and sinners for to hear him. And the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them. And', to that backdrop, 'he spake this parable unto them, saying, What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it?'. Then we read: 'I say unto you, that likewise', verse 7, 'joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine righteous, self-righteous, which need no repentance'.

Look at verse 8, another parable, a woman having ten pieces of silver and loses one, she cleans the house till she finds it - verse 10: 'Likewise, I say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth'. Then the most famous of all, verse 11: 'A certain man had two sons' - now we love the prodigal. He goes into the far country and he spends everything in riotous living, wine, women and song. We preach the gospel over and over on this and it's wonderful, but we miss out the half of the story - the elder brother! Verse 25: 'His elder son was in the field: and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard musick and dancing. And he called one of the servants, and asked: What are these things?'. Like the Pharisees: 'Why is He eating with publicans and sinners?'. 'And he said unto him, Thy brother is come; and thy father hath killed the fatted calf, because he hath received him safe and sound. And he was angry, and would not go in: therefore came his father out, and intreated him. And he answering said to his father, Lo, these many years do I serve thee' - what did he see himself as? He was worthy, he was honourable of his father's goodness. How did the prodigal see himself? Look at verse 19: 'I am no more worthy to be called thy son', verse 21, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son' - what is it? It's all an illustration to tell us that Jesus came to be a Saviour to sinners.

That's why Matthew says in his account of this story: 'Go ye and learn', he records Jesus saying to the Pharisees, 'what that meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice: for I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance'. Now, so what? What's my point? If you are saved this morning, you are converted, you need to revel and rejoice in the wondrous grace of God as a believer that He calls sinners like you. If you can't see yourself as a sinner, you're not one of the saved. If you are not converted today, you need to repent and believe this gospel.

Can I read three portions of Scripture for the believers chiefly, but the unbelievers can enter into this as well, and revel in it. In everything that we have said as a backdrop to these verses in this message, listen to God's word, all three portions are from the writings of Paul. Romans: 'For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die. But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us'. 'Moreover the law entered, that the offence might abound. But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound: That as sin hath reigned unto death, even so might grace reign through righteousness unto eternal life by Jesus Christ our Lord'.

Listen to 1 Timothy: 'This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners', Paul says, 'of whom I am chief. Howbeit for this cause I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might shew forth all longsuffering, for a pattern to them which should hereafter believe on him to life everlasting'. Can I say this: I have
scoured the Scriptures, and I can't find one clear account of Jesus calling directly a Pharisee, other than Paul the apostle - is that not interesting?

Finally Titus 3: 'For we ourselves also were sometimes foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving divers lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful, and hating one another. But after that the kindness and love of God our Saviour toward man appeared, Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost; Which he shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour; That being justified by his grace, we should be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life'.

Can you not shout this morning: 'Hallelujah! What a Saviour!'. Is He your Saviour? Believer, is He your cherished Saviour?

Lord, I have a terrible fear in my heart for myself, that I have lost the wonder of the grace of God to me - and I don't know if it's true of all the folk gathered here, but I suspect it might be. Lord, may You thrill us afresh with the amazing wonder of the grace of God in Christ, that He can come to tax collectors and command them individually to follow Him - yet He leaves all the religious folk, and ignores them. Lord, help us to see ourselves as the tax collector, as the sinner, not just at the moment of our conversion but every day from it; that we might always resort to the Great Physician, the Saviour of sinners, for our wholeness and our well-being. Save those who feel their sickness here today, for Christ's sake, Amen.
We're turning in our New Testament to the gospel of Mark chapter 2 as we continue our studies in Mark's account of the gospel of our Lord Jesus. We're beginning to read this morning from verse 18 through to verse 23, and I've entitled the message today 'Feast or Famine, Old or New'.

We take up our reading at verse 18: "And the disciples of John", that is, John the Baptist, "and of the Pharisees used to fast: and they come and say unto him", that is, Jesus, "Why do the disciples of John and of the Pharisees fast, but thy disciples fast not? And Jesus said unto them, Can the children of the bridechamber", or the guests of the bridechamber, "fast, while the bridegroom is with them? as long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. But the days will come, when the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and then shall they fast in those days. No man also seweth a piece of new cloth on an old garment: else the new piece that filled it up taketh away from the old, and the rent is made worse. And no man putteth new wine into old bottles: else the new wine doth burst the bottles, and the wine is spilled, and the bottles will be marred: but new wine must be put into new bottles", and we'll end our reading just there at verse 22.

Now, Jesus is in the centre of controversy once more. You remember the previous question He was asked that we studied last week in the preceding verses to the ones we read: 'Why is it that your Master eats with publicans and sinners?'. So that was a question regarding the company that our Lord Jesus was keeping. Now the present question for our consideration today raises the issue of why Jesus was enjoying the company of these publicans and sinners so much, having such a good time feasting in their presence, with those type of people at the table. You remember how abhorrent that was, we saw last week, to these Pharisees.

Now specifically here it is John the Baptist's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees, which really means the followers of pharisaical teaching, who ask why Jesus isn't fasting, why Jesus' disciples weren't fasting - when John's disciples fast and the Pharisees' followers fast, why did they not fast? That's their question, verse 18, 'Why do the disciples of John and of the Pharisees fast, but thy disciples fast not?'. Now if you look at verse 18, we read that it says the disciples of John and the Pharisees 'used to fast'. Now I don't want to get technical, but in the Greek language that carries the idea that they may well have been observing a fast at this very moment. That's very important to our understanding of this event.

Now we believe that the Lord Jesus is most likely still in Levi's house - that is Levi, Matthew we know, who was a publican and a tax collector, and we saw last week all that that meant, how despised they were - and now He is in Levi's house, having been invited to socialise with some of his companions and colleagues in the trade. The Pharisees have seen Him there, and now they are witnessing Him with this motley crew feasting on a day when they, possibly, were fasting. Now I'm reading between the lines, I know, but it is very likely that this event was taking place on one of the weekly fast days. Now let me give you some background regarding this practice of fasting. The only time we find a compulsory fast ordered in the Old Testament is for the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, when the Jews were commemorating the
day when their sins are forgiven, and hopefully, by faith, looking to God for forgiveness of sins on that day. But fasting had evolved to the stage where in Jesus' day the stricter Jews fasted twice in a week: Monday and Thursday from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. So after 6 p.m. they could eat all they wanted. In Luke 18 verse 12, in the parable of the Pharisee and the publican, a tax collector, you remember that the Pharisee declared, self-righteously, 'I fast twice in the week'. So this was a common practice of the Pharisees and of their followers.

Now let me say before I go on any further, in qualification to anything that will be said, the Lord Jesus was not anti-fasting. He believed in fasting, for He fasted Himself, He taught fasting - indeed, in this very portion, He implies that His own disciples one day, when He is taken away from them, will fast. But Jesus' protest here, that throws Him into the midst of this controversy with the Pharisees and the disciples of John, is at the abuse of the practice of fasting among Jews in His day. You see it was exercised in an ostentatious way. What I mean by that, I'll just quote for you the words of our Lord in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6, and He takes up more than just fasting, giving alms and praying, how they were done hypocritically. 'Take heed', He says, 'that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven'. Matthew 6:6: 'But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly'. Then, related to fasting in verses 16 to 18 of chapter 6 of Matthew, 'Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; That thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly'.

The Lord Jesus is not objecting to fasting, just as He is not objecting to praying in the Sermon on the Mount, or giving to charity in the sense of the Lord's work and good works; but He is objecting to how these Pharisees had extracted all semblance of joy from the religious experience of praying, almsgiving and fasting. You see, when these Pharisees fasted they pretentiously would have whitened their faces with powder to look pale. They would have dishevelled their hair and worn tattered clothing - and I think, as I look out, maybe some of you have followed that tradition this morning! - but they wanted to declare to others that they were mournful, religious individuals, they were morally and religiously sober. Monday and Thursday, the fast days, were also market days - now do you know what that means? That they doctored themselves up to show that they were fasting, and they went to the marketplace to show everybody they were fasting, the day when most people would be gathered together at the one spot - the greatest exposure!

Now, thanks to the legalism that was imposed by the Pharisees, the Jewish religion in many respects had become a burdensome and joyless thing. These poor Jewish people were crushed by rules and regulations that Jesus even said Himself were impossible to obey, Matthew 23:4: 'they bind', that is, the Pharisees, 'heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers'. So I think you can see now why the Pharisees were so appalled that Jesus was feasting on what, for them, was a fast day. Now you can see also why Jesus and His disciples were not fasting, but feasting, they were making a point! To enforce this point and hammer it home, the Lord Jesus uses three illustrations to contrast dead legalistic mournful religious form with the living liberty of the joy of grace that is found in Him.

Here are the three illustrations: the first is of wedding, in verses 19 and 20; the second is of
clothing in verse 21; and the third is of wine in verse 22. Let's look at the first illustration Jesus uses. Let me say first that in all these three illustrations, it is striking how earthly Jesus' parables really are - they come with such force because of the domestic nature of them. Effectively what the Lord Jesus is saying here in verses 19 and 20, before we look at the detail of it, is: life in God is meant to be like a wedding, not like a funeral. That's what He's saying. It's meant to be like a feast, not a famine. The emphasis in Jesus' point, before we delve into it and perhaps miss the wood for the trees, is the element of joy. There was no joy in this fasting of the Pharisees. But there is another aspect to what Jesus is going to say, for in chapter 1 verse 15 you will remember He emphasised that the time is fulfilled now, the kingdom of God is at hand now, repent ye and believe the gospel. The Lord's ministry was coming after John the Baptist, and He was saying that the Messiah you've been waiting for and praying for, the Bridegroom has come, so all your waiting is over, I'm in your midst!

There could be many explanations why John's disciples were fasting. It may be because John was in prison. It may even be because he had already been beheaded, but I feel that they were fasting because they were still waiting for the Messiah, they were still waiting for justice in Israel, for deliverance from God. Jesus is coming and saying: 'Why are you still waiting and fasting for this?'. You remember, of course, in Matthew 11 they asked the question of Jesus, supposedly sent by John: 'Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?' - and they had failed to see, move from their master's ministry of preparing the way of the Lord, to recognizing that the Lord was in their midst and celebrating His arrival and His presence.

You remember John saw himself as the friend of the Bridegroom, and perhaps these disciples of John failed to see themselves as the guests of the Bridegroom, because He was there. Also John was an austere man, he was somewhat of a recluse, he was in the old order of the prophet Elijah. You remember in Matthew 11, Jesus says 'John came not eating and drinking', he was a man who was in a kind of asceticism - and I'm not in any way demeaning that or condemning it, far from it - but Jesus ate and drank with men, He mixed with sinners, so much so that He says in Matthew 11, 'You say of me that I am a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners'. You see, Jesus was something different, something different completely from the old order, He was something absolutely and dramatically new.

He accepted meals, He played with children, He interacted with outcasts, and it appears that John's disciples made the same mistake as the Pharisees: they may not have been as hypocritical as the Pharisees, but they still failed to enter into the joy of having the Bridegroom with them. They failed to see that what they were fasting for was there, like the Jews today. The point that I believe Jesus is bringing to us is: they were not rejoicing in Christ's coming. In verse 17 the Lord Jesus, we saw last week, said effectively: 'Do you not expect doctors to be around patients? That's why I, as a Saviour, am around sinners'. Now He is saying in the same ilk: 'Do you not expect wedding guests to be feasting, not fasting?'.

Now, after a Jewish wedding, the couple didn't go away on a honeymoon, they stayed at home. For a week or so there was open house, and there was continual feasting and rejoicing, and the bride and groom were treated like king and queen, and even at times were crowned. That was a very special time, because in a hard-wrought life like they had in that particular era, this wedding was the happiest week in a man or a woman's life. Because of that, even Rabbis recognized it and gave an exclusion from some of the rigid laws. There was a rabbinic ruling that said that all in attendance on the bridegroom, listen, were relieved of all religious observances which would lessen their joy. So wedding guests were excluded, exempted from fasting, even on fasting days! This is Jesus' point - now He does qualify it and say that the days will come when I am taken from the guests, and then My disciples will fast. The word
'taken' there, 'taken away', implies violence, I believe He's talking about His death.

Now some think then that Jesus was prescribing fasting between His death and His resurrection, and they say that there is no need to fast now because we have the Bridegroom with us in Spirit. That might seem plausible as we look only at this text, but the fact of the matter is that it doesn't square with the rest of the New Testament. In Acts 13 we have the separating of Barnabas and Saul for the work of the gospel, and the apostle's fasted before it; Acts 14, before they ordained the elders they fasted. Paul said himself in 2 Corinthians 10 that he was in fastings often. So the Lord was not scrubbing out the practice of fasting. Here's how Kenneth Wuest translates this verse, that is verse 19: 'The sons of the bridechamber are not able to be fasting while the bridegroom is with them, are they?'.

So what the Lord is doing is He is contrasting two spiritual experiences, and I believe they're the only two spiritual experiences that exist today. What is that? Feasting or famine. You either subscribe to the famine of legalism in every form: works religion, adhering to rules and regulations to earn favour with God; or you're enjoying the feast of God's grace when you realise that Christ is so great, having encountered Him, and you realise what His grace has done through His death and resurrection and His gift of forgiveness. But you can even practise fasting now and still feast at the same time because you're feasting on the Living Bread, you're drinking at the Fountainhead! They hadn't discovered that, you see.

Now John the Baptist understood it, even though his disciples, perhaps, had erred at this time. Though he was of the old order, you remember he said in John chapter 3 and verse 29: 'He that hath the bride is the bridegroom', pointing to Christ, not himself, 'but the friend of the bridegroom', John, 'which stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice: this my joy therefore is fulfilled'. Why? Because he was in Christ's presence. Now, everything that the Lord Jesus is saying here is telling us at least in our era that the Christian attitude to life ought to be one of joy - a feast! Yet some Christians look as if they've read their rich aunt's will and discovered she left everything to the cat! In church, that is the way some of you look! I know I look like that at times. I've even heard it said that because there is no record of Jesus smiling or laughing in the Gospels, that we ought to not laugh or smile! I think there's many instances of humour related to the Lord Jesus, and joy, but there are some people even who call themselves Christians, and they espouse this idea that to be spiritual you must be uncomfortable or at least look uncomfortable all the time!

So Jesus presses this home: the Christian life, the life with God, the life of grace is meant to be a feast, not a famine! Is your soul feasting on Christ? Here's the second illustration, of clothing. Verse 21: 'No man also seweth a piece of new cloth on an old garment: else the new piece that filled it up taketh away from the old, and the rent is made worse'. Now that word 'new' there in verse 21 could be translated, and is by the English Standard Version, as 'unshrunk'. 'No man puts an unshrunk piece of cloth on an old garment'. Now you've got to understand the process of the fuller's job in Palestine. Maybe you don't know what a fuller is? Sometimes people think of it as a launderette - well, not quite, it was also a person that treated clothing. The fuller's trade was to take a new piece of cloth that had been just manufactured, and he had to make it usable and durable. He did that by putting it through a process of cleansing, then he would shrink it, then he would thicken it through use of moisture, heat and pressure - and the point of it all was, if you had a hole in your coat or jacket and you put a new patch on, when the rain fell and hit it would shrink and then there would be another greater rip. But if the cloth was treated, well, that wouldn't happen.

What Jesus is saying here is: 'If I take this new cloth, the preaching of grace that I am
bringing to you, and try to patch up your old dead religion' - and the word 'old' here for the old cloth is not old in point of time as years old, but it means old in point of use - 'Your worn out cloth, it will be torn apart!'. Jesus' point is this: 'I have not come to do a patch up job on Judaism. My intention in coming into this world is not to prop up dead religion, but to bring a new cloth'. It is the cloth of grace, and it can't patch up the worn out garment of Mosaic law and adherence to the rules and regulations of the Old Testament. The law was given by Moses, John the gospel writer said, but grace came through Jesus Christ.

Now here's the problem: some people attempt to retain the Mosaic law and put on it a patch of grace. What I mean by that is: they mix law and grace. They think that they're going to get to God by keeping the commandments. Now don't misunderstand me: the commandments are good, and the commandments are a schoolmaster to bring us to Christ, to show us that we cannot keep the commandments - but the commandments do not equate grace. Jesus is saying: if you try and take the old garment of the law and patch it up with a new patch of Jesus' grace, both will be destroyed, both will cease to be used according to their original purpose.

Now I can give you a living example of this in the New Testament, and that is the doctrine of the Judaisers in the book of Galatians. These were men who believed in Christ, believed the good news that He had come to die and rose again, but they were wanting to reconcile Judaism with Christianity. They were wanting to circumcise people as well as baptise them. They wanted to keep the law alive, and the ceremonies and ordinances, and they wanted to place it side by side with the Gospel. That has always been an error, even in the church. Not long after the Apostles died, some tried to mingle platonic philosophy with the gospel. Some tried later on to make appealing to the heathen the Christian faith, and so they borrowed forms and processions and vestments from the temples of heathen gods - and we're left with Roman Catholicism today, trying to mix law with grace, untruth with truth. Jesus is saying in the context of dead old legalistic Judaism: there comes a time when the day of patching is ended. Patching is no more effective, recreating must now begin, and Jesus came to that conclusion in His day, Luther came to that conclusion concerning the church of Rome in his day, John Wesley came to that conclusion concerning Anglicanism in his day - what is it in our day?

I will apply this message a little bit later, but dead traditionalism and dead formalism is as rife today, even in evangelicalism, as it has ever been - and that is the reason why many people are robbed of their joy. It may well be that there are times when we try to patch and mend and adjust, when what is wanted is the complete abandoning of something that is worn out, and the acceptance of something that is new altogether. If you're here this morning and you're an unconverted person, you need to realise that you can't do a patch up job on your soul. You need the new garment of God's salvation - throw out your dirty rags that are filthy in God's sight, even your own righteousness is like that, and accept the garment of salvation that is a gift!

Let's move on to this third illustration which is wine. In verse 22: 'No man puts new wine into old bottles: else the new wine bursts the bottles, and the wine is spilled, and the bottles will be marred: but new wine must be put into new bottles'. Now that word 'bottle' there is not like your milk bottle, it's wineskins - that's what the writer is talking about. They were leather, made of animal skins, and because of that eventually, with age, they lost their ability to stretch. Now I could give a very apt illustration of that, but it maybe wouldn't be appropriate for folk with too many wrinkles and that! But it's just like - well, you know what I'm talking about! It loses its ability to stretch with age. What Jesus is saying is that if new wine is put
into them, pressure is built up within the wineskin by the fermentation of the wine, and the skin bursts - and then the skin is destroyed, the bottle is broke, and the wine spills and it's no use either.

Now what is Jesus talking about? The new wine is the joy and the power that Christ brings, and the old wineskins are the form and ritual of dead Judaism. What He is saying is that new wine needs new skins. His point is that there is no use for you disciples of John the Baptist, and for you followers of the Pharisees to put My disciples, Jesus says, under the bondage of sorrowful fasting as it has been practised in the past. It won't work, because the joy and effervescence of the new life in Christ must be allowed to spring forth, must be allowed to express itself! Can I say this to you today: Christianity has always suffered from man's attempt to mix it with legalism. The Lord taught on this portion of Scripture, categorically and explicitly, that the two don't mix - they don't mix! So stop trying to mix them! Jesus taught that legalism is a cancer that kills new life, and if you don't believe me you need to see the Gospels, and you need to see how serious this legalism was. Because of Christ's non-observance of these fast days, because He broke the pharisaical interpretation of the sabbath that we'll see in our next study in the following verses of this chapter, it was because of these things that verse 6 of chapter 3 says they began to devise a way, take counsel of how they might destroy Him! That's how serious legalism is: it leads you to extinguish the presence of Christ - and if you can't celebrate His presence, that's the only other alternative, you extinguish it, whether you're conscious of it or not.

Now I have heard it said, and I have said it: 'If it's new it's not true, and if it's true it's not new'. If it's new it's not true, and if it's true it's not new - now that is authentic and true in the sense that God is changeless, doctrines in the word of God are changeless. I hear people say: 'I'll never change, no change Jehovah knows' - I've got news for you: you aren't Jehovah. Waken up, you're not God, you've got to change, I've got to change. God's word never changes, doctrine never changes, but here's the problem: some can't distinguish between doctrine and practice. There are some very biblical practices here that we must never change, but there is a difference between principles and procedures; there's even a difference between doctrine and interpretation. In Jesus' day the Jewish pharisaical, and even John the Baptist's disciples' interpretation was stifling the new wine that was in Christ, the joy that came from it. It was having the potential of, one, destroying Judaism or, two, destroying the new wine. Jesus wasn't prepared to put His new wine into the old wineskins, new wine needs new skins, and dead religious forms of an old era will not suffice for a new life - that's what Christ is saying.

As one writer put it: 'The new wine of the new covenant stretches us to new limits. The inner pressure expels unneeded things and fills every aspect to new limits. So dynamic is the new life that the old wineskins of previous religious structures must give way' - and that's why we have the Christian church today, that's why we have the Protestant church, that's why the Methodist Church is still here and was ever here, that's why we've had the revivals: because men broke out of tradition when the new life pushed it out! Not modernism, not pandering to people's felt wants, no, that's not what I'm talking about.

Now let me apply this truth. First of all, these illustrations of the Lord Jesus: the wedding, the clothing and the wine tell us that salvation is of grace, not of the law. I say to you again this morning: you can't patch up your sinful life by adhering to the rules and regulations of old law in the Old Testament. Now someone might say: 'Ah, but hold on, Jesus said He came not to destroy the law but to fulfil it'. Well, you're right, Jesus wasn't against the law, He enshrined the law, He was the only man who kept the law - but you know there's two ways of replacing
a thing. For instance, take an acorn: you can get a hammer and smash it to smithereens - you can replace it with nothing by doing that - or you can stick it in the soil, and wait for the seasons to roll and see it grow into a mighty oak. That's what Jesus did with the law, He fulfilled it, He accomplished it so much so that God's law, that was written on pieces of stone that the Jews couldn't keep, the New Testament tells us is now written on our hearts - the new covenant. We have now the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus. That doesn't mean we go out and break all the commandments because we don't adhere to them any more, not in the slightest, it means we can actually live it by the power of the Spirit, not by legalism. That is what 2 Corinthians 5:17 means that it says: 'Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new' - that's what that verse means.

You need God's salvation, which is by grace, and I hope everybody here this morning has that. The second way to apply this is: false ecumenism is out. That's another way to apply this verse and these illustrations. In other words, you can't patch up dead religion, and therefore we should never be uniting with dead religion. We should only unite with those who have the truth of this new wine, this new cloth, that are rejoicing in the wedding feast that Christ has come, and there is no other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved. We must never water it down.

A third application is that legalism, traditionalism, formalism is out. That doesn't mean there aren't some good traditions, there are very good traditions and there are very biblical traditions that are derived from doctrine, but according to the Lord Jesus Christ: if anything that is man made or devised in the heart or mind of a man stifles new life, if any old form kills the new vibrant being that is in the new gospel of Jesus Christ, no matter how beloved it is to us, it must go! That's Christ's word.

The fourth application is: life, liberty and joy - whilst these other things are out - must be in. Is life, liberty and joy in you? Do you know what our problem is here? And it's mine too. We haven't lost the doctrine, but we've lost our joy - do you agree with me? The first Salvationists, The Salvation Army, used to jump for joy when they sang their hymns. It was because General Booth told them that when they felt the Spirit moving them, they could leap in a hymn or a prayer, and they did. Now I'm not prescribing that for you this morning, but all I'm saying is: there was something fresh. God was doing a new thing through them. I don't agree with a lot of their doctrines, but no one can say to me that God wasn't moving in the early days of the Salvation Army, and even moving today among some of them.

What God is saying through the Lord Jesus here is that there is a perpetual wedding joy with Christ for those who will have it: a feast, not a famine; new clothes, not patched up rags; new wine in new wineskins. Do you think it's a coincidence that the early church, in Acts chapter 2, were accused of being drunk? Is that a coincidence? Now they weren't rolling around, and barking, and roaring like a lion - but they were filled with so much joy that the people said: 'Nobody could be full at this time of the morning!', but they were filled with the Spirit of God! It told on their face, in the way they sang, in the way they preached, the way they prayed! We have lost this: Christ brings perpetual joy to those who take it and fight for it.

Let me ask you as I close: what is your reaction to this message? Maybe you'll carve it up with the roast at the dinner table, that's OK! But can I say to you this morning: if you're sitting there, and at any point, like me, you think, 'This is not appropriate' - that's what they said of what Jesus was doing. If you're sitting there thinking, 'Here, this is dangerous, because you don't know how people will take this on, you know' - that's what they said, 'This
is dangerous'. If you're saying: 'This is scandalous' - the Pharisees said it to the point of pulling our blessed Lord to death.

I am inviting you to exit, if you're in it, legalism to the glory of God with a leap and a bound, and sit with the Lord Jesus and join Him in the feast of joy with publicans and sinners. Leave the fast and formalism and dead religion, and know the joy of the Lord which is your strength. Have you got it? There's no joy in keeping rules, because you can't keep them, you'll always fail - but there is joy as a fruit of the Spirit, where you're not drunk with wine wherein is excess, but filled - that word means 'controlled constantly' - by the Spirit. Is it a feast or a famine? Is it the old, or is it the new?

Who of us can say, as David, 'As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God. My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God: when shall I come and appear before God'?

Father, help us to feed on Christ. Sometimes we can stand upon the correctness of our doctrine, the perfectness - we suppose - of our practice, and yet all these things are idols if they distract us from Christ, if they rob us of joy. Lord, give us, restore unto us the joy of our salvation. Amen.

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Now we're turning again to Mark's gospel, as we have been meditating these Sunday mornings, to chapter 2 this morning - and the title of my message, which will be taken from verses 23 to 28, is 'Lord Of The Sabbath'. So we begin to read at Mark chapter 2 verse 23: "And it came to pass, that he", the Lord Jesus, "went through the corn fields on the sabbath day; and his disciples began, as they went, to pluck the ears of corn. And the Pharisees said unto him, Behold, why do they on the sabbath day that which is not lawful? And he said unto them, Have ye never read what David did, when he had need, and was an hungry, he, and they that were with him? How he went into the house of God in the days of Abiathar the high priest, and did eat the shewbread, which is not lawful to eat but for the priests, and gave also to them which were with him? And he said unto them, The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath: Therefore the Son of man is Lord also of the sabbath".

Here again we find our Lord Jesus in the midst of serious controversy. His behaviour and the behaviour of His disciples has ridden roughshod over the established religious norms of Judaism in that day. The revered rabbinical tradition and interpretation regarding the sabbath, the Lord Jesus and His disciples had, it seemed, disregarded. They were flying in the face of the tradition of the elders, and it was causing a storm. So great a squall was being stirred that the religious establishment, after this event in particular and the beginning of the verses of chapter 3, would - as we see from verse 6 of chapter 3 - begin to plot His death. Of course, as we have led up to this particular event, we have seen how the Scribes, or the scribes of the Pharisees, had questioned the Lord and His disciples. You remember after the four friends of the paralytic man had put him through the roof to be healed of the Lord Jesus, and He not only healed the man but He forgave the man's sins, in verse 7 we see that they said, the Pharisees: 'Who can forgive sins but God? This is blasphemy!' - they question Christ and His authority to forgive sins.

Then in verse 16, again of chapter 2, we see that Levi has believed on the Lord Jesus and followed after Him. He gathered a number of his friends together in his home, and the Lord Jesus was eating with them. When the Scribes and Pharisees saw Him eating with publicans and sinners, 'They said unto his disciples, How is it that he eateth and drinketh with publicans and sinners?'. 'How can He do this? Have contact with these unclean people?'. You remember that 'Pharisee' literally means 'to be separated', 'separated ones'. Then in verse 18, in the same context, you remember that we believe that this was an actual Jewish fast day that the Lord was feasting with these sinners, and they ask the question: 'Why do the disciples of John and of the Pharisees fast, but thy disciples fast not?'. Again, ignoring the tradition of the elders - and our question this morning in verse 24: 'Why do they on the sabbath', after the Lord and His disciples had gone through this cornfield and plucked some corn, 'Why do they do on the Sabbath day that which is not lawful?'.
STUDIES IN MARK

David Legge

mournful religious forms, and the living liberty of the joy of the life of grace that is found in our Lord Jesus. Remember how He illustrated the difference? It's like the difference between a funeral and a wedding feast. It's like the difference between an old garment that you try to patch up with new cloth, and a new piece of clothing that is completely new. It's the difference between putting new wine in old wineskins that will be burst eventually, and giving new wineskins to hold the new wine. The difference between dead legalistic religion, characterised here in Judaism in Jesus' day, and the new life that is found in the grace and joy of Christ.

Now this particular incident that graphically illustrates that stark contrast, I want to bring it to you this morning under four headings. First of all there is an accusation of the Pharisees to the Lord and His disciples in verses 23 and 24, then there is an answer, the answer that the Lord gives in verses 25 and 26. Then the Lord gives, in verse 27, an application to that answer, so that we would know how to apply the principle that is found in His response to the Pharisees. Then finally, and most greatly, in verse 28 there is an annunciation concerning who the Lord Jesus, the Suffering Servant, really is.

So let's begin in verse 23 and verse 24 with this accusation. It's simply stated like this: 'Why do they on the sabbath day that which is not lawful?'. Now at the beginning of verse 24 it tells us that the Pharisees said these words unto the Lord Jesus. Now that, in the Greek language, is not in the ares past tense when it says 'The Pharisees said', it is in the imperfect tense which emphasises that the Pharisees kept on saying - that's the sense, the Pharisees kept on speaking to Him about this matter. They had seen Him going through the fields, His disciples with Him, His disciples plucking the corn on the Sabbath day, and they would not let it go - for, as far as they were concerned, He, the Lord Jesus, and His disciples had transgressed the law on the Sabbath. So they kept at it: 'Why do you do this?'.

Now of course previously at Levi's home, on this fast day we presume, they had spoken to the disciples: 'Why do John the Baptist's disciples fast, and the followers of the Pharisees fast, and you disciples don't?'. They hadn't the guts to face the Lord Jesus, but now they're getting more brazen, and they come to the Lord and say to Him: 'Why do You do this?'. Now, it doesn't record that the Lord was plucking grain in the field, He may well have been, but it doesn't say that: it was His disciples - but what you have to understand is that a rabbi was held responsible for the behaviour of his disciples in Judaism. So if your disciples were doing something, it was assumed that you had condoned it or even allowed them or taught them to do so.

So here we have, and Kenneth Wuest translates it very well, 'The Pharisees kept on saying to Him, 'Behold', or 'Observe that you will, why are they doing on the Sabbath that which is not lawful?''. Here's the big question: was the Lord Jesus doing something that was wrong? Was the Pharisees' accusation correct regarding the behaviour of Christ and His disciples? Well, we need to understand a little bit about the Jewish sabbath to answer that question, and to discern whether there is any weight in the Pharisaical accusation. Of course, the sabbath was cherished by the Jews as a sacred institution. Though the sabbath day principle, the sabbath rest was established at creation, the Jewish ordinance of the sabbath law, the religious rite and practice, was only given to the nation of Israel after they came out of Egypt in Exodus 20, and we read of it also in Nehemiah 9. It was a special sign between Israel as the covenant people, and Jehovah as the covenant-keeping God. Now if you want to read more about that, you can from Exodus 31. So it was unique to the nation of Israel.
Now the law of the sabbath expressly says that it is not illegal for a hungry soul to take some of his neighbour's fruit or grain, provided that he doesn't fill a vessel with it, or take a threshing, harvesting tool to it. Let me show you this from Deuteronomy 23, if you turn to it with me, Deuteronomy 23 verse 24. The law of Moses states: 'When thou comest into thy neighbor's vineyard, then thou mayest eat grapes thy fill at thine own pleasure; but thou shalt not put any in thy vessel. When thou comest into the standing corn of thy neighbor, then thou mayest pluck the ears with thine hand; but thou shalt not move a sickle unto thy neighbor's standing corn'. So, as far as the law of Moses is concerned, neither the Lord Jesus nor His disciples were doing anything wrong - so what was the Pharisees problem? Well, the problem was, as with much of the law of Moses, the Pharisees and the Scribes had developed their own extra rules, and elevated their own human laws to the point of infallibility, to the status of being equal to Scripture.

Now as an aside, let me just express a word of warning to us as believers today who are people of the book, particularly the New Testament, but the Old also. There is a danger, even in our adherence to New Testament Scripture, that we develop the scriptures further than the scriptures allow and permit us to be developed. There is a danger that we say more than the scriptures say, and we fill in the spaces and read between the lines, and then begin to think that those particular interpretations are infallible. Now Jewish tradition did this regarding the sabbath by stating 39 acts that they said were strictly forbidden. Now, if you were to turn to Exodus 20, where the law of the sabbath is enshrined, Moses said: 'But the seventh day is the sabbath of the LORD thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates'. Moses had prohibited work on the sabbath day, but he didn't give any specific incidents of what would be wrong to do on the sabbath. Now we have some - in Exodus 35 the law states that it's wrong to kindle a fire for cooking a meal; in Numbers 15:32 and following, it's wrong to gather fuel, and you remember the incident of the little man that gathered sticks on the sabbath day for his fire, and he was condemned for it. Jeremiah 17:21 tells us that it is wrong to - as far as the Old Testament, of course, is concerned - carry burdens on the sabbath day. Nehemiah 10, Nehemiah 13, tells us it was wrong to transact business on the sabbath.

But here is where the problem arose: these Scribes and Pharisees and Rabbis, in their tradition, went further than the scripture. They even went to the point of informing people how far they could travel on the Sabbath day. You'll not believe the verse that they used as evidence for that. They said, 'You're only allowed to travel 200 cubits on the sabbath, a sabbath day's journey' - and their proof text for that was Joshua 3 and verse 4, where Joshua is taking the children of Israel across the Jordan into the promised land, and he is told: 'There shall be a space between you and it, about two thousand cubits by measure: come not near unto it, that ye may know the way by which ye must go: for ye have not passed this way heretofore'. That was their proof text, that's all you're allowed to travel, though they said - I think - it was 200 cubits on the sabbath.

Now here's the problem, personally for the Jew that was brought up in this particular religious culture: in short, the sabbath day, like most of the other Jewish practices, had become a crushing burden upon these poor souls. The sabbath itself had become a symbol of a suffocating religious bondage that was squeezing any life that was in these people, and effectively it was robbing them of their joy in God as individuals, as families and as a whole nation. If I could use the Lord's own illustration: the sabbath had ceased to become a celebration, a wedding feast, and was now a funeral. It was no longer a wonderful new
garment day, but it was a useless, worn and torn vesture; it was a leaking wineskin, it couldn't hold the new life of their Messiah who had come to them.

Now it's interesting - I mentioned these 39 extra rules of interpretation that were added to the law concerning the sabbath by these Pharisees - 4 of those 39 rules prohibited these: one, reaping; two, winnowing, which is simply blowing away the chaff of the corn; three, threshing, which is separating out the grain by beating it; and then fourth, preparing a meal. That was 4 of the 39 extra rules. Now, as far as the Pharisees were concerned, the acts of the disciples walking through this field on the sabbath day, plucking the corn and eating it, could be construed as transgressing these four extra rules. As far as they were concerned, they were lawbreakers, and because they were the disciples of Jesus the rabbi, He was a lawbreaker also.

So get the point: the Pharisees weren't upset because the disciples picked the grain - Deuteronomy 23 allowed them to do that - but according to their hair-splitting traditions the disciples, as they plucked, removed the husk from the corn, and ate the corn, had broken the sabbath, they said, by reaping, by winnowing, threshing, and preparing a meal. How ridiculous can you get! Do you know something? That's how ridiculous legalistic religion is. So Jesus and His disciples were not breaking God's law, but they were transgressing a man-made interpretation of the rabbi's law that they had enshrined to equal status with God's law - there is where the problem lay.

Now let's look at the answer: how did Jesus answer? Verse 25 and 26 - now let me first of all, I'll deal with what the Lord's answer was in a moment or two, but I can't get past how the Lord answered. I love how the Lord answered these Pharisees throughout the gospel writings, it's masterful! Often He answers a question, you'll notice, with a question that these Pharisees couldn't answer without condemning themselves. The irony of His answer here in verses 25 and 26 is that He's asking these scribal Pharisees, who claimed to be experts in the Old Testament law, 'Have you not read?'. These Pharisees knew the Old Testament back to front, and yet, with all their knowledge, with all their supposed expertise in interpretation, they had missed the whole point of them!

Let me remind you of a couple of other occasions the Lord Jesus used this answer, 'Have you not read?'. We dealt with it looking at heaven not so long ago, this incident where some religious people who did not believe in the resurrection were questioning Him about that fact, and they referred to the Levirate marriage in Mark 12, and they said: 'Now there were seven brethren', giving a hypothetical situation, 'and the first took a wife, and he died and left no seed. And then the seven had her, after each brother died, and there was still no seed left. And then the seven had her, after each brother died, and there was still no seed left. Last of all the woman died', and they posed to the Lord Jesus, 'In the resurrection therefore' - if you believe, the Sadducees are implying, in such a ridiculous idea - 'In the resurrection therefore, when they shall rise, whose wife shall she be of them?'. We read on: 'Do ye not therefore', the Lord Jesus said, 'err, because ye know not the scriptures, neither the power of God? Have ye not read in the book of Moses, how in the bush God spake unto him, saying, I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob?'. 'Have you not read? You experts in the law, have you not read?'.

Then we read later in Matthew 19, when the issue of divorce and marriage is presented to the Lord, 'The Pharisees also came unto him, tempting him, and saying unto him, Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause? And he answered and said unto them, Have ye not read, that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female, And said, For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain
shall be one flesh? Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder'. 'Have you not read about this matter of marriage?'.

Then the triumphal entry of the Lord Jesus, when everybody is praising him in Matthew 21, 'When the chief priests and scribes saw the wonderful things that he did, and the children crying in the temple, and saying, Hosanna to the son of David; they were sore displeased, And said unto him, Hearest thou what these say? And Jesus saith unto them, Yea; have ye never read, Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings thou hast perfected praise?'.

In Luke 10, just before Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan, 'A certain lawyer stood up, and tempted him, saying, Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life? He said unto him, What is written in the law? how readest thou?'. He supposedly was an expert in it, but he didn't understand it. Now let me say: there is such a lesson in this phrase, that is only part of the answer of the Lord Jesus, to us. What is the lesson? Well, first of all, from the Lord's perspective, the lesson is: we must read and know the scriptures. It is only through this book that we will discover God's will. In times of crisis and personal dilemma, the Spirit of God will bring out of us the word of God that we have put into us. A case in point regarding that is the temptation of our Lord Jesus Christ, where three times - from the book of Deuteronomy, mind - He answers the devil's accusations.

But there is another lesson from the Pharisees' point of view that we need to learn, and that is: mere knowledge of Scripture is useless - did you hear that? Mere knowledge of Scripture is useless, if you do not interpret it correctly and you do not apply it correctly. Here is the heavy import of that principle to us as far as the Pharisees and the Lord were concerned, and the Jews of His day, their interpretation and application of the Sabbath Law was robbing others of joy and satisfaction in God, and it proved that they had gotten it wrong somewhere! Friends, you see if interpretation of scripture and application robs us of joy in Christ, we can be sure we've got it wrong somewhere!

Now, what was the Lord's answer - that's how He answered, but what was His answer? Well, look at it: 'What did David do?', verse 25 and 26, 'What did David do in this similar situation?'. Now He's referring to 1 Samuel 21, you can read it when you go home: David had been anointed king, and of course he was rejected. Instead of reigning in Jerusalem he was hunted down by Saul like a partridge, and when he got to the stage of having no longer any provisions the Bible says he went hungry to the house of God, that was the Tabernacle in Nob. He asked five loaves of common bread from the priest, and the priest couldn't give him any common bread because there wasn't any, and all the bread there was was the shewbread that was only permitted to be eaten by the priest - Leviticus 24. What happened, you see, there were 12 loaves of shewbread baked every Friday, and then those 12 loaves of shewbread were placed on the golden table of shewbread, which is in front of the Holy of Holies, and they were placed there on the Sabbath - and then others were removed later on and given to the priests. So the old bread was given to feed the priests, and it was probably this old bread that David was given, and his men also ate.

Now here's the point: the Lord is implying from this story that though, theoretically, it was illegal, according to Leviticus 24, for David to do this, God didn't rebuke David, God didn't judge David. Now notice the connection in verse 24 and 26, the Pharisees' accusation is: 'Why do you do on the Sabbath that which is not lawful?'. Now they were accusing Him wrongly, according to Deuteronomy 23 - what they were doing was lawful, it was their added rules that He was breaking. But the answer that the Lord gives in verse 26 is: 'David did eat the shewbread which is not lawful' - it is really not lawful, he was really breaking God's law. Now here's the Lord's point: if David had actually broken the law of God by eating the shewbread,
and yet God didn't rebuke him, how more blameless are my disciples when they, under similar circumstances - they're hungry - are eating and not breaking the law, but only breaking the tradition of the Pharisees?

The underlying truth of this is very instructive, because the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, like King David, had been anointed King. He was their Messiah, and yet He's not reigning, He's rejected. Here are His disciples, His followers, like David, picking grain as they travel - which showed that just as Israel was in Saul's day, Israel was in Jesus' day, they were not right with God. The Pharisees should have been feasting in the presence of the Lord Jesus and His disciples, but what were they doing? There were plotting to kill Him.

What is the practical lesson in this answer to us? Well, when David, God's anointed, was rejected, as far as the priests were concerned in his day it was far more important to minister to David and to the needs of his followers than to preserve the order of the Tabernacle. That might shock you, but after all, what is being said in this story is: men are more important to God than ordinances. God is surely more concerned with meeting people's needs than He is with protecting the religious traditions of men. The Pharisees had got their priorities totally confused. In Matthew's account of this same event that we're studying this morning, he adds this little phrase and statement - the Lord says to them: 'But if you had known what this means, 'I will have mercy and not sacrifice', you would not have condemned the guiltless - you've got it all wrong! You're protecting your religious traditions at the expense of the needy. I would have mercy upon them rather than your sacrifices'.

So we've seen the accusation and the answer, now an application. The Lord doesn't leave it up to us to apply it. Verse 27: 'The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath'. Now, interestingly 'He said to them' is also in the imperfect. You remember how I said in verse 24 that 'the Pharisees saying to them', was 'continuing to say to them'? Well, now He is continuing to say to them, it's not something that He's just mentioned as He bypasses in conversation, but it's taking Him a lot of talking to get across to these legalists who have been warped by religious rites and tradition what the point of the message is. The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath. Now, believe it or not, some rabbis actually taught and believed that human beings were created in order to keep the sabbath day. Our Lord Jesus had to teach these experts in the law that the Sabbath was instituted by God for man's benefit, not for his bondage. It was God's loving provision, the law says. God gave it to man for rest, He gave it that they might worship Him and enjoy worship of Him. Certainly what the Lord is implying is that the sabbath was never intended to prohibit works of necessity, deeds of mercy and kindness, and love and grace. These legalists had turned what God had given to Israel for a benefit into a bondage, and it was killing people, it was squeezing all the joy and satisfaction in their faith out.

The principal the Lord is giving us here is: the sabbath was given to Israel only as a means to an end. It was a means to the end of benefiting, helping these poor, sinful people. Can I take out of that a general principle which I think will follow through right throughout the Gospels, and right throughout the epistles? It's simply this: every spiritual practice that we are engaged in should be judged upon this principle, is it a benefit or is it a bondage? If it robs us of our joy in God, if it prevents us helping others, that means it has become a bondage not a benefit - and, according to Christ, it has outlived its usefulness. That's the application: spiritual ordinances, spiritual practices are for our benefit, not for our bondage.

Fourthly, in verse 28, there is an annunciation, and this is the greatest part of the text as far as I'm concerned: 'Therefore', the Lord said, 'the Son of man is Lord also of the sabbath'. You
see the Pharisees, where they were coming from was this - and it was the same with these other questions, like 'Who can forgive sins but God?', etc - 'Who does He think he is? This rabbi Jesus, He's just overturning all our traditions, our laws as far as we are concerned, what gives Him the right to make a pronouncement like this?'. 'This is what gives Me the right', Jesus says, 'The Son of Man is Lord also of the sabbath'. Now the Greek word for 'Lord' there is 'kurios', which is used simply to mean a person to whom a thing belongs, an owner, 'I own the sabbath'. It's talking about a person who has the authority to possess or dispose, to keep or give away a thing. The Septuagint is the Old Testament in Greek, and the word 'kurios' is used there to translate the title of God, Creator, the One who has created all things. What Jesus is saying here is, 'The Son of Man, I am the one who gave the sabbath for your benefit, I am the Lord of the sabbath, and I am telling you that you are using it as a bondage not as a benefit'. He gave it in the first place, so He has the right to pronounce what is permissible, what is forbidden on that day. Again and again in the scriptures you find out this title for God, 'The Lord of the Sabbath', or 'The Sabbath of Jehovah'. Here He is claiming to be God in a roundabout way, and they would have understood this statement as a claim to deity. Here we have Mark setting forth this lowly Servant, who is suffering, as the Lord of the sabbath - and these religious Pharisees couldn't see it, because they wouldn't see it; and the less they would see it, the less they could see it.

I wonder is there someone here today, and you are unwilling, you are resisting seeing the wonder that is in Christ as the Saviour of the world, and potentially your Saviour too. Beware, there is a spiritual law here that we see embodied in the Pharisees: because they would not see Christ, and refused to see Him as Messiah, they got to a point in the gospel writings where they couldn't see any longer! That could happen to you.

Let me conclude in the words of a commentator, and a lot of the stuff this man says is erroneous and absolute nonsense, but he got this right - listen: 'If ever the performance of a man’s religion stops him helping someone who is in need, his religion is false. People matter far more than systems and ordinances, and one of the best ways to worship God is to help men'. Now please don't misunderstand what I'm saying this morning, it's not that we reject spiritual ordinances and religious practices - no, no. We don't reject them, we don't get rid of them all - no, no - but we keep them in perspective! Listen to what the Lord said to the Pharisees in Matthew 23:23: 'Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone'.

Now did the Lord say, 'You shouldn't have done these things'? No, He says, 'These you should have done, but not left the greater, weightier matter of the law undone'. Indeed, the best way to use sacred things and religious practices is to use them to help men, that's why the sabbath was instituted, that's why I believe every spiritual ordinance is instituted: to help us as believers, and to help even the lost. That, in fact, is the only way that we can really offer up all these ordinances to God: if we are using them to serve others! That commentator goes on to say: 'The shewbread was never so sacred as when it was used to feed the starving men of David. The sabbath was never so sacred as when it was used to help those who needed help. The final arbiter in the use of all things is love, not law'. Oh, please don't miss that: the final arbiter in the use of all things is love, not law.

Can I finish this conclusion with a story? I don't know whether you've ever heard the story of the fourth wise man, have you? Anybody ever heard that story before? I know it's news to some of you that there were three wise men - of course, we don't know that there were three wise men, and this is not a true story by the way, so don't be adding it into the back of your
Bible! It’s a fictional story by Henry van Dyke, and was made into a film in 1985, and Martin Sheen starred as the fourth wise man, and his name was Artaban. The story goes that he set out to follow the star, like the rest of the three wise men, and he took with him a sapphire, a ruby, and a pearl beyond price as gifts for the King. So he was going to join in with the gold, frankincense and myrrh of the others. He was riding, and as he was going along to meet his three friends at the agreed meeting place, he was hurrying because the time was short and he knew that if he was late they would go on ahead of him. Suddenly a dim figure was on the ground lying before him, and it was a traveller who had been stricken with fever.

Now if he stayed and tried to help this man, he would be too late for the other three wise men, but he decided to stay. He helped the man, he healed the man, but now he was alone. Artaban needed camels and bearers to help across the desert because he had missed his friends and their caravan, so he had to sell the sapphire - because he helped the man, he had to sell the sapphire to buy the camels and the caravan. He was sad that that would mean that he wouldn't be able to give the sapphire to the King when he met Him. So he journeyed on, and in due time he came to Palestine and to Bethlehem, but again he was too late - Joseph and Mary and the baby had gone. Then there came soldiers to carry out Herod’s command that the children should be slain. Now Artaban was lodging in a house where there was a little child he had come to love. When he heard the tramp, tramp of the soldier's feet coming to the door, and the weeping stricken mothers crying out because of the death of their offspring, Artaban stood in the doorway tall and dark, and he had the ruby in his hand. When the captain of the soldiers came, Artaban bribed him, gave him the ruby not to enter, and that child was saved. The mother was overjoyed, but the ruby was gone. Artaban was sad because he thought the King would never have his ruby now.

Well, for years he wandered looking for the King, for more than 30 years he wandered around Jerusalem. Until one day, the story goes, he heard of a crucifixion. Artaban heard of this man Jesus who was being crucified, and as far as he was concerned, He sounded wondrously like the King. So he decided, 'I'm going to go out to Calvary', he thought, 'Maybe this one pearl that I now have left, the loveliest pearl in all the world, could buy the life of the King'. So down the street he went, and down the street came a little girl - she was fleeing from a band of soldiers. She cried out, 'My father is in debt, and they're taking me to sell me, and to pay the debt - save me!'. Artaban didn't know what to do, he hesitated, then sadly he took the pearl and gave it to the soldiers, and bought the girl's freedom. She was safe.

At that moment, all of a sudden the skies grew dark, there was a great thunder over Golgotha's hill. Then came an earthquake, and a flying tile from a roof hit Artaban in the head, and he sank half conscious to the ground. That little girl pillow ed his head on her lap, and suddenly his lips began to move. He said: 'Not so my Lord, for when saw I thee an hunred, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink? When saw I thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee? When saw I thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee? Thirty and three years have I looked for Thee, but I have never seen Thy face, nor ministered to Thee my King'. Then, like a whisper from very far away, there came low and sweet a voice: 'Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, thou hast done it unto me'. Artaban smiled in death because he knew that the King had received his gifts.

Does He receive ours? The things that we do for Him, the practices that we are engaged in: are they for the benefit of others? When they are, then they will be gifts to God.
Father, at the beginning of our service we sang 'O Christ, in Thee my soul hath found, and found in Thee alone'; then we sang 'My faith has found a resting place, not in a form or creed'; and we have just sung now 'Thither may I, in simple faith, draw nigh, and never to another fountain fly, but unto Thee'. Lord, let us not draw life, or even draw death, from anything else but Christ. Let us, in all that we do as Christians, all that You have given us to do in Your word, may we use all these things to our benefit, to our joy, and to the benefit and joy of all people that they too may be filled with the love of Christ from that living fount above. Hear our prayer, and help us to offer up all that we have to You in the service of others. Amen.
Let's turn together to Mark's gospel chapter 3, and this is our 18th study - believe it or not - in Mark's gospel these Sunday mornings, and we are only entering now chapter 3. Our title for today's message is 'The Sabbath Setup', and we will be reading from verses 1 to 6, and carrying through the theme of our sermon from last week which was 'The Lord of the Sabbath'.

Verse 1 of Mark 3: "And he", the Lord Jesus, "entered again into the synagogue; and there was a man there which had a withered hand. And they watched him, whether he would heal him on the sabbath day; that they might accuse him. And he saith unto the man which had the withered hand, Stand forth. And he saith unto them, Is it lawful to do good on the sabbath days, or to do evil? to save life, or to kill? But they held their peace. And when he had looked round about on them with anger, being grieved for the hardness of their hearts, he saith unto the man, Stretch forth thine hand. And he stretched it out: and his hand was restored whole as the other. And the Pharisees went forth, and straightway took counsel with the Herodians against him, how they might destroy him".

Now verses 1 to 6 of Mark 3 form the last of this first series of five conflict narratives. In other words, Mark's account of how the Lord's behaviour and the behaviour of the Lord's disciples flew in the face of the established rabbinical tradition, the laws of the Pharisees and the Scribes, the tradition of the elders of Judaism. Because of the Lord and His disciples' behaviour, the Scribes and Pharisees were questioning, criticising the controversial conduct of the controversial Christ. Let me remind you of those again, perhaps you weren't with us in previous studies. If you look at verse 7 of chapter 2, you will see that the Lord Jesus forgave the sins of the man that was paralysed, who you remember was let down through the roof by his four friends. Having spoken these words of absolution to this man, the religious leaders said in verse 7: 'Who can forgive sins, but God only? He is speaking blasphemy to speak these words of forgiveness!'.

Then the second occasion where they criticised Him is in verse 16. You remember that Levi followed the Lord Jesus, believed on Him, and Levi brought some of his friends to his home to introduce them to the Lord Jesus; and the Pharisees saw Him eat with publicans and sinners, and they said unto His disciples: 'How is it that he eats and drinks with publicans and sinners?'. They were appalled at His contact with these sinners. Then in verse 18 the third event which flows out of the last one, 'The disciples of John and the Pharisees', His accusers say, 'used to fast', and they come and say unto Him, 'Why do the disciples of John and of the Pharisees fast, but thy disciples fast not?'. We think that the day that the Lord feasted with these publicans and sinners in Levi's house was a traditional Jewish day of fasting, and they were appalled that the Lord and His disciples were feasting when they thought, according to their rules and regulations, He should have been observing a fast.

Then verse 24, where we were last week, the fourth account of controversy: 'And the Pharisees said unto him', after His disciples had walked through the cornfield and plucked the ears of corn and ate them, 'Why do they on the sabbath day that which is not lawful?'. Now
we showed last week that the Lord and His disciples did not transgress the law of Moses, rather they transgressed the laws that the Pharisees and Scribes had added to the law of Moses.

Now the fifth account of controversy that we have here in verses 1 to 6 of chapter 3, I believe, takes the form of a test case. Verses 1 and 2 seem to indicate that: 'He entered again into the synagogue; and there was a man there which had a withered hand. And they watched him', the Pharisees and Scribes watched the Lord Jesus, 'whether he would heal him on the sabbath day; that they might accuse him'. They are going up a gear in their attempt to ensnare and trap the Lord Jesus as a transgressor of the law.

Now I'm going to make a suggestion to you, and I can't prove it from these verses or any others, but I believe it is quite possible that the Pharisees could have created this scenario as a test case for Jesus, to accuse Jesus of non-observance of the sabbath. Now one thing is absolutely certain, and that is that they were treating this man with the withered hand in the synagogue as a test case for Jesus. The question is whether he was there of his own volition, or whether they had planted him there knowing that the Lord Jesus would never miss synagogue on the sabbath, knowing that the Lord Jesus was always compelled to help those who were most needy, and therefore they planted him in order to - as they thought - lure the Lord Jesus into a trap of healing on the Sabbath day.

Now whether you accept that or not, either way they should never have underestimated the Lord's knowledge of their intentions. We see always that with His divine mind, He is steps ahead of these Scribes and Pharisees. Not only should they not have underestimated His wisdom, but His all-wise ability to turn the tables back on them. However, they still thought that if they could get the Lord Jesus to heal this man, if they could get Him to fall for the bait, they would have a case against Him in order to condemn Him for a transgression of Sabbath laws - ultimately to kill Him, that's where these guys are going to: they want to condemn the Lord Jesus to death.

So let's look this morning at this Sabbath setup. First of all I want you to see the test case trap that they lay for the Lord Jesus. We've read these verses, verses 1 and 2, look at them again - verse 1 tells us half way through that there was a man there in the synagogue which had a withered hand. Now Kenneth Wuest, in his commentary and translation which I'm relying heavily on this morning, is very helpful in this regard. He points out that the Greek participle here indicates that this man had come to have a withered hand - in other words, he wasn't born with a withered hand, it wasn't a congenital defect. Whether through accident or some disease that he had contracted, his hand had become withered. A withered hand simply meant that his hand was atrophied, it was wasted, withered, it was palsied, it was paralysed. Luke, the physician, in his gospel, chapter 6 and verse 6 with a physician's precision tells us that it was this man's right-hand - and we assume, perhaps, that he was right-handed, and this disabled him in a great way in his daily life, and probably in his livelihood.

Imagine this man, here in the synagogue, such a pitiful creature. He was the ideal inducement to get the Lord Jesus to heal, that the Pharisees and Scribes might ambush Him on the Sabbath. So, if you look at verse 2 it says: 'They watched him', to see what He would do. The 'they', of course, is the delegation from the Sanhedrin which no one could miss sitting in the synagogue, because they always sat in the front seats so that everyone could see them. The front seats were the seats of honour, and it was their duty to, from those front seats, spy and see that no one was leading the people of Judaism astray. Anyone likely to
mislead or seduce the people from the right way would be reprimanded severely, and perhaps even cast out of the synagogue - that means fellowship was disallowed.

They watched Him. Now, the Greek there for 'watched him' is a verb that is in the imperfect tense, now that means that what is being spoken of here is a continuous action. They kept on watching Him, that's the sense. In other words, they were bent on finding fault, they were scrutinising every move of the Lord Jesus. Now the prefix preposition on this verb is 'para', which means 'beside', and it speaks of how the Pharisees were like sideline observers, watching the Lord Jesus continuously. This is the picture, there is an aloofness in their behaviour. They don't want to be seen to be near the Lord Jesus, or beside the Lord Jesus, lest anyone accuse them of fellowship with the Lord Jesus. Yet, even though they were aloof, they were engrossed with Him. You can see them, can't you, with their backs turned, but looking behind them, and looking at each other - they're scrutinising the Lord to find fault.

The illustration of a spy is a wonderful one. They want to create the persona that is false in order to get some intelligence for their end goal. Someone has put it like this: 'Here were the watchdogs of Israel's religion attempting to discredit this claimant to Messiahship by finding Him violating its regulations'. What were they watching for? Look at verse 2: whether He would heal this man on the sabbath day, that they might accuse Him. That word 'accuse' means 'to formally accuse before a tribunal', to bring a charge publicly to the Saviour in order to condemn Him. If the Lord healed this man on the sabbath, their desire was to rush and kill Him like a pack of wolves - that's how serious this test case trap is.

Here's the great question that we need to answer, just as we sought to answer the question during last week's incident: had these Pharisees and Scribes legal grounds to accuse the Lord Jesus of breaking the sabbath if He healed this man? Was it grounds for condemning Him? Would He have broken the law of Moses if He had healed this man, as of course He did? Well, if we go into the law, Exodus chapter 31 verses 14 to 17 provides that the violator of the sabbath should be killed - but did the Lord Jesus violate the sabbath? As we saw last week, what the law of Moses actually said, and what these lawyers had made the law become were very different. At times there were subtle differences, at times they had taken laws to reasonable and logical conclusions which were unwarranted by Scripture - but the Scribes had taken the law of Moses a little bit further, from violating the sabbath as it is written in the Torah, to coming to a position where they as lawyers and Pharisees determined precisely in which cases it was proper to speak of breaking the sabbath. So they became the chief interpreters of law, and infallible as such.

So in relation to healing someone on the Sabbath, these Pharisees, Scribes and rabbis said: 'Well, you have to make sure that if you're going to heal someone, that person's life is in immediate danger'. It's got to be a life and death situation. Then you've got to decide to what extent you need to help them - you don't have to go all the way, but you must only go as far as to save their life. Now imagine how ridiculous this is in a practical scenario: someone is in real need - if you, for instance (today is not the sabbath by the way, but this is Saturday, the Jewish sabbath), but imagine someone, as you're going out the door this morning, gets hit by a car, and you believe these laws just as these rabbis did. The first thought that comes into your mind is not the natural human instinct to help someone spontaneously, but rather to think: 'Well, is this man or woman going to die? If they're going to die I'll have to help them, if not, well, they're alright, I can't touch them'. Maybe you think: 'They are going to die, I will help them' - then you've got to start to calculate in your mind, 'What can I do to save their life, but not do too much in order to condemn my soul'. It's idiotic, isn't it?
How serious is serious enough, to help a person? What procedure to help them is, or is not religiously right to adopt? You might say: 'These Jews were off their head in their day, it's ridiculous! It's hard to think of this today' - well, is it really? Is it? It is not so other-wordly when you consider that, particularly in the United States of America, doctors, surgeons, medical practitioners are absolutely terrified of litigation - being sued - to such an extent that doctors think twice now, some of them at least, if they walk by someone who is in need, of treating them; lest that person, after they get well, if they get well, sue them, or if they die the family sues them. Indeed, I read in USA Next, an Internet site which is a media site, an article on the 11th December 2003, which said this: 'Not only are doctors leaving health care, but patient care is jeopardized. One survey revealed over 76% of doctors are concerned that malpractice litigation hurts their ability to provide quality care to their patients. Patients are being subjected to additional, and often unnecessary, testing simply because doctors are threatened by possible lawsuits at every turn. 79% of doctors said they ordered more tests than they normally would have, for fear of lawsuits. 51% recommended more invasive procedures (such as biopsies) to confirm diagnoses than they otherwise would have. Out-of-control lawsuits discourage reporting of errors and development of systems to track, and therefore reduce, medical errors'.

You see what's happening, in that situation anyway, in our modern day age - what is happening? An over-emphasis on law is destroying the higher principle of care - have you got it? Legalism is eroding love. To prove their legalistic point, the Pharisees and Scribes used this man with the withered hand as a pawn in a religious game. They weren't concerned about the man's predicament. They weren't knowledgeable, at least consciously, of the fact that they had no power to heal this man. It's even worse than that, they resented the fact that Christ had the power to heal him. They sought to use that great supernatural divine power of the Lord Jesus against Him to condemn Him.

So, in the Lord Jesus' day, to provide medical attention on the sabbath in cases that meant other than life or death was considered by the rabbinical schools as working. Healing was only permitted when the person was not likely to live another day. Let me give you an example of this: if a wall fell on anyone, enough rubble was allowed to be cleared away to see whether the person was dead or alive. If he were alive he might be helped, and if he were dead the body had to stay there another day. A fracture could not be attended to, it wasn't life-threatening, and you couldn't even pour cold water on it - a sprained ankle or hand - in order to relieve it; that was work. A cut on your finger, if it was bleeding severely, might be bandaged with a plain bandage, but you weren't allowed to put any ointment on it. When you put ointment on it that was work. Therefore, at most, an injury could be kept from getting worse, that was the mentality - keep life-threatening things from getting worse, but don't make them any better. As far as these Pharisees were concerned, this man with the withered hand had been living with a withered hand for many years, and there was no need for Christ to heal him on the sabbath, it wasn't an emergency, life or death case. You've got to understand how deeply ingrained this Sabbath observance was in the Jewish psyche in Jesus' day. It was so serious that a strict Jew would not even defend his own life on the sabbath.

In the wars of the Maccabees, in between, historically, the Old and the New Testament, when there was a resistance broke out among the Jews, some of the Jewish rebels took refuge in a cave. The Syrian soldiers pursued them, and Josephus the Jewish historian tells that the Syrians give them a chance to surrender, but they would not surrender. 'So', Josephus says, 'they fought against them' - that's the Syrians against the Jews - 'on the sabbath day, and they burned them as they were in the caves, without resistance, without so much as stopping up the entrance of the caves. They refused to defend themselves on that day because they
were not willing to break in upon the honour they owed to the sabbath, even in such distress, for our law requires that we rest in that day'. So you see how serious it was for the Lord, on the sabbath, to heal this man who was far from dying. That was their test case trap.

Now I want you to see in verses 3 and 4 how the Lord turned the tables. They give Him this test case trap, and He turns the tables on them. 'He saith unto the man which had the withered hand, Stand forth', verse 4, 'He saith unto the Pharisees and Scribes, Is it lawful to do good on the sabbath days, or to do evil? To save life, or to kill? But they held their peace'. Imagine it, this charged atmosphere, both tension and expectation. This is the amazing thing: these Pharisees knew that the Lord Jesus could heal this man, yet they would not believe in Him. How hard are their hearts? Now please note: Jesus made no attempt to avoid the trap. He could have, He could have said: 'Well, let's not make a big issue of this one, it's not a hill to die on yet, let's leave it till Monday, or Tuesday, or Wednesday, or Thursday, or Friday, or Sunday - let's leave it till then'. But He didn't, because He wanted to challenge them, He wanted to expose their legalistic traditions that were binding and destroying them.

He said to this man with the withered hand, 'Stand forth' - and the Greek literally means 'Arise into the midst'. In other words, 'Step where all can see you, all can see your awful predicament, all can see how these Pharisees are using you, imposing upon your predicament for their own ends. Stand into the midst that everyone can see Me healing you'. The Lord Jesus turned the tables on them by saying to them: 'Is it lawful to do good on the sabbath days, or to do evil? To save life, or to kill?'. Do you know what the Lord Jesus was doing? He was revealing their wickedness. Imagine this, and this is the whole point: they thought it was wrong of the Lord Jesus to perform a miracle of healing on the sabbath, but they didn't think it was wrong to plan the destruction of the Messiah on the sabbath! It's bad enough that they left this man with the withered hand to languish in his poverty of the flesh, when there was one in their midst who could heal him - but worse than that, they were plotting the death of the Son of God on the sabbath. They couldn't see it.

That's what He means when He says: 'Is it lawful to do good on the sabbath days, or to do evil?' - they were doing evil. 'Is it lawful to save life?', that's what Christ was doing, 'Or to kill?', that's what they were doing. No wonder they couldn't answer, if they had replied they would have condemned themselves, so they said nothing. Because the Lord Jesus turned the tables on this test case trap, we see the outcome of their unbelief. Verse 5 says the Lord Jesus 'looked round about on them with anger, being grieved for the hardness of their hearts'. In the original language the verb there for 'looked around', means He looked with a penetrating gaze, and yet there is a sense there, because of a preposition on the verb, that He looked around quickly like that. Can you picture the scene? He swiftly turned round with a glance, and yet at a glance He takes them all in and penetrates their very soul. He is angry, and it's not often we see the Lord Jesus angry in the gospel records. Yet, whilst He is angry, He has grief, grief for the hardness of their hearts. 'Grieved', and the participle there is in the present tense - and I'm not trying to blind you with all this linguistics, I'm not saying I know it all, I'm getting most of it from secondary sources - but the point is very clear when you see that this means that they were continuing to harden their hearts, there was a process here. The Lord's heart was grieved because of their unbelieving, unmerciful state of heart that was getting worse, and worse, and worse to the point of putting Him to death on a cross.

The Lord never became angry at the publicans and the sinners. Show me an occasion - it's interesting that, isn't it? He never became angry at them, but He did express anger towards the self-righteous Pharisees, the legalists. If you want to read the tirade that He spoke to them, look at Matthew 23 for His condemnation of them. Why was He so angry? Why was He
so grieved? Because they would rather protect their religious traditions than see this poor man healed - that makes Jesus angry! After an embarrassed silence, the Saviour ordered the man to stretch out his hand, and as he did so full strength returned and the flesh was filled out again to normal size, and all the wrinkle and paralysis and palsy disappeared. This is the wonder of it all, none of them could have pointed the finger and said: 'You have worked on the sabbath day', do you know why? Because there were no visible means used, no implements, no bandages, no potions, all He did was speak a word!

He had them every time. Verse 6 says the Pharisees couldn't take it any more, they went out 'and straightway took counsel with the Herodians against him, how they might destroy him'. They contacted the Herodians. Now I don't know whether you know or not, that the Herodians were the Pharisees' traditional enemies. They contacted their enemies, they got into a little unholy huddle, and made a pact that they would sort this guy out once and for all. Now please cast your mind back for a moment or two, this is the same group of Pharisees - 'Pharisee' meaning 'separatist' - who would have nothing to do with Gentiles, a man who didn't adhere to the law of Moses. The Herodians were not proper Jews, and they supported the rule of Herod, and they were continually coming in contact with the Romans and dealing with them, and living with them. You remember in a previous study that the Pharisees would have nothing to do with a tax collector to help them, because a tax collector was working for the Romans, and he was unclean even when he was a Jew - yet all of a sudden, to put a man to death, to put the Son of God to death, they did a deal with the same type of person! An unholy alliance to kill a man, yet they wouldn't make an alliance to help a man.

There's not only that irony, but the fantastic irony that all this was done on the sabbath: 'They went out straightway', on that day, 'and took counsel with the Herodians against him, how they might destroy him'. Do you know what they were thinking, I think? Herod had put John the Baptist to death, perhaps his party would be equally successful in killing this Jesus! These enemies united together because of their common enemy, Jesus Christ. Can I say to you today that if we do not believe in the Lord Jesus, we will finally crucify Him. That was the outcome of their unbelief, it is always the outcome of unbelief, there is no 'no man's land'. You're either for Christ or you're against Christ. Maybe you're here, and you've never taken that step of faith to believe in the Lord Jesus as He is the Son of God, and the one who died for your sins, and promises you eternal life if you believe on Him. My friend, beware how the Pharisees rejected Him, and then their heart hardened to the very point of putting Him on a cross. Beware, lest you do the same.

But for all of us, we see in this account the great clash once more of these two ideals of spirituality - what are they? Law and grace. They are not compatible, they are completely opposing. We see these men whose religious existence was to obey rules, laws, regulations; and because Jesus and His disciples broke their laws and their rules, they were convinced, genuinely now, that this man Jesus was a bad man. They believed it in their heads and in their hearts, because they were intoxicated with their traditions! Like people today who believe that religion consists of going to church, of saying grace before meals, being a Presbyterian or Anglican, or Baptist or Brethren, or Catholic - that's as far as it goes for them. But they go to great lengths in carrying out external acts which are looked on as religious, and yet many of these people - even when they take the name of being fundamentalist Christians - would never ever put themselves out for anyone! When a man is in need, like this man, would they do anything to help a life like that? Many today, even who take the name of Christ, are devoid of sympathy - they don't want to sacrifice anything to help anyone. They are sincere in their religious orthodoxy, yet they are deaf to the cry of the needy, of the blind, of the naked, the hungry, the dying and the damned!
Someone put it well: 'If moral behaviour were simply following rules, we could program a computer to be moral' - is that not right? I'm not saying there aren't principles in the Christian life, of course there are - but the Christian life is that: life, life, life, eternal life! The Apostles preached this life - what do we have? Life or law? That life is found in grace, it's found in the love of God; and that love of God, when we receive it by faith, outflows in a love for mankind. To the Lord Jesus the most important thing in the world was not a correct performance of ritual, but a spontaneous answer to the cry of the human need.

The sabbath setup was an operation of Scribes and Pharisees - but can I say to all of us today: there is a satanic setup, and that is to get all of us, believers and unbelievers, tangled in a bondage of man-made laws that will squeeze the life of God right out of us. May I implore you, as Jesus did, to be daring enough to stand it in the face and, whatever the accusation, withstand it and be no more in a yoke of bondage, but live the life of the Spirit, in the law of the life of the Spirit in Christ Jesus which has set us free from the law of sin and death. Don't fall for Satan's trap.

We embrace the principles of the Scriptures. Don't think that I'm saying this morning that we don't follow what's written in this book! Far from it! But there's many men would add to this book, and many would give their interpretation of this book as infallible - do you know what that is? That is popery, that's what it is - and sometimes it's protestant popery. Let's stick to this book, let's preach it clear, let's believe it, and let's say to the Lord in our lives: 'Teach me Thy way'. Are we still people that believe that all we need is this book, and the Holy Spirit? Do we believe that? We sang last week: 'My faith has found a resting place, not in a form or creed'. Let's rest on Him by faith, and Him alone, as we say to Him prayerfully: 'Teach me Thy way, O Lord'.

Father, we pray that You would deliver us from having the letter of the law without the life of the Spirit. Oh God, what better are we than the Pharisees if we rest on our traditions, rather than on the word of God and the Spirit of God. Lord, get us back to basics, deliver us from those things that kill us and bind us, those things that are poisons. Help us to get into that promised Canaan land, where we realise all the blessings that are 'Yea and Amen' in the Lord Jesus. Give us that new wine that bursts the old skins, give us those new clothes that don't patch up the old, give us a feast and not a famine, feed us on Christ the Living Bread, and we shall be satisfied, and in turn go out and satisfy the hungry and the needy with that Bread that came down from heaven. Give us Jesus, Christ and Christ alone, in whose name we pray, Amen.

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We're turning in our Bibles to Mark's gospel chapter 3. We have been in Mark's gospel Sunday morning by Sunday morning, with the exception of last Sunday when we took a break from it, but last Sunday morning's ministry - providentially - has a lot of bearing on what we will look at this morning as we look at what I have entitled 'The Servant's Servants'. We are introduced to all the disciples, or more correctly the apostles, in our reading today.

Beginning to read at verse 7 of Mark chapter 3: "But Jesus withdrew himself with his disciples to the sea: and a great multitude from Galilee followed him, and from Judaea, And from Jerusalem, and from Idumaea, and from beyond Jordan; and they about Tyre and Sidon, a great multitude, when they had heard what great things he did, came unto him. And he spake to his disciples, that a small ship should wait on him because of the multitude, lest they should throng him. For he had healed many; insomuch that they pressed upon him for to touch him, as many as had plagues. And unclean spirits, when they saw him, fell down before him, and cried, saying, Thou art the Son of God. And he straitly charged them that they should not make him known. And he goeth up into a mountain, and calleth unto him whom he would: and they came unto him. And he ordained twelve, that they should be with him, and that he might send them forth to preach, And to have power to heal sicknesses, and to cast out devils: And Simon he surnamed Peter; And James the son of Zebedee, and John the brother of James, and he surnamed them Boanerges, which is, The sons of thunder: And Andrew, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus, and Simon the Canaanite, And Judas Iscariot, which also betrayed him: and they went into an house". We end our reading at verse 19.

R. Kent Hughes, in his commentary on Mark's gospel, when he comes to this particular portion and comments on it, entitles his chapter: 'Jesus, Pressured Jesus' - of course it is a parody on the spiritual song that many of you know, 'Jesus, Precious Jesus'. Pressure in Jesus' life came from two sources. First of all, the repeated collisions that He had with the then religious establishment, the Scribes and the Pharisees. A second source of pressure to Him was the popularity He enjoyed among the ordinary people. Now of course, in our recent studies in chapter 2, at the beginning of it right through to verse 6 of this chapter we have been dealing with the collisions that the Lord Jesus had with the Scribes and the Pharisees - and of course it all climaxed in verse 6 of chapter 3 where we see the Pharisees going forth, and straight away they take counsel with the Herodians how they might destroy Him. They're going to kill Him for what they see as transgression of the law which, in effect, was just the transgression of their own tradition and interpretation of God's holy word.

But now the portion we're looking at this morning focuses on another pressure that was in Jesus' ministry: popularity - the other end of the scale, if you like, from opposition. There were great demands upon the ministry of the Saviour because of His success, effectualness and His popularity among ordinary people. We're going to see this morning how this popularity added pressure, and how the Lord Jesus coped with such pressure - in other words, the method that He used to offload, if you like.
Now we see in this portion in verse 10, first of all, that He had pressure from sick folk. Verse 10 says: 'He had healed many; insomuch that they pressed upon him for to touch him, as many as had plagues'. Now if you have a marginal reference Bible, the Authorised reference to 'pressed' is that it can also be translated 'rushed'. It literally means 'to fall upon', or 'to jostle'. So the picture here is of many diseased, leprous, afflicted, ill folk falling upon the Lord Jesus; wanting to be healed. Not only were the sick jostling Him, but we find in verse 11 that unclean spirits, when they saw Him, fell down before Him - now unclean spirits don't have bodies, but they possessed people's bodies, and they most likely forced these people to fall before the Lord Jesus and cried out, 'You are the Son of God' - 'And straitly Jesus charged that they should not make him known'. The reason for that was that He did not want their witness of who He was, He wanted authentic witness from believing people, not from the demon-possessed.

What I want you to catch a glimpse of is the added pressure of not only having all these sick folk pressing in and rushing upon Him, jostling Him, pressurising Him to heal, but all of these supernaturally demon-possessed folk doing the same. Kent Hughes in his commentary captures the scene very well, he says: 'Putting it all together, the ill, the feverish, the crippled were pushing and grabbing at Jesus and falling over Him. The demonised were malevolently seizing Him up with howling His name in futuritive combat. The jaundiced Pharisees were watching His every move, waiting for their chance'. In other words, you can't underestimate the human strain that would have been upon the Lord Jesus in such a situation. It was so great that the Lord ordered for the disciples to get a boat so that He could go out from shore a little and the crowd would not press upon Him in such a manner.

Now I don't want to read too much into such a thought, but the fact of the matter is: one of the greatest 21st-century problems that we have today is that we seem always to be under pressure and experiencing one strain or another. I can identify with Annie Johnson Flint's poem which is called 'Pressed', listen to the first verse:

"Pressed out of measure and pressed to all length; Pressed so intensely it seems, beyond strength! Pressed in the body and pressed in the soul; Pressed in the mind till the dark surges roll. Pressure by foes, and pressure by friends; Pressure on pressure, till life nearly ends!"

Of course the Lord Jesus was the perfect God-man, and yet He experienced, on a human level, pressure. Isn't it wonderful to know that when we are pressured, He understands what it is to be pressurised? If you're a mother, you know what pressure is, and fathers too, to a lesser extent. A student, perhaps, maybe you're in a professional vocation - and most likely, if you're a Christian worker or involved in some work in the Christian church, you will know all too well what it is to know strain and pressure as you serve the Lord.

Now the bottom line for the Saviour was: the more care He took over people the busier He seemed to get. It's the same in this life: the better you are at your job the more people will be looking for you. It's the same in ministry: the more effective your ministry and service for the Lord, the more people will come to be ministered to and served. This is what happened in the life of the Lord Jesus. Now the question before us today is: how did He cope? What was His method to deal with this pressure, and what should our method be in our day and age? To manage the pressure and the demands of His ministry, the Lord implemented an unfailing
method that, if we implement it, will help us greatly.

Here's the first string, if you like, to the bow. The first step of His method was prayer. Now, Mark doesn't deal with this in too much detail, but we know from Luke's account of the same narrative in Luke chapter 6 and verses 12 and 13 that when Mark simply says: 'The Lord Jesus went up to a mountain' in verse 13; Luke expands, telling us, 'And it came to pass in those days, that he went out into a mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God. And when it was day, he called unto him his disciples'. It would be very easy to skip over this and miss it, but the first way the Lord Jesus coped with this ministerial pressure was to take it to God in prayer, to get alone with God, a quiet time in a quiet place up this mountain. Now I have to say to you that often, when I feel myself pressurised in life in general or specifically in ministry, the tendency is to give up on prayer and to even think that, 'Well, I have more important things and more pressing things to do just at the minute, and prayer is dispensable, I can do it later or tomorrow or again at my convenience'. We see prayer as an extra pressure, an extra strain, when the fact of the matter is - from the example of the Lord - we should be viewing prayer as a pressure release, a way of getting rid of the strain and distress of our lives.

In Matthew 11:28 Jesus said: 'Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest', and we often apply that to the unbelievers, but it is for us perhaps more even than they. Every moment of every day of our lives we are to keep coming to the Lord to unburden ourselves and to receive grace and mercy to help us in time of need. Paul is explicit in that regard in Philippians 4: we are to be anxious for nothing, pray about everything, and be thankful for anything - but the way we relieve our stresses and anxieties is through prayer.

'O, what peace we often forfeit!
O, what needless pain we bear!
All because we do not carry
Every thing to God in prayer'.

Now the Lord Jesus never had a needless pain, but what we do see in His life is that His method of dealing with this great influx of demand upon Him was to pray. Not to dispense of it, but to pray even more - and before He chooses His disciples, He prays all night! I think He deserved a rest after a day like the day He had, but He knew that the secret to cope was prayer.

Here's the second secret in His method to coping with the strains of ministry: not just prayer, but share. In verses 13 to 15 we see that the Lord Jesus brings to Him the twelve, choosing them. Mark tells us that there was a threefold purpose behind the call of the twelve. The first is that they might be with Him, verse 14. Then we see also there that the second purpose was that He might send them out to preach. Then the third in verse 15, He wanted to give them power to heal sicknesses and to cast out demons.

Now I want to look at verse 15 first of all, because this word 'power' is used. It would be easy to misunderstand its meaning, we're so used with the word 'power' in Scripture being the Greek word 'dunamis', which we get 'dynamite' from, the power of God unto salvation - but that is not the Greek word that is used here. Rather the word used here means 'delegated authority'. So what the Lord is doing here is, He is delegating responsibility to His disciples, if you like, to spread the load - but He wanted to do more than that. He was desiring to find a way where He could permanently keep His message among humanity, and ultimately spread His message cross the globe. Of course, the Lord Jesus knew that the Pharisees were plotting
to kill Him, but He also knew that He had come into the world to bleed and to die, to be delivered up for the sacrifice for the sins of the world. He knew that He was going to die, three days later rise again, and then 40 days later ascend to heaven, and it would be left to His disciples to propagate the gospel throughout the globe.

So He had to have a strategy so that His message would survive when He was away. So choosing the disciples was not simply to spread the load, but to spread the message, and He did it by choosing these twelve men. Now please note this: this was Christ's method for ministry, twelve men. Now, who were they? Well, they were twelve in number which is not without its significance, twelve sometimes in the Bible indicates the number of governmental perfection. But there were also twelve tribes of Israel, twelve thrones for judgement on the twelve tribes of Israel, the book of Revelation tells us that there are twelve pearly gates in the New Jerusalem, twelve foundations to that same city, and there will be twelve manner of fruits to eat from in the new heaven and the new earth.

Now there are four lists of the apostles that we are given in Scripture, this is only one in Mark's gospel. If you look at the screen, just for your help you will see that one is found in Matthew 10, one is found in Mark 3, one is found in Luke 6, and the other in Acts chapter 1. Now they all, when you're reading them, seem to be the same - but as you glance at them in greater detail you will see that they differ somewhat. For instance, Mark and Matthew have the name 'Thaddeus' in the lists, while Luke in both of his lists - remember he wrote the Acts of the Apostles and Luke's gospel - he has the name 'Judas of James'. Now of course they are the same person, and some think that Judas may have been James's original name, and he changed it later to Thaddeus which means 'warmhearted' to avoid the stigma that had been attached to the name 'Judas', because of Judas Iscariot.

Now all these four lists in Scripture begin with Simon Peter - you can see that, the list is a bit hard to see perhaps, but if you squint you can see Simon at the top of them all. They all end with Judas Iscariot except, that is, Acts, because Judas by that time had killed himself, was deceased. Also you see that these four lists are gathered together and appear in three groups of four names. So Peter, Andrew, James and John are always in the first group, though not always in that order. Philip, Bartholomew - who incidentally is also Nathaniel, who you find in John's gospel - Thomas and Matthew are always in the second group. James, Thaddeus, Simon the zealot and Judas Iscariot are always in the third group - of course, except Acts, where Judas is left out. It's interesting. In all four lists given in the scriptures Peter's name always heads the first group, because he always heads the full list of disciples. Philip always heads up the second group as you can see, and James always heads up the third group. It may suggest that Simon Peter, Philip and James were prominent leaders in the early church and among the first Apostles.

Also you can note that the Apostles seem to be listed in the order in which they were converted and called by Jesus, at least that applies to the first four - Peter, Andrew, James and John were the first to be called to follow the Lord. Then, of course, after them came Philip and Nathaniel, in John chapter 1 you can read about that. It's interesting also to note that in Mark's account of these names they are given in twos. Not only are they grouped in these three groups of four each, but they are named in twos. So it's 'Simon Peter and Andrew', 'James and John', and so on and so forth. We know from Mark 6 and verse 7 that this reflects the fact that Jesus sent the twelve out two-by-two to serve the Lord - I'm just encouraging you to look in more detail at Scripture. The Holy Spirit does not arrange things in a haphazard way, everything that is in God's word is ordered and it's there for a reason for our attention.
Let's look at these twelve. There are three things, generally speaking, that I want to say about the Servant's servants. The first is in keeping with what we learnt about last week, and it's simply this: the twelve were young, they were young men. James E. Stewart comments on this: 'Christianity began as a young people's movement. Unfortunately it is a fact which Christian art and Christian preaching have too often obscured, but it is quite certain that the original disciple band was a young men's group. Most of the Apostles were probably still in their twenties when they went out after Jesus'. He also points out in his commentary that the hymn we sang around the Lord's Table, penned by Isaac Watts, 'When I Survey the Wondrous Cross', in its original version went like this:

'When I survey the wondrous cross,
On which the young Prince of glory died'.

Stewart goes on: 'No one has ever understood the heart of youth in its gaiety and gallantry and generosity and hope, its sudden loneliness and haunting dreams, and hidden conflicts and strong temptations; no one has understood it nearly so well as Jesus. No one ever realised more clearly than Jesus did that the adolescent years of life, when strange dormant thoughts are stirring, and the whole world begins to unfold, are God's best chance with the soul. What a telling remark. It's wonderful to know, if you're a young person, that Jesus understands what young people go through because He called a band of young people around Him. But the reason why He called young men was that they were teachable, they were receptive, and He knew that God's best chance with the soul is when it is young - like the children, like the young people.

So when we study the story of the first twelve, you've got to realise first of all something that is often missed: this is a young man's adventure. We are studying about a group of young men that Jesus has called, so here's the first characteristic of the Servant's servants: they were young. Here's the second characteristic: not only were they young, they were ordinary. Despite what Christian art through history portrays to us, there were no halos adorning the heads of these twelve men. Indeed Mark seems, more than any other gospel record, throughout his gospel to go out of the way to emphasise the imperfections of these twelve men - especially Peter, and we know that Peter gave him the information for his gospel. In many ways he was the leader of the twelve, and he is set forth to a large extent as a man who kept failing and letting the Lord down. Now Mark does this not to belittle the twelve, but he wants to make the grace of God and the wonder of this gospel all the more wonderful by setting it in contrast to the men Christ called, the men Christ would use.

Second Corinthians puts it so well: 'We have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us'. So these disciples were not supermen, the early Christians were not supermen and superwomen, they were only sinners saved by grace - and that's why we see them, warts and all, to show this. Mark especially, I believe, wants us to see that the servants of the suffering Servant were only men and women like you and I with all our weaknesses, with our same foibles, struggles, temptations, sins. I think it isn't a coincidence, I've told you that the Holy Spirit doesn't put things in here to fill the story out, that these men had nicknames - and some of them were given by Jesus to them. Simon became Peter, 'stone' or 'rock'. Of course 'the sons of thunder', James and John because of their temperament.

Leslie Flynn says something that wonderfully sets forth the ordinariness of these men, this is what he said, quoting a sermon by Peter Marshall called 'Disciples in Clay'. Peter Marshall depicts the disciples appearing before an examining board to be appointed to be Jesus' close
associates, and he says: 'Peter stood there smelling of fish, uncouth and uncultured, impulsive and impetuous. Andrew, James and John also reeked of fish oil and lacked refinement. Philip appeared indecisive. Thomas radiated cynicism. Matthew was considered a traitor to his country. The zealot Simon was a dangerous revolutionary. Judas was a thief. Without whitewash', he says, 'the New Testament paints them as they were, a group not most likely to succeed - and it is likely that some of the disciples would not have chosen each other to be members of the same group. Why did Jesus choose these twelve? Simply because His purpose was to show that God can be glorified in using men like these, men and women just as we are: ordinary'.

I hope you know you're ordinary! Paul reflects this: 'For ye see your calling', 1 Corinthians 1, 'how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called' - it doesn't say 'not any', but it does say 'not many', it's not the norm - 'But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: That no flesh should glory in his presence'. He chooses the weak, so that His strength can be made perfect in their weakness. Judging by worldly standards, these twelve had no special qualifications, they weren't wealthy, they had no social position, they had no special education, they were not trained theologians, high ranking churchmen or ecclesiastics - but twelve ordinary men.

The Servant's servants were young, the Servant's servants were ordinary, and thirdly: the Servant's servants were diverse. There are two ways that I want to show you this morning how they were different, but before I look at those two, we see from the outset of their conversion that they were led differently to the Lord Jesus - just as, of course, all of us were. John and Andrew were helped by the preaching of John the Baptist who was the forerunner before the Lord Jesus. They were helped by a preacher, some of you have been saved through the ministry of a man of God who has preached God's word. Peter and Nathaniel were helped by Philip, he was a personal worker, and I think more have been helped through personal work, individual one-to-one conversation about their soul, than through preachers. Then Philip and Matthew were brought to Christ by direct divine intervention, the Lord Jesus Himself - and there are some people who are converted, and no one is near them, God just speaks to them and they come to faith in the Lord Jesus.

What a different group, different even in how they came to know the Lord - but it takes all sorts to serve Him, and that is seen in these two ways, these two aspects of diversity that I want to share with you. The first is: they were different in their personality and their biography. Their personalities were different and their life stories. Peter was the spokesman, and he seems to be the only one that was in this role. He was a strong personality, always to the point, and his strong point was the fact that he spoke out for the Lord - but isn't it interesting, like many of us, his strong point was also his weak point, and often he spoke out when he shouldn't have. James became one of the first Christian martyrs. He had a short life, he died early, and there are some of us here today and some who we remember who died early in a relative sense. We need to face the fact that not all of us have the same amount of time in which to serve the Lord, and most of us don't know how long we have, and it bodes well that we serve Him with all our might in the days that we've got.

John was the opposite with James, he was long living. When all the other brothers were gone, Peter and Andrew had died, and even Philip and Stephen had deceased, John is still living! I wonder, you who could be classified as in old age here this morning, are you still serving the
Lord with the days that God has given you? Then there's Andrew, the personal worker, he won his brother to Christ. Then Philip, also a personal worker, won a friend to the Lord Jesus. Nathaniel was the perfectionist, Thomas was the pessimist, Matthew was the secularist, the traitor to the Jewish cause; and Simon was his antithesis, he was a zealot, a terrorist, a separatist. Then we have James of Alphaeus, and he’s just called 'James the son of Alphaeus', and you could call him 'so and so's son'. Then there's Thaddeus, or Judas as we have seen, or Lebbaeus, and you could almost name him 'What's his name' - we hardly know what to call him! Then there's Judas, the betrayer.

These last three, in a sense, because of how little we know about them from the scriptures, they could be classed as nobodies. We're not sure what they did, we're not sure how some of them came to Christ, we're not sure exactly of their history, at least from the word of God. This is such a strange team, such a variety, a diversity - but here's the whole point: if the Lord can use such a variation and diversity of personalities and biographies, how can we not work together as God's people? It's interesting that the Pharisees, who the Lord Jesus has been levelled against up to now in Mark's gospel, they were separatists - that's literally what their name meant, separated ones - and yet Jesus, when He calls a band to fight His cause, He calls a company who would be united, unity in diversity.

So the Servant's servants were young, the Servant's servants were ordinary, the Servant's servants were different in personality and life experience. Here's the second thing they were diverse in: they were diverse in spiritual maturity. You see, before they could go with the gospel as missionaries, they had to spend time with the Lord Jesus and learn the pattern of life on His life. They were at different stages in this progression. If you look at the first three names on all of the lists - Peter, James and John - they could be classed as the inner circle of intimacy in the Lord Jesus' Apostles. We know that because they were chosen by the Lord to witness the raising of Jairus' daughter, to see the Transfiguration of the Lord, and to witness the deep agony of the Lord Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. So there is this inner circle of intimacy, and then we see in the fourth and fifth names there was also evangelistic practicality, these personal workers. Then we see, as we move down, skipping a few names, in tenth and eleventh there were these people that we don't know much about - James of Alphaeus, and Thaddeus or Judas. We are reading between the lines a bit, but I offer to you the suggestion that they may have been delayed in their maturity regarding the progress that they were meant to have in discipleship with the Lord Jesus.

So the point is this: they were all at different stages, and yet the Lord chose them all, the Lord was discipling them all, the Lord loved them all - and, praise God, they all got there in the end. Is that not encouraging? The goal of the School of Christ was to prepare them for missionary service, and to do that He had to bring them into intimacy with Himself - the Servant's servants were different in their spiritual maturity, but all of them were moving towards greater intimacy. I want you to look just at this diagram, because it's been a help to me in my life, and it shows this progress. These circles, if you look at the outer circle you will see that the little key to it is the number 5000 - you remember that the Lord fed the 5000, and He provided for them; but you know that He said many of them only came for the loaves and fishes, for the provision. Then we see in the Gospels there were 500 men who followed the Lord Jesus by faith, they believed in Him, in other words they were saved. Yet there were 70 who the Lord Jesus called as disciples, and they served the Lord - they went further than just believing in Him, but they became His disciples, His apprentices, His assistants, ones who learned at His feet. But these 12 we're looking at this morning, they were in the place of fellowship that the Lord took to Himself to be with Him, and to take on His cause forever. Yet even within these twelve there were different degrees of maturity and spiritual intimacy, and
we see that Peter, James and John had that place of privilege with the Lord on very special occasions, and yet even among those three there was one disciple whom Jesus loved. The Lord Jesus seemed to have a special intimacy with John, the beloved disciple. All at different stages, does that not encourage you? It doesn't mean that because you're maybe not as far on as someone else, and not going at as fast a pace as another Christian you know, that God has no use for you - Christ chose them all, worked with them all, and got to the point of maturity with them all eventually.

The point is this: they were transformed - and if you don't believe that, all you need to do is read the Acts of the Apostles. Someone has put it: 'When their exceptional training with Christ was anointed with the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, this nondescript, ragtag, dullish, fearful, unlearned gang of throne-climbers and deserters was transformed into a revitalised, united, godly band of flaming and courageous evangelists who', Acts says, 'turned the world upside down against all the odds'. Now we started off this message asking: how did the Lord Jesus cope with the pressure of a broadening ministry, and how did He provide for the witness of His message to succeeding generations? We must answer this question from Scripture, because we have the same challenge: how do we cope when our ministry broadens? How do we provide for witnessing in the generations that are yet to be?

Well, the first thing I want to say to you, if you haven't got the message yet, is: there's a job for everyone in this regard! No one is exempt, no matter how great or little the gift you feel you have to give - even if only you're getting a boat for Jesus, like we see in verse 9 the disciples doing. If you can lend Him a boat, you have something to do. But you see the inference of what we have read together this morning is that if you want to assist the Lord Jesus, the most important thing is that you're with Him. He called the disciples to be with Him. We have to abide in the Lord Jesus, and there is our strength and preparation for anything we do.

But how do we spread the load, and how do we spread the message? Well, we see it in the example of how the Lord makes these twelve ambassadors, these twelve Apostles. He is with them! You can't do this at a distance! He called these men as a small group, and into that small group He invested His time, training, His whole life. He took three, some would say four, years to do it. They lived together for that whole period, and there is more time Jesus spends with these men than any other people in the Gospels put together. He was with them, and if we are going to see God's witness go on to further generations, we have got to be together, discipling each other.

Now those Apostles were ordered to make disciples, apprentices of themselves, and Jesus told the Apostles to get a convert, get someone saved and teach them everything I taught you. Here are the three things, the three directives the Lord Jesus gave the Apostles on how to make disciples. First of all He tells them to evangelise, Mark 16:15: 'Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature'. It's not enough getting people saved, you've got to disciple them - that's where Matthew 28:19-20 comes in: 'Teaching them all things that I have commanded you'. Not only do you get them saved and disciple them, but you've got to train leaders, 2 Timothy 2:2: 'The things that you've heard of me, Timothy', Paul says, 'among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also'.

There is a method, and I get a little bit tired of this attitude: 'Que sera, sera, whatever will be, will be. The Spirit of God will do it all, we'll just sit on our hands and do nothing'. It doesn't work like that, it didn't work like that for the Lord Jesus, the Apostles, or the early disciples.
There was methodology, biblical - and we might ask: 'Why do we lack converts today? Why are people not developing into disciples of the Lord? Why are we looking everywhere for leaders for another generation?'. Could it be that we have adopted our own methods, or maybe no methods, and this method of Christ has been neglected? Indeed, it's the method of ministry in the church - Ephesians 4, go home and read it, 11-13. Pastors, evangelists, teachers, prophets and apostles are gifts to the church that they might equip the church to do works of ministry. There is a shared responsibility as we spread the load and spread the message, and what the Apostles effectively did was they reproduced themselves in ever widening circles of outreach, and in one sense we are the continuing fruit of their service! So there is no telling what can be done, what far-reaching influence we can have if we implement the Master's method.

This was the system that the Servant's servants used to propagate the message. This was how they would carry on the message after His Ascension. My question to you here is: how will you carry it on in the next generation? We must be using this method.

I'm going to close with an old legend, and it is just that, so take it in that light. It's an old legend that imagines the Lord Jesus arriving in heaven after His Ascension, and the angels are there to welcome Him. The Angel Gabriel asks the Lord Jesus: 'Lord, You suffered so much, You died for sins of mankind, does everyone on the earth know about it?'. 'Oh no', replies the Saviour, 'Just a handful of folks in Jerusalem and Galilee know about it'. 'Well Lord', continued Gabriel, 'What's Your plan for everyone in the world to know Your great love?'. The Master replied, 'Well, I asked all my Apostles to carry the message into all the world, and I told them to tell others, who will in turn tell others, until the last person in the farthest corner has heard the story'. The legend goes that Gabriel's face clouds, for he suspects a potential problem with the Lord's plan. He says to the Lord, 'But Lord, what if Peter forgets and goes back to the fishing in Galilee, and James and John and Andrew? Suppose Matthew returns to his tax booth in Capernaum, and all the others lose their zeal and just don't tell others - what then?'. The story goes that after a pause came the calm voice of the Lord Himself, 'Gabriel, I have no other plan'.

That's His plan, for you to take the Gospel, for you to disciple Christians, for you to train leaders who will be the Servant's servants for a day that is yet to be. Are we doing it? Will we do it? Please God, to the glory of the Lord Jesus, we will follow His example.

Father, we thank You that when the Lord Jesus called His Apostles to send them forth, He brought them to be with Himself. Help us to spend time with the Lord Jesus. We thank You also that He gave them a message, and we thank You that by grace we have received it. He gave them power and authority to go out and preach it - and whilst we are not Apostles, we thank You that we have the Holy Spirit, that power that demonstrates the Gospel message to those who receive it. Lord, give us an ability to follow the method of the Master in preaching the gospel to all creatures, making disciples, training leaders; that Your cause may go on in this place. We know it will go on forever until the Lord comes, for the Lord Jesus said He would build His church and the gates of Hades would not prevail against it. Yet Father, we see the churches of Ephesus, and most of them are not there today because they lost the method and the message and the power. May we not lose our candlestick here, Lord, but reignite the flame of every heart - for Christ's sake we pray, Amen.
ow let's turn in our Bibles to Mark's gospel chapter 3 please. We are taking up our study again - if you haven't been with us in previous weeks, we are studying Mark's gospel - this is our 20th study in the book, I think, and we're only in chapter 3. But we are beginning this morning at verse 20, and we'll be reading down to verse 30 - and the title of my message today is 'Unforgivable Opposition'.

Beginning in Mark 3 verse 20: "And the multitude cometh together again, so that they could not so much as eat bread. And when his friends", the Lord Jesus' friends, "heard of it, they went out to lay hold on him: for they said, He is beside himself. And the scribes which came down from Jerusalem said, He hath Beelzebub, and by the prince of the devils casteth he out devils. And he called them unto him, and said unto them in parables, How can Satan cast out Satan? And if a kingdom be divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house be divided against itself, that house cannot stand. And if Satan rise up against himself, and be divided, he cannot stand, but hath an end. No man can enter into a strong man's house, and spoil his goods, except he will first bind the strong man; and then he will spoil his house. Verily I say unto you, All sins shall be forgiven unto the sons of men, and blasphemies wherewith soever they shall blaspheme: But he that shall blaspheme against the Holy Ghost hath never forgiveness, but is in danger of eternal damnation. Because they said, He hath an unclean spirit".

Now if you can remember a number of weeks ago, in our last study when we looked at how the Lord chose and ordained the twelve disciples in the same chapter, verses 13 to 19, you remember that I told you that one commentary - which is a good one on Mark's gospel by a man called R. Kent Hughes - he entitles the chapter on the choosing of the disciples 'Jesus, Pressured Jesus'. Of course I told you that that was a parody of a line from a favourite hymn, 'Jesus, Precious Jesus'. The point he was making is: Jesus was pressurised in His ministry in verses 7 to 19. He was experiencing pressure because of His workload as the Servant of Jehovah. The population around Him were making great demands on His ministry, He was experiencing pressure from sick folk and from those who were demonised - verses 10 and 11 show us that. We saw in that study what the method was the Lord Jesus implemented to cope with the pressure of being the Servant of the Lord and the demands of His popularity.

The first was prayer, and the second was share. He spent a whole night in prayer, and he was asking the guidance of Almighty God just before the morn when He would choose His twelve disciples and apostles. Not only did He implement prayer to cope with pressure but He also shared the ministry, and the choosing of the twelve was also a sign that the Lord Jesus implemented practical means to share the load of ministry. Not only was He doing that, but He was also instigating a plan whereby He would spread that message to generations that were yet to be. Of course those twelve disciples, eleven of them, would become twelve missionaries, and indeed many of them martyrs for the gospel cause as they took it to the four corners of the globe. We are still fulfilling that ministry, the method of the Lord Jesus is unchanged, we ought to follow it as well - discipling others to take the gospel and preach it to every creature.
Now this morning, in verses 20 to 30, we see pressure upon the Lord Jesus in a different form. This time it is not coming because of the workload of service, but because of opposition to His service. Now we have seen this already in Mark's gospel, particularly coming from the Scribes and Pharisees - but this morning we're going to see this opposition to His ministry in two forms and from two sources. First of all it comes, surprisingly so, from Jesus' friends and even perhaps His loved ones. Then secondly we see again it comes also from His enemies, the Scribes and the Pharisees. Now before we go on any further I want to lay down a few scriptures from John chapter 15 to show us that this is a lesson that we need to learn, it's a lesson that Jesus exemplifies in His life and ministry, but it's also something that He taught to His disciples and teaches to us today. It is simply this: if we, like He, are involved in the service of Jehovah, we will encounter opposition.

Look at John 15 with me, verse 18 reads thus, Jesus said: 'If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you. If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you. Remember the word that I said unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord' - now mark these words - 'If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you; if they have kept my saying, they will keep yours also'. But this is what I want to lay down as a foundation to everything we will say this morning as we look at the unforgivable opposition that the Lord Jesus faced: He told us, 'If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you'. Service, serving the Suffering Servant of Mark's gospel and the gospel record, will entail for us suffering service also.

Now of course we have seen many times, particularly in our introduction to this series, how Mark's gospel is the gospel of the Suffering Servant of Jehovah - it's the gospel that follows Him, primarily, more than any other gospel, as He travels the Calvary Road and goes to be the sacrifice for our sins. But what Mark is saying to us in this message of his gospel is that if we choose to suffer and serve Christ, we must be ready to travel the Calvary Road as well - that is a road that leads to a cross, and a cruel crucifixion, and a death to self, to sin, to popularity. To be the servant of Christ involves opposition. Like Him, it will involve opposition from family and friends, it will involve opposition from enemies, even in religious establishments.

Now let's look first of all at the first source of the Lord's opposition, verse 21 - it says: 'His friends heard of it', or His own people heard of it, 'and they went out to lay hold on him: for they said, He is beside himself'. The New King James translates that, 'He is out of his mind'. These were close friends of the Lord, perhaps even His relatives - if you look down at verse 31 that we will deal with in a later week, it says 'There came then his brethren and his mother, and, standing without, sent unto him, calling him'. Now we're not told precisely what they wanted to say to the Lord Jesus, but it is likely that, whatever it was, it involved a concern either for His safety, or for His reputation as a prophet and a miracle worker - it might have been that they heard what Jesus was teaching, what He was saying, what He was doing, and they feared for Him. They assumed, 'He's gone mad, He's out of His mind, He's beside Himself'. Now of course we know that the Lord Jesus had brothers and sisters, half brothers and sisters according to the flesh. Mark 6 and verse 3 tells us that, but John 7 and verse 5 also informs us that some of His half brothers in the flesh did not believe in Him. Now eventually they did, but at this point they didn't - but because of His faithful service to God, the Lord Jesus experienced division in His own family concerning Him and His ministry. Jesus taught us as His disciples today, as His servants now, that we will know the same experience.
He tells us in Matthew 10, listen: 'Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law. And a man's foes shall be they of his own household. He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And he that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, is not worthy of me'. If you experience hostility in the home because of your faith, do you know what that is? It is fellowshipping in the sufferings of the Lord Jesus Christ. If you have faced opposition in the home, persecution from those who are your friends and your loved ones, you are one of a privileged number that is the great fellowship of the community of suffering saints who have also suffered at the hands of friends and loved ones, even at times Christian friends and loved ones. You're in the fellowship of Christ.

Now you know I love Christian biographies, and I'm always encouraging you to read them - but you learn a great deal about the Christian life from these stories of men and women of God of faith. Many do not know that William Carey, who has been dubbed 'the father of modern missions', during his first year in India was overwhelmed by opposition - not from the Indians, but from family and friends. Everyone seemed to be against him. His own wife, who had never wanted to come to India to begin with, was hostile, and she was sinking into insanity. His four children were continually contracting tropical diseases. His co-worker, a man by the name of John Thomas, squandered all their money leaving Carey virtually destitute. He could echo the cry of King David when he said in Psalm 41: 'Yea, mine own familiar friend, in whom I trusted, which did eat of my bread, hath lifted up his heel against me'. The father of modern missions, as he served the Lord Jesus, suffered as the Lord Jesus suffered.

Now I told you several weeks ago in our Monday evening studies, I think it was that night we looked at Abigail, that John Wesley also suffered from friends and family. His own brother thwarted his attempted marriage to Grace Murray who was ideally suited to him as a bride. Then later on he entered into an incompatible marriage to a wealthy widow by the name of Molly Vazeille, and that resulted in her vehement opposition to his ministry, and heartache and deep unhappiness in a tragic marriage. The founder of Methodism, the leader of the Great Awakening, opposition from friends and family. After the Great Awakenings in the United States, in the New England area, Jonathan Edwards - who was a catalyst for that Awakening - was involved, after that revival now, in a prolonged opposition to his ministry coming from within his own church. He was involved in a dispute over whether or not unbelievers should partake of the Lord's Supper, and because of it - his belief was that they shouldn't - in 1750 he was ejected from the pastorate in Northampton where he served for 23 years. These are the greatest spiritual giants that Christian history has, and yet they all faced suffering in their service, they faced opposition from friends and family, and from close believers.

I see a pattern here, I hope you see it too, and it's enshrined, I believe, in Mark's gospel: the more Christ-like your service will be, the more Christ-like your suffering will be - even friends and family will oppose it! His own people said He was mad. Then we see that His enemies, the Scribes and Pharisees, verse 22 - they came down from Jerusalem, they didn't say He was mad, they said 'He has a devil'. They accused Him of being possessed by Beelzebub - now we will look at what that accusation meant later, but what I want you to see is that not only do we often have opposition from within our own ranks or within our own families, but we need to be awake to the fact that the whole wide world is against us. The enemies of Christ are still with us today. Remember what He said in John 16:2, and think of a modern day application of it: 'They shall put you out of the synagogues: yea, the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service'. On April 18th, five Muslims entered a Christian
publishing company and killed three believers in the southeastern province of Malatya in Turkey. Two of the Christian victims were Turks, converted from Islam, and the third was a German citizen who had lived in Turkey for 10 years - killed for their faith, and I can't even begin to enter into how they were killed for their faith. Reports of this event, which have been very scarce certainly in the United Kingdom, say that four of the attackers admitted that the killings were motivated, listen, 'by both nationalistic and religious feelings'. They believed that they were doing God a service to kill His servants! We need to waken up to the fact that Christian service will not be a picnic inside or outside the church. It is a choice to suffer as Christ has suffered, and if we serve as He served, we will suffer as He suffered.

Now let's look - and this is my first point now! - let's look at the form this opposition took. The form, we've seen the two sources - His friends and loved ones, and the Scribes and Pharisees - but let's see the form the opposition took. The first from the friends and family took the form of saying: 'Jesus, you're deranged! You are deranged! You're mad! You've got a Messiah-complex'. The reason, probably, is because, we see from verse 20 that a great multitude gathered and the Lord Jesus and His apostles were kept so busy that they didn't have time to eat, and the family and friends hearing of His activities felt, 'You're out of your mind!' - and they sought to take Him away. They probably were embarrassed by the zeal of what they saw as a religious fanatic in the family - a religious fanatic in the family. Does that sound familiar to any of you? Maybe that's what you have been for many years to some who belong to you. But you know it's not only unbelievers who sometimes look on Christians, other Christians, as fanatics in the family - but if you are on fire for God, or have a desire to be on fire for God, many believers see you as a fanatic. That's how they viewed Christ.

J.R. Miller says this, and I think it's wonderful, he says: 'If there were more of this insanity there would not be so many unsaved souls dying under the very shadow of our churches, it would not be so hard to get missionaries and money to send the gospel to the dark continents. There would not be so many empty pews in our churches, so many long pauses in our prayer meetings, so few to teach in our Sunday Schools. It would be a glorious thing if all Christians were beside themselves as the Master was, or as Paul was. It is a far worse insanity which, in this world, never gives a thought to any other world; which, moving continually among lost men, never pities them nor thinks of their lost condition, nor puts forth any effort to save them'. William MacDonald said it well: 'It is always true that a man who is on fire for God seems deranged to his contemporaries. If we set out to make a fortune, men will cheer us; if we are a fanatic for Jesus Christ, they will jeer us'. Are you a fanatic for Jesus Christ? You should be.

They accused Christ of being deranged, that was His friends. What do His enemies say? They accused Him not of being deranged, but of being demonised. Verse 22, the Scribes didn't think He was insane, far from it, they thought He was wickedness personified. They accused Him of casting out demons by the power of Beelzebub, which means 'The Lord of dung flies', or 'The Lord of filth', which is just another name for Satan. They said: 'You're casting out devils by the Devil. You're casting out demons by Lucifer'. Now what does that say of these enemies of Christ? It demonstrates the hardness of their hearts towards Him.

Now let me summarise what I've already said and apply it somewhat. What we've seen already, as we've looked at the two sources of this unforgivable opposition, and as we've looked at the two forms that it has taken, is that: one, sometimes opposition comes to us when we are serving the Lord because of ignorance on the part of others. That was the case with the Lord Jesus: some just simply didn't know who He was. They were ignorant, and that's why they opposed Him. They didn't realise He was the Son of God, the Messiah of God.
Then secondly there were not only those who opposed because of ignorance, but those who opposed because of misunderstanding. They knew who He was, but they misunderstood His mission. He was not the Messiah that they expected nor wanted. They wanted an imperial conqueror who would take the Romans to task, and deliver Israel as the Kingdom of God again, and bring that Kingdom on earth there and then. They suspected who He was, but they didn't like the way He was doing His ministry. Then thirdly, there was opposition not only through ignorance and misunderstanding, but there was opposition through pure wickedness - those who knew who He was, who knew what His mission was, but who rejected Him outright.

Now we will experience all these forms of opposition as we serve the Lord: because of others' ignorance, and we've got to live with that; even at times with their misunderstanding; but sometimes we will be opposed because of absolute wickedness in the hearts of others. For these Scribes and Pharisees who personified that attitude, that attitude was fatal. So I want you to see not only the form this opposition took, but the fatal attitude that was the unpardonable sin. We are looking specifically at the opposition of these Scribes. Jesus answers the Scribes' accusation that He casts out devils by the Prince of Devils in a twofold manner. First of all in verses 23 to 26 He teaches them a parable, and the gist of it simply goes that if Satan was casting out demons by Beelzebub, then Satan would be working against himself - Satan would be frustrating his own purposes. He uses the illustration: just as a kingdom divided against itself cannot stand, or a household divided against itself cannot stand, Satan's kingdom cannot stand if he was casting out his own devils - because Satan wants to control men through demons, not free them from demons!

Incidentally, can I say that the Lord Jesus' illustration applies in every facet of our lives, in our homes and in our churches. A church divided cannot stand. Verse 27, Jesus then says, interpreting this parable: whoever defeats Satan must be stronger than he. Jesus sees Himself as a robber, if you like, entering into the strong man's house, and seizing that man's goods. Now that's how the Lord Jesus saw His ministry, that's how it panned out in the Gospels, that's what the apostles preached in the Acts, and what they taught in the epistles. Listen to 1 John 3: 'For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil'. In His lifetime, He proved His ministry as He cast out the demon-possessed people, delivered them, freed them from their oppression and possession. But let me say: when He went to the cross - and this is the gospel of the cross if ever there was one - the Lord Jesus defeated Satan, the grave, hell and evil forever; and we need to realise in the face of opposition that is wicked, opposition that is satanic, and as it increases as we near the end of the age and the return of the Lord Jesus, we need to assert that the victory at Calvary is absolute over all evil! Not only must we assert it, we must claim it in Christ's name by faith and in the battle of prayer.

I wish I had time to go into that, that's a subject all on its own that we don't have time for this morning. But let us not think that we are fighting for victory, we are fighting in victory, the victory of Calvary. So this is what the Lord Jesus is saying: He has bound the strong man, He has stolen his goods. So he gives them this parable, and then He lays down a principle in verses 28 to 30 that many have known as 'the unpardonable', or 'the unforgivable' sin. 'Verily I say unto you', verse 28, 'All sins shall be forgiven unto the sons of men, and blasphemies wherewith soever they shall blaspheme: But he that shall blaspheme against the Holy Ghost hath never forgiveness, but is in danger of eternal damnation. Because they said, He hath an unclean spirit'.

Now what does this mean? We're going to spend a wee bit of time on this, because many explanations have been offered as to what the unpardonable sin is. Many people in our world
who are not Christians think they have committed it - I heard of somebody even this morning, who said: 'I don't think I'll ever be saved, I think I've committed the unpardonable sin'. There are even Christians who fear - they profess Christ, and they fear that they have committed this at some time, whether before conversion or after conversion. Some people say it is blaspheming the Spirit - so if the Holy Spirit does something, and you say it's not of God, that is the blasphemy of the Spirit, the unpardonable sin. Others say it's attributing the works of God to Satan - if you go further than saying it's not of God, and actually say it's the devil doing it, that's the unpardonable sin. Now is that true? Are any of those definitions correct? Well, whilst some of those things actually did happen here in this portion of Scripture, we need to ask a better question than 'What is the unpardonable sin?'. What are we to understand as the core of what these opposing people did and said to Jesus? It's not so much to do with words that they spoke, or even works that they did, but an attitude that they had.

So what we need to ask is: what actually are we to understand was the unpardonable sin? And secondly: can it be committed today? Well, like every interpretation of the Holy Scriptures, context is key - don't just pluck a verse out of context and give it your own meaning, you've got to root it and ground it in the passage where you find it. First of all we note that Jesus says that all blasphemies and sins will be forgiven of men - that's an absolute statement: all blasphemies will be forgiven of men. In Matthew 12 Jesus actually is recorded as saying all manner of sins will be forgiven of men, except, of course, the sin against the Holy Spirit as found here. Now, let me ask you a question: Matthew 12 and verse 32 actually says that you can blaspheme the Son of God and be forgiven, Jesus said that! Even blasphemy against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but not blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Here's the question: is the Lord Jesus, the Son of God, of lesser importance than the Holy Spirit? Think about it, is He? I mean, if you can blaspheme Him, and not the Holy Spirit, does that not imply that the Holy Spirit is a little bit more important? Well, if that's not the case - and we believe it is not the case, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are co-equal in the Godhead - it must mean that what the Lord Jesus is talking about here is not speaking blasphemies, it's not even thinking thoughts of blasphemy. What we have here is something deeper, something more serious.

So what is it? Well, if you take the wider context and you look at Matthew 12, where this verse is found also, we see that these words were spoken by Jesus after He had healed the demoniac who was both blind and dumb. The crowd were saying round about, the ordinary people, 'Perhaps this man is indeed the Son of David, the Messiah!'. They were testifying His true identity, they were responding to God's ministry of the Holy Spirit in their midst, and yet the Scribes and Pharisees responded by taking an opportunity to say: 'That miracle was done by the power of the devil himself'. So the wider context in Matthew 12 is that the ordinary everyday people recognized that this was Jesus the Messiah, sent by the Spirit - but the Scribes refused and hardened their hearts, and attributed His ministry to the devil.

That's the wider context, now let's look at the even broader context in the history of Israel. God the Father sent John the Baptist to preparing the nation for the coming Messiah, prepare the way of the Lord. Many, people responded to John's call and repented, Matthew 21 says that: 'John came unto you in the way of righteousness, and ye believed him not: but the publicans and the harlots believed him: and ye, when ye had seen it, repented not afterward, that ye might believe him'. Harlots, publicans, sinners believed, but the religious leaders would not permit their hearts to recognize the Lord Jesus - in fact, they actually arrested John the Baptist, and ultimately they had him killed. God the Son came as promised, He called the nation to trust Him, but those same religious leaders asked for Jesus to be killed. Yet on the cross the Lord Jesus cried: 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do'. Then the
Holy Spirit came at Pentecost and demonstrated God's power in many convicting ways - how did those religious leaders respond? By arresting the apostles, ordering them not to speak in the name of the Lord Jesus, then killing Stephen themselves - and Stephen told them their sin, what was their sin? Acts 7:51: 'You do always resist the Holy Spirit'. They were sinning against the Holy Spirit in that manner. They had sinned against the Father, they had sinned against the Son and all that they graciously gave - but when it came to the point of Christ rising again, ascending, and the Spirit coming, and the Holy Spirit witnessing to who Christ was through the apostles, and then they rejected it: it was the end of the line for them, there could be no more forgiveness because there would be no more message, no more messengers like Christ.

Have you got the point? So this sin against the Holy Spirit, this unpardonable sin seems to mean a deliberate closing of the heart and mind to the witness of the Spirit to Jesus - that's exactly what the Scribes did. They would not accept the spiritual witness of who Jesus was. Now sensitive souls have suffered much agony because of certain interpretations of this verse. Some in their past were forced to blaspheme Christ, even Christians in times of persecution have been forced to blaspheme, and they worry they have committed this sin. You remember that Saul of Tarsus tried to force early Jewish Christians to blaspheme in Acts 26, communist governments in our own day trying to do this to believers, and remember Peter the apostle cursed and swore that he did not know Jesus - and he was forgiven, he repented and was reinstated to a place of authority in the church.

Listen to me this morning: if you are a Christian or a non-Christian, and you fear that you have ever committed the unpardonable sin, that is sure proof that you have never committed it - because anyone who has committed it is past feeling, past caring; they have outright rejected the gospel completely and permanently. We can't know anyone who that may be, only God knows - but ultimately this is a complete and utter rejection of the ministry of Christ that will take people to hell. Now let me say - and please don't misunderstand what I'm saying, some people go out at times and take half of what I said, and misinterpret me - listen carefully to what I'm saying this morning: literally this sin cannot be committed today in the sense that Jesus is not physically here as the Jewish Messiah performing miracles and signs to the nations. The nation has rejected Him as their Messiah, they can't do that again, so in a literal sense this sin, as was committed here, cannot be committed again - but spiritually it can be committed in the sense of those who permanently reject Christ and the gospel, anyone who rejects the Holy Spirit's convicting influence and does not believe, will not be forgiven, neither in this world nor the world to come.

If you look at verse 22 the word that is used of the Pharisees saying that Jesus cast out devils by Beelzebub, the word 'saying' is in a tense that means this was an ongoing and persistent thing they said - they went on saying it! Now listen: this does not teach that God is unwilling to forgive, but this unpardonable sin teaches that the person concerned is unwilling to receive God's forgiveness, and persists in that permanent attitude just like the Jews did. They hardened their hearts so much that even till today, apart from a remnant, they are still in spiritual darkness. It was a historic sin that cannot be repeated in context, and yet it is being repeated in the spiritual sense all over our world where people harden their hearts, some permanently, to Jesus Christ.

Let me summarise everything I've said this morning: if we are serving the Servant of Jehovah, opposition is certain. You will suffer if you serve, and if you serve as Jesus served you will suffer as Jesus suffered. That opposition at times can be serious: family, friends, and even satanic opposition that we have seen this morning. But here's the message: the great
gospel that we preach is that salvation is secure to those who, hearing God's voice, do not harden their hearts but believe His word - but there is a word of warning: if you do not use what God has given to you, you will lose it. The law of nature is that if a man will not do anything, the time is bound to come when he cannot do it. If you don't use an eye, and patch it up, you'll lose the sight in it. If you don't use a limb, and tie it up, you will lose the use of it. If you cover over your ear for an extended period of time, you will lose your hearing. There will come a time, if you constantly reject the gospel of the Lord Jesus and harden your heart, there will come a time when your heart will not be able to believe. It could be hardened through sin, it could be hardened through age, through time, through previous rejections of the gospel - all those things harden the soul.

I wonder am I talking to someone this morning in this family worship service, and you have constantly rejected the Lord Jesus? You need to be very careful that your next rejection is not a permanent rejection that hardens your heart to such an extent that you resist the Holy Spirit to never speak to you again. Pirate Gibbs from 'The Pirates of the Caribbean' was a terror to the commercial seas, and finally he was hanged in New York City - but he acknowledged before his death that when he committed his first murder, I use his words, 'His conscience was a hell in his bosom'. But after sailing the seas for years and years under the skull and crossbones, he became blunted, and testified that he could have robbed a vessel, murdered a crew, and laid down to rest like a child in a cradle - hardened. There are many forms of unforgivable opposition in the sense that they are unjustified, but there is a rejection of Christ which is final and eternally unforgivable, and in that sense will never be forgiven in this age nor the age to come. Do not go into eternity having committed that sin.

John chapters 14 and 16 tell us that the ministry of the Holy Spirit when Jesus left this world was to convince sinners that they are sinners and they need a Saviour. If you are beginning to be convinced of that, that is the work of the Holy Spirit; but if you resist that you are in danger of rejecting His ministry in your life, and the cross work of Christ and eternal salvation - that's what we're talking about today. The more you reject, the more you resist, the less light and feeling you will have. May anyone who finds themselves being convinced of these truths trust in Christ now before it is too late.

Father, we thank You - though it's hard to say those words, but we must get to the place - we thank You for when we suffer for serving the Suffering Servant of the Lord. Even when that opposition comes from friends and families, but even when it comes from satanic sources, angels of light, we thank You that we are in the fellowship of His sufferings. Yet, our Father, if we could just turn the tables of focus on to those who are doing the opposing for a moment, we fear for their souls, and we ask that none certainly in this building, but none in our families and among our friends, none will permanently reject Jesus Christ. Give us a greater burden for their souls, give us a greater confidence in the victory of the cross and claim it on their behalf. Bless us now as we go our separate ways, in Jesus' name, Amen.
Now do turn with me to Mark's gospel chapter 3 again in our studies in this gospel, and we've reached verse 31 and we begin our reading there through to the end of the chapter, verse 35. I've entitled my message today "Jesus' True Relations".

Verse 31 of Mark 3: "There came then his brethren and his mother, and, standing without, sent unto him, calling him. And the multitude sat about him, and they said unto him, Behold, thy mother and thy brethren without seek for thee. And he answered them, saying, Who is my mother, or my brethren? And he looked round about on them which sat about him, and said, Behold my mother and my brethren! For whosoever shall do the will of God, the same is my brother, and my sister, and mother".

Now if you remember where we have been up to now in Mark's gospel, particularly Mark's gospel chapter 3 and chapter 2 as well, you will know that a frenzied scene has been created for us concerning the daily life of the Servant of the Lord, that is our Lord Jesus. If you cast your mind back, you will remember four men demolishing someone's roof to lower their friend down to meet Jesus and be healed. You will remember that in this chapter in particular, the Lord Jesus was hard pressed and pressurised by demoniacs who were pressing themselves against Him to be delivered, diseased people falling upon Him to be healed. We also saw the Lord spending a whole night in prayer, at least that's inferred in Mark, the night before He chose His twelve apostles - and what a motley crew they were, the Lord had His work cut out with them! Last time we looked at Mark, we found that the Lord was on the receiving end of accusations of demonic possession. The religious establishment were accusing Him of casting out devils by the power of the Prince of devils, Beelzebub, which of course was synonymous with Lucifer himself, Satan.

If it wasn't bad enough that these religious leaders were accusing Him of having a devil, His own friends were accusing Him of being beside Himself, being mad, out of His mind. Now we're going to see this morning that it's not so much His friends, but His relatives that are coming to Him and wanting to take Jesus away from the chaos. I want you to get this picture in your mind, their idea is that they are rescuing the Lord Jesus from Himself. He has created this frenzy by His own mania, by what He thinks He is Himself - perhaps they have even heard of some of His teaching and they're coming to rescue Him, to rescue His reputation as a prophet, as perhaps the potential Messiah - or maybe they are just wanting to rescue Him physically, because they know He has been spending whole nights in prayer and all day serving others.

Now do you know what's amazing to me, before I go on any further: as someone who is so easily discouraged and dissuaded from the work of the Lord, it's amazing to me how none of these things moved Him, none of them. They were powerless to turn Him from His course. His face was set flint-like toward the cross and the crown. We could spend a whole morning thinking about that, couldn't we? How we need to be the same. Now, while Jesus was still speaking to the people, and the crowd were seated around Him, we read here in verse 31 that His mother and His brothers arrived. Let me just say that it is significant that Joseph is not
mentioned as living during any of the ministry of our Lord Jesus, since Joseph was in the royal line to be Israel's next king. So, only after Joseph's death could the Lord Jesus have presented Himself as 'King of the Jews'. We just read of Jesus' mother Mary and His brothers, and they stand outside and ask to speak with the Lord, for they are unable to reach Him themselves because of the great multitude that is gathered around Him.

So someone tells the Lord Jesus: 'Your mother and Your brothers are standing outside, and want to speak with You'. We read that the Lord's reply was this: 'Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?'. Now Mark records that the Lord Jesus looked around at those who were sitting round about Him, but Matthew put it like this: that, after doing that we assume, He extended His hand towards His disciples and said, 'Look at my mother and my brothers, my mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it. Whoever does the will of my Heavenly Father, he is my brother or my sister or my mother'.

Now, lest we miss the entire point of this passage, let me spell out very clearly what the point of the Lord Jesus is: it is simply that ties of flesh and blood mean nothing spiritually. In a nutshell, that's what He is saying. What marks us out as being part of God's family is obedience to God's will, full stop. Not who we are related to, but how we have a relationship with Almighty God. Now of course when a newborn comes on the scene, all the women especially are asking 'Who is he like? Who is she like?' - such a lot of nonsense is talked at such a time! Yet some will say, 'I can see his father in him' - that's what they say about my children! 'I can see his father in him', that's what we're talking about here, the family likeness of the children of God. It is to see the Father in them, or to see Jesus in them. The family likeness of the family of God is obedience, that's what the Lord is saying here: 'My brothers and my mother are those that obey the Father's will'.

So let's take the point of what Jesus is saying and split it into two points for our understanding this morning. The first is this: ties of flesh and blood mean nothing spiritually. Let's tease this one out for a little while: ties of flesh and blood mean nothing spiritually. Now in Mark 6 and verse 3, if you look at it, we have clear proof that the Lord Jesus had brothers and sisters according to the flesh - now of course they could only be half brothers and sisters, as God was Christ's Father. But humanly speaking, we read: 'Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary', they say, 'the brother of James, and Joses, and of Juda, and Simon? and are not his sisters here with us?'. Now that clearly disproves the dogma of the Roman Catholic Church that Mary was a perpetual virgin. She was a virgin, of course, before the Lord Jesus was born; but after that the Lord Jesus had brothers and sisters. There are many other scriptures that prove that point.

Now if we go back to Mark 3 and verse 21, we saw in our last study that His own people thought that the Lord was mad. Now that may well be His friends, but probably, I think, it included also His relatives - because here this morning in verse 31 we see that it is His brothers and His mother had come to rescue Him. They are concerned for Jesus' safety, or concerned for His reputation, and perhaps because of the frenzied atmosphere that has been created by Jesus' teaching they have assumed - as the New King James Version puts it in verse 21 - that He is out of His mind. Now we know from John 7 and verse 5 that the condition with His brothers and sisters was worse than just thinking He was mad, John tells us that some of His brothers at least did not believe in Him. They didn't believe He was who He said He was, and was going to do what He said He was going to do.

Now what does that teach us? Very simply what the Lord is teaching us through the story today is that ties of flesh and blood mean nothing spiritually. To put it specifically: being a
half brother or sister of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself in the flesh, didn't make any difference to their spiritual condition. Some of them were unbelievers - and they had to believe, they had to believe to be benefited from Christ spiritually, that's very significant. Being a half brother or half-sister of Christ didn't matter in the spiritual realm. But being the mother of Jesus wouldn't make any difference to Mary either. In Luke 2 verse 22 we read that after the birth of the Lord Jesus, 'When the days of Mary's purification according to the law of Moses were accomplished, they brought Jesus to Jerusalem, to present him to the Lord', and later on in verse 24 of Luke 2 we read, 'And to offer a sacrifice according to that which is said in the law of the Lord, A pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons'. Mary needed to be purified after birth, and she had to give an offering as a sinner - and, of course, you know well her great cry in Luke 1:46-47: 'Mary said, My soul doth magnify the Lord, And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour'. She was a sinner who needed a Saviour.

Mary, of all people, on this occasion should have remembered what the Lord Jesus said to her and Joseph when He got lost on their journey to the Feast, and when He was found with the doctors in the Temple He said: 'How is it that ye sought me? wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business?'. Now there is another rebuke here to the Roman Catholic Church for their emphasis on Mary-worship, Mariolatry. We see here that Mary was a sinner who needed a Saviour, and in fact the only time we find her mentioned in Mark's gospel is in this negative light of not understanding what the purpose of Christ was at this moment. Whilst she is undoubtedly the greatest of all women - and I do not demean her as many do - she is a sinner saved by grace.

Jesus is basically saying that it was more to Mary's credit to do the will of God than to be His mother. It meant more to do God's will than to be related to Christ in the flesh. So, being a half brother or sister of the Lord Jesus meant nothing spiritually, being the mother of the Lord Jesus meant nothing spiritually. Being a son of Abraham means nothing spiritually. If you were to turn to John 8, we would read these words: 'They answered and said unto the Lord Jesus, Abraham is our father. Jesus saith unto them, If ye were Abraham's children, ye would do the works of Abraham. But now ye seek to kill me, a man that hath told you the truth, which I have heard of God: this did not Abraham. Ye do the deeds of your father. Then said they to him, We be not born of fornication; we have one Father, even God'. The Lord Jesus was pointing out to them that being related to Abraham by flesh and blood meant nothing spiritually, being a Jew, Jesus was saying, will not save your soul. It will make no difference to you eternally, and we see that in Luke 16 where the rich man is in hell, and he's able to call Abraham his father, and Abraham is able to call the rich man 'son', and they are related in race, but spiritually he is lost and that for all eternity.

Jesus is telling us, lest any of you in this congregation this morning have missed this fundamental spiritual gospel lesson, that ties of flesh and blood mean nothing spiritually! You need to be born again, and that is how you enter into the family of God - John chapter 3, Jesus said: 'Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again'. It is a salvation that is not related to religion, or to works - in Matthew 7 Jesus made that clear: 'Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity'. Works mean nothing!
Now you might say: 'Well, is obedience not works?'. Jesus is saying in this passage that, 'Those who are related by blood to Me are not spiritually correct in God's eyes; but those that do the will of My Father in heaven' - are works not obedience? Initially, no. You see, Jesus was asked on one occasion by religious people: 'What must we do that we might do the works of God?', and Jesus answered and said unto them, 'This is the work of God, that ye believe on Him whom God has sent'. They wanted to do a work, but Jesus here, I believe, is making the point that you need to be obedient to the gospel, you need to believe on the One who God has sent. That is not a work, that is faith - saved by obeying God's word to believe the gospel. Even Abraham, the father of Judaism, was justified by faith and not by works - Romans 4: 'What shall we say then that Abraham our father, as pertaining to the flesh, hath found? For if Abraham were justified by works, he hath whereof to glory; but not before God. For what saith the scripture? Abraham believed God, and it was counted', accredited, 'unto him for righteousness'. Peter put it well, to get into God's family you need to be 'born again, not of corruptible seed' - that is, not in your first, natural birth - 'but of incorruptible seed, by the word of God, which lives and abides forever'.

You're not saved eternally because of your relations, and you're not saved eternally because of religious works, you're saved because you're born again, having put faith in Jesus Christ and Him alone. So who you are related to in the flesh, or how religious or righteous you are in the flesh, is irrelevant: you must obey God through the gospel, that's what Jesus is saying. Now I have a question, and I try to be as honest as I can when I come to the scriptures, and I encourage you to do that - don't douse your questions, but try and answer them biblically - this book can answer any of the questions that you might have. When I was reading this, I thought: 'Well, this makes the Lord Jesus look a bit rude, doesn't it?'. Let's be honest: here's His mother and His brothers coming to see Him, and He doesn't want to go out and speak with them. If that happened to you in your situation, would you not think your son or daughter was being rude? Of course you would! Indeed Renan, the famous sceptic, used these words to accuse Jesus of, I quote: 'Trampling underfoot everything that is human, love and blood' - His family relationship - 'and country'.

There's no doubt that this is one of the hard sayings of Jesus. Let me point out a number of things that will help you if you're asking the same question as I am: was He being rude? First of all, it doesn't say that the Lord Jesus didn't eventually speak to His mother and His brothers, does it? He may well have done so after this event. The second lesson, which is more important, is: Jesus could not have dishonoured His mother, because that would have been a transgression of the fifth commandment. Added to that is the fact, as we often sing, 'There is no love like the love of Jesus' - now that's the case for us as His disciples, but you could never imagine the type of affections that sprung up in Jesus' heart toward His natural mother and His brothers and sisters - they are certainly greater than anything that you have experienced in your own family.

Indeed, we have evidence of this in John 19, that when Jesus was in His most needful hour, He was looking after the needs of His own mother. You remember He saw His mother, and the disciple standing by her whom He loved, and He said unto His mother: 'Woman, behold thy son! Then saith he to the disciple, Behold thy mother! And from that hour that disciple took her unto his own home'. No one can accuse the Lord Jesus of being negligent or dishonouring towards the care of His mother - but here's the point that the Lord is making: He put God's interests above natural ties. That's why we find it so difficult to understand. He's not exhorting, as the cults do today, that we break our ties with friends and loved ones. He's not saying, as many Christians do, that we should be callous, almost, towards our unconverted loved ones and relatives - no, no! But He's saying, rather than showing that the ties of flesh
are stronger than the Spirit, we should be showing as believers that the ties of the Spirit are stronger than the ties of flesh and blood.

What He is meaning is that when there is a conflict of interests between the ties of flesh and blood and the ties of the Spirit, we ought to obey God's word. Now there's precedent for this in the Old Testament, if you look at Exodus 32 - you remember that when Moses was receiving the law, the people got together and made a golden calf and worshipped it in a pagan orgy. 'When Moses saw', we read in verse 25 of Exodus 32, 'that the people were naked; (for Aaron had made them naked unto their shame among their enemies:) Then Moses stood in the gate of the camp, and said, Who is on the LORD's side? let him come unto me. And all the sons of Levi gathered themselves together unto him and he said unto them, Thus saith the LORD God of Israel, Put every man his sword by his side, and go in and out from gate to gate throughout the camp, and slay every man his brother, and every man his companion, and every man his neighbor. And the children of Levi did according to the word of Moses: and there fell of the people that day about three thousand men. For Moses had said, Consecrate yourselves today to the LORD, even every man upon his son, and upon his brother; that he may bestow upon you a blessing this day'. Now that seems cruel to us, but Moses knew that the wicked in the camp had to be slain, lest the whole camp perish under God's judgement and this sinful way of life spread. When we go to Deuteronomy 33:8-9 we find that Moses commends the Levites for their ability to give judgement with loyalty to God, rather than being swayed by family ties.

Now, whilst it's not as harsh for us in the New Testament era of grace, the Lord Jesus still says to us in Luke 14:26, listen to these words: 'If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple'. Now I wonder do we get the balance right in our lives as Christians? The balance between the ties of the flesh and the ties of the Spirit - this is very hard. Jesus is saying that it is only those who love Christ more than their nearest and dearest that can be my disciples. Now being a disciple is not an issue of whether you're saved or not. You can have eternal life and not be a true disciple of the Lord Jesus, so don't be confused that I'm saying you can't be saved if you don't love Christ more than your nearest and dearest. Jesus is saying that if you want to follow me completely and be a true disciple of mine, you've got to do this. What He's saying is simply this: 'You must put me first, and whatever pain that causes in your family or in your own heart, you must do it'. Now that doesn't mean you deprive your family of love - no, no, in fact it's the opposite, because if our love for God is great enough to love God and Christ greater than our family, surely our love for our family will be even better. But Jesus is saying that our love should be so great for God and Himself that our love for our family looks like hatred in comparison! That's what He means in Luke 14:26.

So how do you fare? It's a hard one, isn't it? In fact, you can imagine the impact of this in Jewish society where the family was so important - this was radical obedience that the Lord Jesus was espousing. Maybe it wasn't only too radical for the Jews of His day, but it's too radical for us in our day, that the ties of flesh and blood mean nothing spiritually.

Let's move on to His second point, or the second half of His main point. He's telling us that the character trait of those who belong to God's family is obedience to the Father's will, not who you're related to or how religious you are. He asks: 'Who is my mother and my brothers?'. He looks around at the circle of people, and He stretches out His hand towards His disciples and says: 'Here is my mother, here are my brothers, those who do the will of God'. That's not to say that there was no honour in being the mother of the Lord Jesus, or being
one of His siblings, there was - but His point is: it's of no eternal significance to their souls. Listen to Luke chapter 11: 'It came to pass, as he spake these things, a certain woman of the company lifted up her voice, and said unto him, Blessed is the womb that bare thee, and the breasts which thou hast sucked. But he said, Yea rather, blessed are they that hear the word of God, and keep it'. It is a blessing to be the mother of Messiah, it is a blessing to be a half-brother or half-sister, but it means nothing spiritually. Jesus is saying: 'I regard My disciples, those who do My words, as My family, My brothers, My sisters, My mother'.

Now some people are bothered by the concept that we should be called the brothers or sisters of Jesus, and their reason is justified: they worry about overfamiliarity. Well, let me point out that the Greek here indicates a figurative sense of 'brother' and 'sister' and 'mother', it's not meant to be taken literally - how we are spiritually related to one another. Here is a principle that I think you should lay down in your own mind to discern what is overfamiliarity and what is biblical, simply this: intimacy is not the same as overfamiliarity. Did you hear that? Intimacy is not the same as overfamiliarity. Sometimes it is portrayed that the two are synonymous, and they are not - neither is intimacy equal to irreverence. Intimacy is not equal to irreverence.

So we are seeing here the intimate relationship that we can have with Christ in this spiritual realm when we are obedient to God's word. It's right throughout the Bible, He calls us brothers and sisters - yes! Listen to the Psalms, 22:22 prophetically, 'I will declare thy name', Messiah says, 'unto my brethren: in the midst of the congregation will I praise thee'. Matthew 25:40, one of the Lord's parables, 'And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me'. Matthew 28:10, 'Then said Jesus unto them, Be not afraid', after He had risen again, 'go tell my brothers that they go into Galilee, and there shall they see me'. John 20:17, 'Jesus saith unto Mary', after His resurrection, 'Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father: but go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God'. Romans 8:29, 'For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren'. Hebrews 2:11-12, 'For both he that sanctifieth and they who are sanctified are all of one: for which cause he is not ashamed to call them brethren, Saying, I will declare thy name unto my brethren, in the midst of the church will I sing praise unto thee'.

So you see it is biblical that the Lord should call us brothers and sisters in humanity, yes, but in the Spirit because of obedience to Him. The character trait, the family likeness of God's family, is to obey the Father's will as Jesus did, to have His resemblance. Now here's the reality check: are earthly ties greater to us than ties of the Spirit? Are earthly loyalties greater to us than heavenly loyalties? Let's do the test then: your home, has it become a temple for you? What about your family, and your career, and possessions - are they idols of devotion to you? Do you worship them? Do you covet them? This is elementary stuff, but in a world of increasing materialism, the fact of the matter is: we, even unconsciously, are putting things and people before God, ties of flesh and blood before spiritual.

Let me say to you: the best way that you can provide and protect your family is to love Jesus more than you love them, that's the best way. To put it negatively: a Christian should not use family as an excuse for giving Jesus second place - for the Christian there is no excuse for that! I know it's hard, and I know that there's great cost, and I know that I'm guilty of not doing it - but it is upon us as disciples of our Lord to be obedient, and the recompense for those who even lose relatives and friends because of their faith, the Bible says, is a hundred
fold - Mark 10:29: 'And Jesus answered and said, Verily I say unto you, There is no man that hath left house, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my sake, and the gospel's, But he shall receive an hundredfold now in this time, houses, and brethren, and sisters, and mothers, and children, and lands, with persecutions; and in the world to come eternal life'. I always wondered at that verse, but do you know what it means? We are meant to have brothers and sisters and fathers and mothers in the church of Jesus Christ, and for those who lose their fathers and mothers and brothers and sisters and friends because they have followed Jesus, we ought to be greater fathers and mothers and brothers and sisters and friends to them by the ties of the Spirit than you could ever have in the ties of the flesh. The question is: are we?

In Luke 8:21, where Luke records this particular instance, we read that Jesus said to them: 'My mother and my brethren are these which hear the word of God, and do it'. Where do you find the will of God? You find it in the word of God: hearing God's word and doing it! I'll tell you, if there is a message for the people of the Iron Hall and evangelicalism in Ulster today, it is this one: people need to not only hear the word of God, they need to do it! There's a great responsibility when we hear God's word, and that responsibility is to do it. James said - and incidentally James, we believe, who wrote the epistle, is a half-brother of the Lord Jesus, who obviously came to faith and was a great leader of the church in Jerusalem. It's interesting also that he never mentions in his book that he is a half-brother of the Jesus, because ties of the flesh don't mean anything in the spiritual realm. So he called himself 'a servant of the Lord', but he says: 'If any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass: For he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was'.

Let's not miss this: you're very good, you evangelical people, at telling folk 'It's not by vain conversation of the tradition of your fathers that you're saved, but by the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot'. Oh, 'Amens' for that first point, ties of flesh and blood mean nothing in the Spirit - what about the last one? That the character trait of the likeness of the family of God is not to hear the word, not to hear the word but to hear and do! That's different! That's hard! John in his epistle, after James, later on, says - 1 John 2:17 - if we do His word, we will abide in Him. Are you up and down in your Christian life, and wondering why, swings and roundabouts, peaks and troughs, roller coasters? 'The world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever'. You'll abide, you'll be stable not only in time but for eternity. First John 3:22 says we'll also have answers to prayer: 'Whatsoever we ask, we receive of him, because we keep his commandments, and do those things that are pleasing in his sight'. Is God not hearing, God not answering your prayers? Could it be that you're doing an awful lot of hearing, but very little doing God's will through God's word?

First John 3:23: 'This is his commandment', if you want to obey something, 'That we should believe on the name of his Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, as he gave us commandment'. Now let's be real for a moment: not all flesh and blood families are loving, are they? Quite a lot of them aren't. Not all churches are loving, where there are ties of the Spirit that are meant to mean more than ties of the flesh - but do you know what Jesus is saying, and John is saying, and James is saying, and the whole word of God is saying? If you do God's will in God's word, you will love one another, and you will be bound together by a stronger cord of love and devotion as fellow Christians than you have even with your family of flesh and blood.

How do we fare where that's concerned? I don't mean to be ignorant - I know it can come
across like that at times, I'm sorry about that! - but I'd rather be sitting with my family than sitting with you! Is that right? Well, I think part of it's right, but when we have an aversion to come among God people, and be with them, and rub up against them, and help them when it costs us and is inconvenient, when we'd rather just go home and shut the door and let them get on with it - that's the way we feel, I'll tell you that's the way I feel - but it's wrong. We need to be hearers and doers - oh, I wish I could tattoo that word somewhere where you'd see it everyday! Doers!

Let me relay this story to you in closing. During the holiday there - one of my holidays! - I read a book on the persecuted church. It was quite technical in bits, but it's worth getting even for the last chapters of it. It's written by a man called Ron Boyd McMillan, who is the son of Pastor Ron McMillan who was in Templemore Hall for many years - he works with Open Doors. Near the end of the book he says that he once knew a Chinese Christian, an evangelist, to whom was given 5,000 copies of the Word of God to distribute among new converts. The organisation that gave him the Bibles was dismayed because they discovered two years later that very few of the Bibles had been distributed. They began to wonder was this guy selling them on the black market or something. So Ron Boyd McMillan was asked to be a mediator in this difficult situation, and he says that in a tense meeting this was the reason the evangelist gave for not distributing the Bibles at a faster rate. Now listen carefully: 'I have discovered that it is dangerous to learn truth at a rate faster than we can practise it'. I have learned that it is dangerous to learn truth at a rate faster than we can practise it.

Now bear with me: this Chinese man began his ministry in the 1980s when Bibles were extremely scarce in China, and he travelled around and there was revival in several of the provinces of China. He found that each week roughly 100 people were professing faith in Christ. Because he was an itinerant, he could not linger to disciple these people, so he kept on moving - as well because of the police that were tracking him. His dilemma was this, and he says, I quote: 'I have no Bibles to give these new converts, but I must leave them something so they can keep on growing into God' - what a privilege we have. He devised a unique method of self-discipleship, this is what he did: out of 100 converts he picked five people at random, and he said: 'You are each going to lead a weekly group of 20 people'. He went down to the stream and he picked out five smooth stones, and on each of those stones he chiselled a verse of Scripture. He gave each a stone, and said: 'Each week give a different member the stone, let them live with this verse on the stone, think about it, pray about it, take it into the field as they farm, put it next to their rice bowl as they eat, put it under their pillow as they sleep, all the time asking God to speak through these words. Then next week, when you all come together, you're to listen to what God has told them about the verse on this stone. As long as the person holds the stone, they cannot be interrupted, after they release it you may extend the discussion to the others. After everyone has spent a week with the stone verse, swap the stone with another group and do the same again'. That's all they had.

He promised to return in six months, though in reality it was often a couple of years, and he frankly expected many of the converts to have fallen away - but he was astonished to discover that nearly everyone was going on in the faith. He felt he had stumbled on a Bible truth about discipleship, and that is why, he was explaining to those mission representatives, he did not give a Bible to a new convert at first but required that for a time they use the five stone method. He said, listen: 'I don't want them to encounter too much truth too fast, otherwise they will get into the bad habit of never using what they know'. I'm convicted - a lesson from the persecuted church: not learning the word of God faster than we can practise it. Let me put that on its head: practising as we learn, that we might wear the family likeness of the children of God, those who hear and do.
We have all got a father or a mother, whether they are deceased or not, or a husband or a wife, or a son or a daughter - this is all religious waffle if it doesn't become real to us. My little girl Lydia, my little boy Noah, I love them to death - do I love Jesus more? Don't say that's taking it too far, that's what Jesus said! Not that you don't love them, or love them less, or look as if you hate them, not that, no, no, no - but do you love Him more? Do you love Him, for He first loved you? I'll tell you, do you see if you go away and say: 'That was interesting, wasn't it', and 'I didn't agree with that point about the brothers there, no, no, no, you shouldn't call the Lord 'brother'' - no, listen, forget about all that: do you love Him first? For when you are standing before the judgement seat of Christ, it will not be whether you are pre-, a-, or post-millennial, whether you dot all the i's and cross all the t's, it will be whether you loved Him first and gave Him all - that's all that will matter. I can't say that.

Lord, get us, we pray, by grace, and slowly lest we stumble, or get frightened, or like some who heard Jesus' hard sayings went away and followed no more, get us there by hook or by crook Lord, get us there. May our fellowship in families, and our fellowship among the family of God here be the better for all of us putting Jesus first, doing the will of our Father in heaven. Amen.
Let's turn to the Scriptures together for our reading, Mark's gospel chapter 4, as we continue our studies in Mark's account of the life and ministry of our Lord Jesus. Mark chapter 4, beginning to read at verse 1, and we will conclude at verse 20.

Speaking of the Lord, it says: "And he began again to teach by the sea side: and there was gathered unto him a great multitude, so that he entered into a ship, and sat in the sea; and the whole multitude was by the sea on the land. And he taught them many things by parables, and said unto them in his doctrine, Hearken; Behold, there went out a sower to sow: And it came to pass, as he sowed, some fell by the way side, and the fowls of the air came and devoured it up. And some fell on stony ground, where it had not much earth; and immediately it sprang up, because it had no depth of earth: But when the sun was up, it was scorched; and because it had no root, it withered away. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up, and choked it, and it yielded no fruit. And other fell on good ground, and did yield fruit that sprang up and increased; and brought forth, some thirty, and some sixty, and some an hundred. And he said unto them, He that hath ears to hear, let him hear. And when he was alone, they that were about him with the twelve asked of him the parable. And he said unto them, Unto you it is given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God: but unto them that are without, or outside, "all these things are done in parables: That seeing they may see, and not perceive; and hearing they may hear, and not understand; lest at any time they should be converted, and their sins should be forgiven them. And he said unto them, Know ye not this parable? and how then will ye know all parables? The sower soweth the word. And these are they by the way side, where the word is sown; but when they have heard, Satan cometh immediately, and taketh away the word that was sown in their hearts. And these are they likewise which are sown on stony ground; who, when they have heard the word, immediately receive it with gladness; And have no root in themselves, and so endure but for a time: afterward, when affliction or persecution ariseth for the word's sake, immediately they are offended. And these are they which are sown among thorns; such as hear the word, And the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things entering in, choke the word, and it becometh unfruitful. And these are they which are sown on good ground; such as hear the word, and receive it, and bring forth fruit, some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some an hundred".

We want you to pay attention, and you will have to pay attention this morning - well, you have to pay attention every morning - but we're going to look in depth at what a parable is, and I think that is necessary in order that we understand both the parable that is mentioned here, the parable of the sower and the seed, and the three other parables that we will study in subsequent weeks. So my title today is 'A Parable on Parables'. Before we look at parables, and this parable, there are a number of lessons in this passage of Scripture, and that means that it's going to take us two weeks to get through it. The first is found in verse 1, because Mark makes clear to us that the Lord began to teach by the seaside, and the crowd forced Him to use a boat for His pulpit. Now it might be interesting for someone to do, on a future occasion, pulpits of the Bible - strange places and things that the Lord Jesus and prophets and evangelists and apostles used as their pulpit from which to preach the word. But as far as the
Lord Jesus' ministry was concerned, this was a new departure. He had not preached before on a boat, and I would vouch to say that perhaps no one had ever done it as He did it in this particular passage.

He is no longer now teaching in the synagogue, as was the accepted means, but was teaching by the lakeside from a boat. Now, it was an ideal venue to preach from, because the shore shelved gently down to the water's edge and made a kind of natural amphitheatre for the crowd to stand on and hear very clearly what the Lord was saying. But what I want you to notice is that not only was this a practical approach, but it was very unorthodox for Jesus to preach from a boat to a hillside. He had made the orthodox approach already to the people and they had rejected Him in the synagogues, and now He had to take unusual methods to sow the seed of the word of God. Now I only say this in passing because I think it is very relevant to the day and age in which we live: Jesus was prepared to use new methods in His day. His message did not change, but the method by which He presented it did. Now not every method would have been appropriate, and not every method is appropriate today to use as a medium to preach the word, to present the gospel - but out of the conventional setting, the synagogue, the Lord Jesus moved, because of the hardness and unresponsiveness of people's hearts, out into the open air to be among the people, to fish where the fish were swimming.

John Wesley was for many years a faithful and orthodox servant of the Church of England. Down in Bristol George Whitfield was preaching to miners, to as many as 20,000 at a time in the open air, and his hearers were being converted by the hundreds. He eventually sent for John Wesley, and Wesley himself said, and listen carefully to his words, I'm quoting him: 'I love a commodious room, a soft cushion, a handsome pulpit'. The whole business of open-air preaching rather offends him. He said himself: 'I could scarcely reconcile myself at first to this strange way', that is, open-air preaching, 'having been all my life, till very lately, of every point related to decency and order, that I should have thought the saving of souls almost a sin if it had not been in a church'. But Wesley realised that Whitfield's method, field-preaching as it was called then, won souls - people were being born again. He responded to that by saying: 'I cannot argue against a matter of fact' - people were being won for the Saviour by unorthodox means in his day and generation.

Now I'm sure in the Saviour's day there must have been many orthodox Jews who regarded this new departure as a bit of a stunt or sensationalism, but Jesus was wise enough to know when new methods were necessary, and adventurous enough to use them. The question I pose to us today is: are we willing, ready, and able in ourselves to use new methods to reach others, methods that are effective in winning the lost, methods that are biblical in their standards and approach, and yet perhaps are new.

Now, let's leave that, because Mark then begins to tell us what the Lord Jesus has to say about parables. Now Mark's gospel, as I hope you've learned so far in our studies, is a gospel of action. Mark is 'action man' in the Bible! He is more concerned with the works of the Lord Jesus than the words of the Saviour, and that is borne out in the fact that he records eighteen miracles and only four parables. But now we're coming to Mark's record of the parables, only four, and it's interesting when you keep in balance the fact that Mark is the action man of service, portraying for us the Servant of the Lord and how we ought to serve in the way of the cross, and now when He comes to give His first parable He gives His disciples an instruction, a lesson in how they can expect to serve the Lord - how they will see God work as they go in service in the lives of men and women.
Now such instruction was very necessary and relevant when you consider the diverse responses that they have already received to the message of the Kingdom come in the Lord Jesus. You remember our study in chapter 3, if you look back at it, verse 28, you see that the Lord Jesus had been blasphemed - that could be forgiven - but then the Holy Spirit had been blasphemed in the hardening of their hearts to His work in their nation and in their own individual lives, and so He faced persecution and opposition externally, and then we see in verse 31 and following that even His own family and friends were beginning to doubt Him and say that He was mad. These were the diverse and many responses that people had to the message of the Kingdom of God in the Lord Jesus Christ. So what the Lord Jesus is doing in this first parable is to give them a lesson as to what they could expect when they went out to sow the seed of the word of God.

So He gives the parable of the sower and the seed, but then He explains the purpose of parables and, having diverged away from the main parable to do that, He then returns to give the point of the parable. Now I try to be as honest as I can when I'm reading and studying the word of God, and I have to say that, looking at this account over the years, I first thought it strange and even unnatural for the Lord to interject an explanation of what parables are right in the middle of giving one. Does that not seem strange to you? Indeed, before He even gives the interpretation of it, He talks about what parables are all about, and He seems to do that exclusively to the disciples. Now a critic, and there's plenty of those around, might say: 'Lord, You're going off on a tangent'. If He was standing in a preaching class, they might say: 'You're digressing from the subject, You're in danger of losing the main point, stay on track!'.

Now there is nothing in Scripture that is there by chance or is irrelevant. It might be the case that the Lord was digressing, or going off on a tangent, if the parable in question was completely unrelated to the definition of parables that the Lord gives in this passage. However, not only is it related to the parable, but it is intrinsic to our understanding of what a parable is. This parable, if you like, as I have entitled this message, is a parable on parables - it is given to us to understand how people receive and respond to the Lord's parables.

Parables in general, and this parable in particular, are all about how people respond in their hearts to the word of God. Now since these verses, and the next number of verses we'll consider are parables, we need first of all to ascertain the answer to two questions. The first is: what is a parable? The second is: why did Jesus use them? If you're involved in communicating the word of God, whether it is to mixed companies like this, or to your peer group, or to young people or children, listen carefully because there are lessons on communication even as we define what a parable is and why the Lord utilised them.

Let's answer the first: what is a parable? Well, a parable literally means 'something thrown beside something else', or 'a comparison'. Now here is a basic fundamental truth that you need to understand if you're not going to misinterpret parables in the gospels. Now listen carefully, even write this down: originally parables were meant to be heard, not read - parables were meant to be heard, not read. Now we read them, of course, because we've got the record of the life and ministry of our Lord, and we've got time to study it, and at leisure we can think about the implications and what it actually means - but the people who were originally hearing these stories, they heard and had to make an instant split-second appraisal of what Jesus was saying. They didn't have Bible commentaries, they didn't have concordances to compare with another verse in the Old Testament - they had to get the message.

Now what's my point? Well, whilst there are several truths interpreted from this parable, and some other parables have numerous truths weaved throughout them, generally - as far as
parables are concerned - there is one main point that the Lord Jesus wished people to grasp. One main truth! So what I'm really saying is: a parable is not an allegory, and that is a mistake many people make. What's an allegory? Well, an allegory is a story where there is symbolism, and the symbols represent something. A parable is not an allegory, every symbol in a parable doesn't necessarily have to represent something. Sometimes the symbols do, but not always - but sometimes we can get sidetracked by the symbols and miss the main point of what the Lord Jesus Christ was saying! So a parable is not like 'Pilgrim's Progress', where the intention of the author is that everything has meaning, but a parable is used to communicate mainly one point.

So let me say to you: when you study the parables, when you read in your daily devotions and so on, don't get too bogged down with the details of a parable and then miss the main point. If you get the main point, you'll see how the other details are related to it. One author puts it like this - and I'm spending time on this to help you in your daily readings and your study and listening to preaching - he puts it like this: 'Therefore what we must look for in a parable is not a situation in which every detail stands for something, we must look for a situation in which one great idea leaps out and shines like a flash of lightning. It is always wrong to attempt to make every detail of a parable mean something, it is always right to say 'What one idea would flash into a man's mind when he heard this story for the first time?''. Have you got it? What would he think? What impression would he be left with? Not when he read, or studied, or memorised the parable, but when he heard it - he couldn't press 'rewind' and play it all over again, he heard it once. What was his thought?

Well, that's what a parable is, it's not an allegory, it is a comparison with mainly one truth being communicated. Now why, to answer the second question, did the Lord Jesus use parables? Well, the writer I quoted gives a number of reasons, and they're very helpful. Let me share them with you, there're four reasons he gives: one, it caught the attention of the listener. He is not writing a book now, it's not a novel, it's not a biblical letter or a prophecy, it is a spoken parable. He has not a fixed congregation sitting in pews or in the synagogue, He has a moving target, people in the open air who could stay or leave at will. The parable caught their attention, and Jesus knew that the way to keep people was often to tell them a story. It caught attention. Secondly, the people of Jesus' day were familiar with parables. The Jewish leaders would have recognized them, some parables are in the Old Testament - you think of David caught in adultery, and you remember that God brought Nathan to him to further convict him, and he told the parable about the man with the wee lamb. The rabbis used parables themselves in their own writings and teachings, so the people were familiar with them. He was using language that they worked with in the past.

It caught their attention, they were familiar with parables, and then thirdly - and this is very important: Jesus was making abstract ideas concrete. Let me repeat that: He was making abstract ideas concrete. Let me explain: very few people can grasp abstract ideas. Maybe you're even saying 'I don't know even what you're talking about, let alone...' - well, most people think in pictures. Let me illustrate it to you. We could talk about beauty - and I could say I'm a very handsome man and all the rest! - but we could explain what it is to be beautiful: chiselled chin, dark complexion, tall, brown eyes of course, no grey hairs, etc etc! We could abstractly discuss what we feel is the definition of beauty, but then someone comes along and says: 'Well, there's David Legge, if you want to know what's handsome and beautiful, well there he is!' - and the abstract becomes concrete, do you understand? Where you can point at something and say: this is a beautiful flower, this is a beautiful bird, this is a wonderful landscape, the beauty becomes clear because you have made the abstract concrete. The New Testament does this, when the New Testament talks about faith it talks...
about a man, Abraham, isn't that right? So faith becomes flesh, and from the experience of this man we see, not in abstract but in concrete form, personified what faith is in life. A parable does that, Jesus was the master teacher, He knew the people's minds could not cope with just purely abstract ideas, but He put them in stories that they might understand. Now that is interesting, indeed more so, there's something in that for all of us who communicate God's word.

Then fourthly, not only did it catch their attention, and were the people already familiar with these parables, and He was making abstract ideas concrete, but we see that the virtue of the parable is that it compelled the people to think for themselves. What I mean is - well, the worst way, for instance, to help a child with their homework is to do the homework for them, isn't that right? Because they'll never learn! You see the truth enshrined within the parable had a double impact, in that the person felt they had discovered the truth themselves when they worked it out! Jesus didn't want to make men's minds lazy, and He didn't want to take away responsibility from people, but He is encouraging them into an active pursuit of the truth. He is wanting to lay responsibility on them. In other words, 'Here's the message, can you work it out?', and if you've a heart after God, and you're seeking after God, and a heart that is good soil, you will work it out - but if you're hard in your heart, you'll be closed, and you'll say 'That's a lot of nonsense, I haven't time to think about that!'. Do you see what the Lord is doing? He's compelling people to think about their souls.

Now, let's see how He does this in this parable. We will deal with three things in the time that remains: first, He delivers the parable in verses 1-9, look down at it; then He defines a parable in general in verses 10-12; and then He decodes the parable itself that He gave in verses 1-9, in verses 13-20. So first of all He delivers this parable, the sower, the seed and the soil. Now perhaps, as the Lord Jesus was in that boat, He actually saw a sower busy sowing seed in the fields within His own sight, and He says 'Behold', literally 'Look', 'the sower went out to sow'. In verses 3-4 He says some seed fell by the wayside, and that ground was too hard for the seed to penetrate. Many believe it was the place where people walked, the tramp, tramp, tramp of their feet made the ground even harder, and so the seed just fell and lay there, and then the birds of the air came and snatched the seed away and ate it.

The wayside soil, then in verses 5 and 6 there is the stony ground. That was ground that had a thin layer of dirt covering a bedrock, and so it was shallow earth, and that shallow earth prevented the seed from taking deep root - and so it had no root, essentially, and just perished. Then in verse 7 we read of the thorny ground - there's the wayside soil, the stony ground, and the thorny ground. The thorny ground had thornbushes that cut the seed off from nourishment, and the sunlight from getting in and causing it to grow. So literally the seed and the little sprout was choked by the weeds and the thorns and the thistles.

The wayside soil, the stony ground, the thorny ground, and then in verses 8 and 9 the good ground - and this was deep, fertile soil with conditions that were favourable for production of the seed into fruit eventually. We read that some produced thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred. He delivers a parable, and then He does this detour in verses 10 and 12, and we read there that when the disciples were with Him alone, the disciples asked the Lord: 'Master, why do You speak in parables?'. This is deeply informative, pay attention, He explained to them that only those with receptive hearts were permitted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God - that's what He says. Now a 'mystery' in the New Testament is a truth that was previously unknown, that can be only known by special revelation. So the Lord Jesus is coming as God's ultimate revelation, He is bringing the truth of the Kingdom of God in Himself, and He's telling them that those with receptive hearts are those that are permitted to
know the mysteries of the Kingdom. So in other words, God reveals His family secrets to those whose hearts are open to Him.

However, the converse of that is that the truth is hidden from those who reject the light given to them. Look at verses 10 to 12, verse 11: 'Unto you it is given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God: but unto them that are outside, all these things are done in parables', verse 12, 'That seeing they may see, and not perceive; and hearing they may hear, and not understand; lest at any time they should be converted, and their sins should be forgiven them'. Now that's a quotation, verse 12, from Isaiah chapter 6 verses 9 and 10, and that might seem harsh, what the prophet Isaiah is saying and what the Lord Jesus is quoting - that people should see, and yet not see; should hear, and yet not truly hear; should conceive in their mind, and yet not really understand with their heart what the Lord is saying, what God's word means. But you've got to keep this in the context of the whole of not only this gospel, but the whole of the Old Testament, this is being spoken about the Jewish people who had had the great privilege of the oracles of God, and the prophets of God, and the priests of God, and they have rejected the Messiah of God who had now come to them in the Lord Jesus - and because they had spurned the Light of the world, Jesus is saying they will not see the light of the word.

It's basically akin to what we were talking about concerning the unpardonable sin, that it was a hardening of heart to everything that God's Spirit had been saying to them up until this moment, and they had gone one step too far. So when the heart is hard, when it is unresponsive, not receiving, not wanting, it gets harder and the seed is snatched. But when the heart is open it receives not only what God is saying, but receives more, and more, and more of light.

So the Lord defines a parable, let me sum it up like this: a parable has two effects, and they are both opposite effects. On the one hand it makes truth more clear to those who are willing to hear, have you got it? First it makes truth more clear to those who are willing to hear, and yet on the other side of the coin it makes truth more obscure to those who lack spiritual concern. The best way to summarise it is the way the Lord did in verse 9: 'He that has ears to hear, let him hear'. A parable tests the spiritual responsiveness of the soul.

Now, I have wee bit more to say this morning, but I want to ask you as God's people - and perhaps those who are here who are not believers yet - how do you receive God's word? Does it cause you too long for more, or do you shut your heart? That has a great knock-on effect to your ultimate spiritual destiny, because the more you close your heart and harden your heart, the less light, the less word, the less truth you'll be able to receive and respond to.

Then thirdly and finally, He decodes a parable. He has delivered it, He has defined what a parable is, what it's for, and now He decodes the actual parable that is given here in verses 13 to 20. Now we could go into great detail looking at this parable, but we're not going to do that this week, we'll do it next week - but basically He said that some people's hearts are hard, some people's hearts are shallow, some people's hearts are crowded by other things, and some people's hearts are ready to bear fruit. The reason why I'm not looking at these particular soils this morning is that I want us to get the main point of the parable - sometimes we jump right away into the interpretation and miss the main point! The main point applies to saved and unsaved people alike, and it's all about how we respond differently to the word of God. It is particularly appropriate if you, like the disciples, are a sower of the seed. You're a preacher, Sunday School teacher, you work with children, you work with young people, you work with ladies, you work with men, you work with all sorts of different types of adults, you
work with the unconverted on the street, you work in the open air, maybe you're a parent, a grandparent - this tells us of a spiritual principle that applies to saved people and unsaved people: those who have an honest and a good heart shall be given more, those who harden their heart shall have less. Those who cover up light will lose the little knowledge of God that they have.

Now listen, please, if you're involved in the service of the Lord, you need to hear this as loudly as the early disciples heard it from the Lord Jesus. You need to grasp it, why? Because it can make the difference between finishing your course, keeping the faith, or making shipwreck of your profession! Because things don't always go your way, and it's not a revival every day of every week, and people aren't falling around us here getting saved - so what do we do? Despair? Say 'God's word doesn't work any more, the Holy Spirit has gone to sleep'? Galatians 6 and verse 9 tells us: 'Let us not grow weary in doing good: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not' - that means literally, 'If we do not lose heart'. Now you will lose heart if you don't understand the various responses that people can have to the sowing of the seed. Jesus had different responses as He sowed the seed, He told the disciples: 'You will have different responses as you sow the seed', and we will experience the same. Unless we sit up and listen, we're going to be discouraged, we're going to be downcast!

Now, I told you, when we looked at what a parable is, that you must look for the one great idea in the parable that leaps out, that shines like a flash of lightning. Now, if I was to ask you what it was in this particular parable, what flashed upon the minds of the crowd who heard it for the first time, what would your answer be? That would be an interesting one! Will I ask you? You're all hiding now! What would it be, seriously? Do you know what it is? Although part of the seed never ever grew, the fact of the matter is that in the end some did. That's the point, it's very simple, isn't it? Yet we miss it, why? 'Oh, what do you think the shallow ground means? What's the hard soil?', we get so taken up with the interpretation before we get the main point! Some of the seed never grew, but some did - and eventually there was a splendid harvest! That's the message! This is a parable on parables, and it is a parable for the servants of God, for Sunday School teachers, to parents. It explains how God's Word will be received. Listen, look at the mathematics: three-quarters of the parable would suggest that this seed sowing was not very successful, is that not the case? Yet what the Lord is saying is: 'Don't measure success in service mathematically'!

Irrespective of those whose hearts are hard, and those who believe and then fall away, those who are distracted by the world and temptation, there will be a great harvest! So Jesus says to these disciples: 'I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it'. This is a parable to end all despair! How are you serving the Lord? I know how I serve the Lord sometimes, and I'm ashamed of it. We get so downcast, so discouraged, we may feel that all our effort yields no results, and it may seem that our time and our labours are wasted - that is exactly how the disciples were feeling. They had seen Jesus banished from synagogues, regarded with suspicion by the religious leaders and even His own family. In many places His message seemed to have failed. They were discouraged, they were downhearted, but this parable said to them: 'Wait, do your work, sow the seed, sow it prayerfully and faithfully, leave the rest to God for the harvest is sure!'.

As Isaiah put it: 'God's Word will not return to Him void', that means it will not return without producing any effect, it will accomplish the reason why it was sent. Now you mightn't see it first, it mightn't be obvious how God's word is being blessed - but the Psalmist said: 'He who continually goes forth weeping, bearing seed for sowing, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him'. There might be a lot of weeping, mathematically
three-quarters of our work might seem to produce nothing - but there's always that quarter, always that harvest!

I had wonderful news this week, and I had this sermon prepared before I heard it. Andrew Watkins tells me at times what's going on on the internet, and he told me of a man who does a work around residential homes for old people - senior citizens, I beg your pardon - and he takes CDs, tapes and everything into their premises of our services. He was able to tell me - that man sees very little fruit, as you can imagine, in such a work - but he heard of a man who didn't even listened to a whole sermon, who came to the Lord Jesus Christ in one of those homes at the age of 98 - 98! That's worth its weight in gold, isn't it?

Now we mightn't see it right away, but it will come - it doesn't say when it will come or how it will come, but the harvest will come and so we need to sow! Ecclesiastes says: 'In the morning sow your seed, and in the evening do not withhold your hand, for you do not know which will prosper, either this or that, or whether both alike will be good'. Just sow the seed of the word of God everywhere, and there will be a harvest - that's what the point of the parable is.

Can I illustrate this great one point of truth by telling you a story I came across recently, with this I'll close. You'll know, most of you, that North Korea is one of the most Communist societies in the world - there are 22 million people cocooned from birth to death in an atheistic nightmare. God is banned. Well, what you may not know is that R. J. Thomas was a missionary to China in the middle of the 19th century. He had a heart for Korea before Communism existed, but Korea, even back then in the middle of the 19th century, was a hermit kingdom - no one was allowed from a foreign land into the nation. So R. J. Thomas, because of his heart for the Korean people, went to China and he bided his time until it was expedient for him to go into Korea. So in 1865 the opportunity came that he had been waiting a lifetime for, and he went on an American ship called the SS General Sherman. That ship was going to steam up the Tai-dong River to the capital, Pyongyang, in the hopes of luring Koreans to the boat to trade with them - that's all the Americans were interested in. But Thomas bought a berth on that ship, hoping to meet some Korean scholars in Pyongyang who spoke Chinese, and so he brought Scriptures in the Chinese language so that he might give them to those scholars, that they might discover the truth of the gospel.

The trip of the SS General Sherman was ill-fated, because in port along the way to the capital some of the General Sherman's crew killed three Korean men in a barroom brawl. When they reached the capital in Pyongyang, the rumours had grown to such an extent that it was impossible for them to berth the ship, and the people of Pyongyang were convinced that these foreigners had come for their children to make soup out of their eyeballs! There was nothing for the ship to do but to turn around and head down the river, but they struck a sandbank. Seeing them stranded, the Korean defence lashed a series of small ships together, and set them on fire. They drifted to surround the General Sherman, which caught fire also, and everyone aboard had to leap into the river - and as they waded to shore, they pulled out their swords, but were all clubbed to death by the waiting Koreans. Thomas also jumped out of that boat to wade to shore, but before he could speak a club swung with murderous force and dashed his brains into the water. He never spoke to one Korean, but his killer noticed when his body emerged to the surface that he hadn't a cutlass in his hand, but he was brandishing a bundle of books. He wondered had he killed a good man, and he picked up a couple of the sodden books. Drying them off, he separated the leaves that he saw were nicely printed - he couldn't read Chinese, so he decided to paper the outside of his house with the pages, as was the custom of the time.
Now imagine a house papered on the outside with the Bible! You can imagine the astonishment as he returned from the fields day after day to find Chinese-speaking Korean scholars reading around his house God's holy word! One of those Korean scholars became a Christian by reading the gospel portions that were plastered on his house. A generation later that man's nephew assisted in the first translation of the New Testament into Korean. Thomas never lived to see the fruit, but was there fruit? Oh yes, there was fruit, because God's Word and God's honour depends on it! As that club swung toward his brow, what do you think he thought? The trip had been a waste, a tragic mistake, he dies, his life purpose unfulfilled, potential unrealised. Maybe to everybody else his death was a mystery, but not to Jesus, the sower of the seed.

Next week, in the will of the Lord, we'll look at the details of the parable, this parable on parables.

Lord, help us, like our Lord Jesus, the Servant King, to be faithful sowers irrespective of adverse response, knowing that a harvest must come. For His glory we pray and we serve, Amen.

Transcribed by Andrew Watkins, Preach The Word – August 2007
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ow, what I didn't perhaps say last week, which is fundamental to understanding this portion of Scripture, but particularly relates to our interpretation and application of it this week, is that the sower in this parable primarily portrays the Lord Jesus Christ. It was the ministry of the Lord to Israel to sow the seed of the Kingdom, that's what we have here - coming as Messiah, bringing the gospel. But there is also a prophetic element to this parable that shows, not only to the disciples, but to the church of today, how people will respond to the gospel and to the word of God. So how ministry and service, as we sow the seed of the word, will be received in these last days.

So, in its original context, as the Lord Jesus is sending out these twelve apostles to serve Him, it was necessary that they understood how the word of God that they preached would be received, how people would respond, the diverse responses that they would have in their hearts. We pointed out last week that such instruction was necessary for the disciples because, if you look at chapter 3 and verses 28 to 30, you see the different responses that the word of the Lord from the mouth of the Sower, the Lord Jesus Christ, the responses that it received. Some said that He had a devil, and even His own friends and family were insinuating that He was mad.

Now last Sunday morning, along with answering the question 'Why did Jesus use parables?', we sought to answer the question 'What is a parable?'. We defined a parable as 'something thrown alongside something else', in other words a comparison - but I hope you remember, and this is fundamental for your understanding of parables in the Gospels, I hope you remember that these parables, we said, were originally meant to be heard, not read. Therefore the hearers had to make an instant appraisal of what Jesus was saying. They didn't have the privilege and the liberality of time that we have to read and study these truths. We also looked at the purpose of parables, and we saw that the purpose was twofold, and those purposes had opposite effects. On the one hand a parable was to make truth more clear to those who had ears to hear and were willing to receive it, and on the other hand it was to make truth more obscure to those who did not have ears to hear, those who had no spiritual concern.

Then we looked at the point of this particular parable of the seed, the soil and the sower. We defined parables as having one particular main idea, I urged you not to get bogged down with the details too much at the expense of the one main point of a parable. There is in every parable one great idea that leaps out and shines like a flash of lightning, and we saw that in this parable - before we even look at the interpretation and application of each detail - Jesus wanted His disciples to know that He was sowing the seed of the Kingdom, they would sow the seed of the Kingdom, and although part of that seed would never grow, some of it would. There would, one day, be a splendid harvest.

Now I'm not going to spend any more time recapping on those truths - if you want to know about them, get the CD from last week. We're going to turn our attention now to the responses that are identified, that is, the responses to the seed that is sown that is found
here in the soils that the Lord Jesus tells us about. Now we're not getting sidetracked by
detail, as I've warned you about last week, because it is the Lord who interprets these soils
for us - He tells us what they mean, and they are vitally related to the main point of this
parable. Before we look into the interpretations of these soils, and applications thereof, let us
remember the title of our messages these two weeks is 'A Parable on Parables', because
parables in general and this parable of parables in particular are all about how people respond
to the word of God. It is vitally important you keep that in mind - indeed, the Lord reiterates
that in verse 13, just before He interprets and applies the parable to them He says to them:
'Know ye not this parable? How then will ye know all parables?'. If you stumble at this one,
this parable on parables, this parable that explains how you understand parables and how
people respond to God's word, you'll never understand another one.

So let's seek to interpret and apply. Really interpretation is simply 'What does it mean?', and
application is 'What does it matter?'. We'll deal with both of those things as we deal with each
soil, going from one through to four. Before we look first of all at verse 15, the wayside soil,
let me say that obviously this parable has commonly been interpreted and applied to the
unconverted - and that is very true, as we'll see as we go through it. But let me suggest to
you that this parable can clearly be applied to every believer in Christ, because every believer
is called to be productive, but of course all believers are not. The point of the parable in
general is that the condition of the soil of your heart determines your potential for growth.
That can be applied across the board: the condition of your heart determines how you will
respond to God's word, and the fruit that will accrue thereto.

When you think of this parable in that particular light, indeed it is perhaps more applicable to
believers - because, as the Lord has already said, the mysteries of the Kingdom are intended
for the children of the Kingdom. So the Lord begins to expound the wayside soil, the stony
ground, the thorny ground, the good ground. We'll take our time on the good ground later on,
but let me say that the first three soils - the wayside soil, the stony ground, and the thorny
ground - essentially are the three great enemies of the Christian: the world, the flesh, and
the devil. I think if you see that it will help you in our interpretation and application this
morning.

So let's look at verse 15 first of all, the wayside soil: 'These are they by the way side, where
the word is sown; but when they have heard, Satan cometh immediately, and taketh away
the word that was sown in their hearts'. The wayside soil, or literally 'the soil along the way' -
that gives a clue to its meaning. This was the pathway along by the side of the field, and
men's feet walked upon it, and so the soil had been trampled and it had become hardened.
Satan is pictured by these birds snatching away the word - very easy to interpret, isn't it? The
Lord is speaking of the hard, unresponsive heart - a person who is stubborn and unbroken,
who says a determined 'No!' to the words of the Lord in the Scriptures. This is an individual
who is unmoved and untroubled by the message of God's word, someone who is indifferent,
insensitive to the word of God at the moment he receives it and thereafter.

Now certainly, right away, you see the obvious application. This is a wonderful picture of an
unconverted sinner, and of course Paul helps us in 2 Corinthians 4:4 where he says that
Satan, who is the god of this world, this world age, has blinded the minds of them that believe
not, lest the light of the gospel should shine unto them in order that they be saved. So, if
you're here this morning and you're someone who frequents gatherings where the word of
God, the seed of the Kingdom, is sown, you need to beware - because every time you open
your heart and do not allow the seed of the word of God to find root in it, you're allowing your
heart to become harder and more unresponsive, consequently, to the next message you hear
Now though that is the case, this certainly applies to unbelievers - and incidentally Luke chapter 8 verse 12, where Luke recites this parable, he applies it to the lost, and he says that the devil snatches away the seed 'lest they should believe and be saved' - but I want to ask you: could this truth not also apply equally to the Christian? Now I know what Luke says, but Mark doesn't say it, and Matthew doesn't say it in Matthew 13 where he records it - but Satan is operative in this particular line in our lives as well. You remember in Luke 22:31, the Lord Jesus said to Simon: 'Satan has desired to have you, that he might sift you like wheat'. Peter tells us in 1 Peter 5:8 that Satan is 'as a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour'. Now the apostles sometimes were affected like this - in John 2:22 they failed to remember the words of the Lord Jesus Christ, that He was to rise again. In Luke 18 verse 34 the plain and obvious truth about His death and resurrection, I quote, 'was hid from them'.

Now Matthew, in Matthew 13, says that this person who has the seed of the word of God snatched away from their heart by the devil does not understand, and then the wicked one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. So certainly it applies to the unconverted, but can it also apply to believers who do not understand many parts of God's word, what God is saying to them, and Satan ties them up in knots and has them over a barrel? As I've said, soil becomes hard when too many feet tread on it. It's not just unbelievers who recklessly open their hearts to all kinds of people and influences, we as believers are also in danger of exposing our hearts to things that will harden them. I just wonder is that why many in the church today are desensitised to the seed of the word of God, because they have become desensitised to sin and to this world?

Of course it applies to unbelievers, but I'm asking you this morning: is your heart hard to God's word? Primarily it does refer to those that are unsaved, but it applies to you: what are you exposing your heart to that has made you become unreceptive to the word of the living God?

Let's move on to verses 16 and 17, the stony ground: 'These are they likewise which are sown on stony ground; who, when they have heard the word, immediately receive it with gladness; And have no root in themselves, and so endure but for a time: afterward, when affliction or persecution ariseth for the word's sake, immediately they are offended'. Now this stony ground indicates to us that there was a shallow skin of earth that covered this stony ground, which probably was a shelf of limestone rock which was very common in Galilee. This is speaking of a person who seems to go on brightly for the Lord for a while, but then tribulation and persecution rises because of their profession, and they decide that the cost is too great - and perhaps they even abandon the whole thing. In other words, persecution exposes their shallowness.

Now a question that many ask when they look at this stony ground is: is this person regenerate? Is this person born again, or is this person someone with spurious faith that makes a profession but their life doesn't back it up? Well, let me say again: we have to be careful, very careful, because these truths in this parable, as with many parables, certainly apply to how people receive the gospel, but they are generally speaking about how everyone receives the word of God. Now many people feel that this speaks of a person with a shallow heart, someone who makes a superficial response to the message of the gospel, and emotionally, with joy, embraces it - but when the hardships come along, they fall away, proving that the matter was not in them, as the Lord says 'There's no root in them'. In other words, they say these people are false professors. Now let me say that that may well be, and
certainly that is true of many people who profess the name of the Lord Jesus - and let me say that some of you, maybe many of you, will disagree with what I'm going to say this morning, and I'm only saying it to you for your consideration. Search the scriptures to see if these things are so.

Turn with me to Luke chapter 8 for a moment, where Luke gives us this parable. When Luke records how the Lord Jesus explained and interpreted this parable, he indicated that the seed falling on the rocky soil represented those who, Luke 8 verse 13, look at it, 'believe for a little while, and in time of temptation fall away'. Now I know some of you might say: 'Well, this can't be true faith, or the person would never have fallen away' - but if you look at the passage in Luke 8, how Luke records it, it doesn't say that. It doesn't say it was spurious faith, it says he believed for a while. Now if you look at verse 12 in relation to the hard ground that Satan snatches the seed from, look: 'Those by the way side are they that hear; then cometh the devil, and taketh away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved'. Now Jesus, in the verse before verse 13 where He talks about the stony ground, He links belief with being saved, does He not? Verse 12: 'lest they should believe and be saved'. Now in verse 13, He says these people 'for a while believe, and in time of temptation fall away'.

Now have we any grounds to say that 'believe' in verse 12 means something different than 'believe' in verse 13? I would say we don't, in fact the most reasonable thing is to assume that they mean the same thing. In verse 13 it indicated that the rocky soil people received the word. Now Luke also wrote the book of the Acts, and he uses the same expression, though we can't rely on that too heavily, but he uses the same expression, 'received the word', as to how the church grew as they received the word - Acts 8 and Acts 11. Also look at Luke's account for a moment, verse 6, it says, as Jesus delivered this parable first of all, that the seed that fell on the rocky ground sprung up. Then look at verse 7, the seed that fell among thorns sprung up. Verse 8, the seed that fell on the good ground sprung up. They all sprang up, except the first seed.

Someone put it like this: 'In the pro-life movement for plants, we like to say plant life begins at germination'. Some believe, and I think with some grounds, that there is life here in these three soils from the seed. By the time it sprang up, life had long since begun. Whether a person believes for a second, or a person believes for a lifetime, surely we believe that it is at the moment of belief that Christ gives them the gift of everlasting life? I think that is a possible interpretation, and if you're honest with yourself, if you ask the question: 'Is it possible to believe for a while, and then hardships come into your life and you fall away because of those hardships?', what would you answer? You would say 'yes', wouldn't you? I'm just asking you to suspend for a moment your traditional understandings of this portion of Scripture. Even if you reject that, there certainly is an application to you, is there not? Because we, as believers, can have superficial acceptance of God's word. We can seem, apparently, to joyfully embrace it with our emotions, and yet it doesn't affect our lives, it doesn't bear forth fruit. We drink 'Christianity-Lite', we don't want hardships, we certainly don't want persecution.

Now I was in a field recently for family reasons - you can work out that conundrum - and I heard someone read the word of God, and he read from 2 Timothy 3 verse 12: 'Those that live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer prosecution', of course it says 'suffer persecution' - but it may be that we will, some day soon, suffer prosecution. But if we don't, we ought to be suffering persecution for our faith, it's not something that is reserved for those in the Middle East, in lands were Islam holds sway, or in Asia, China, Vietnam etc. We ought to be living
against the trend, not living comfortably with a godless culture that is around us. Some of us espouse to believe in God's word, but when difficulties and persecution for our faith comes along we let go, give up. Oh, it applies to us, does the stony ground.

Then verses 18 and 19: 'These are they which are sown among thorns; such as hear the word, And the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things entering in, choke the word, and it becometh unfruitful'. This is the thorny ground. Now a Palestinian farmer could be lazy, a bit like me when - if - I'm doing the garden! He would cut off the top of the weeds, leave the roots in the ground - he would even, perhaps, burn the head of the weeds, but the field, though it would look clean eventually, below the surface the roots were still there and so, in time, the weeds would be revived in all their strength. The weeds would grow up with such rapidity and virulence, that they would choke the life out of that little seed and the sprout that is implied that comes up.

So the Lord is speaking again of people who believe, and they have a promising start, and then something happens. They become preoccupied with business, or with worldly worries, as Jesus says 'with the lust of riches'. Essentially they lose interest in the spiritual life, their heart becomes crowded. Now some say, and I used to think, that this was a person who had no repentance. Now repentance simply means 'a change of mind', but we have got this idea from somewhere that a change of mind only happens at conversion - that's rubbish. That change of mind, Jesus says, ought to go on every day after conversion, taking up our cross and following Him. Now, this is a person who stopped, one day, repenting. Other things crowded in, occupied him, eventually making him double-minded and consequently unproductive for the Lord.

Why do we apply these truths so quickly to those who are not converted, and forget to apply them to ourselves? We forget how sinful we are, don't we? How prone we are, in this particular instance, to packing our lives with a multiplicity of interests that leave us with no time in our hearts for Christ! The more complicated our lives become in this age, the more necessity there is that we make sure our priorities are right, we allow our hearts to receive the word of God and not be crowded with other things that prevent our productivity for the Master. So I'm asking us today: is your heart so crowded by other things that the word of God is choked?

The seed that fell on stony ground, there was an internal struggle in that heart, the heart was shallow. Here we have an external struggle, the things of the world are attracting them. The hard ground was the devil, the stony ground is the flesh, the thorny ground is the world - look how Jesus defines it: 'the worries of this world, the pleasures of life, the seductiveness of wealth, the passionate desires for material things' creep in and choke out the word, making it unfruitful. Now believers, we need to sit up and listen this morning. G. Campbell Morgan, that great Bible expositor once said these words: 'Persecution is only Satan's second-best weapon, his first is materialism'. Can I repeat that for you again? 'Persecution is only Satan's second-greatest weapon, his first is materialism', because by stealth the love of other things chokes the seed of the word of God, and we become double-minded. Oh yes, we want Christ, we want our profession, we want our Christian way of life, but our hearts are a bit like the girl to which the young man once proposed, and said: 'Darling, I want you to know that I really, really love you, more than anything else in the world. I want you to marry me. I'm not rich, I don't have a yacht or a Rolls-Royce like Johnny Brown, but I do love you with all my heart'. She thought for a moment, and then she answered: 'I love you with all my heart too...but tell me a bit more about Johnny Brown!'.

174
That's what we're like, isn't it? We love the Lord with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our might, and we sing the hymns, we listen to the preaching - but in reality the things of this world, particularly materialism, is choking us! We love the Lord with all our heart... 'but let me live this materialistic life without a conscience, without a twinge'. What our culture worships, we as Christians must struggle against. It was Francis Schaeffer who said: 'This world worships the god of personal peace and affluence' - that is profound. We forget, as believers, that our rest is yet to come in heaven, in glory - but the toil is now, as we follow the Master. Whatever culture we are in, whether it's Communism, whether it's Islam, whether it's Capitalism, we need to realise that we are constantly being subtly coerced into spending our money, or spending our time, or spending our energies on those things that are not of Christ.

A pastor who experienced the persecuted church came home to his Western congregation and said these words: 'Consumerism could be a more effective killer of Christianity than Communism'. Do you know that's what the Chinese church is saying today? You've seen it on the news that China is becoming a capitalist society in cahoots with the UK and with the USA in trading and so on across the world, everything - you probably look at your watch and it was made in China, everything is made in China. Consumerism is entering, and you know it's affecting the revival church that was born during persecution. That church in China is trying to resist it, because they know it's going to kill them. In the words of Lee Tian (sp?), a famous Shanghai pastor, listen, I'm quoting him: 'Consumerism makes you think you don't have to suffer to follow Jesus. It makes you think you can have lots of things and Christ as well. In reality you end up with lots of things, and most of the time you don't even realise Christ has gone'.

Oh, this parable is for us. I know it for unsaved people and how they respond, but it is for everyone, all of us who hear the word of God, how we respond to it. I'm asking you: have you a crowded heart by other things that are choking God's influence in your life? Do you know what the answer is? You and I need to simplify our lives in order to get to know God. It doesn't mean being against money, or being against materialism and becoming an ascetic monk, no, that's not what I'm talking about - but live more simply in order that others might simply live, ourselves included. We need to fight to keep our faith simple and keep it pure - who is fighting for their faith today in the West? Are you?

Then finally, verse 20, there is the good ground: 'These are they which are sown on good ground; such as hear the word, and receive it, and bring forth fruit, some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some an hundred' - definite acceptance of the word of God at any cost. Even, if you look at it, among the good hearers there are varying degrees of fruitfulness - some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred. So even among those people there is a variety of productiveness. What determines that productiveness is simply our hearts! Do you see it? The life is most productive in the one that is most responsive to the seed, the one who receives it, the one who takes it into their minds and into their hearts and then puts it into action, the one who, as Matthew says, has an honest and a good heart that is fertile for productiveness for Christ.

Generally speaking, if I could sum up in conclusion what this parable says, it is simply this - now listen, I know this doesn't apply across the board, but generally speaking: God goes where He is wanted. Is that too simple for you? God goes where He is wanted. Is He wanted in your heart? Do you want other things better? Would you want comfort rather than persecution? Do you want to open your heart to all the things of the world that are hardening your responsiveness to His word?
Let me finish with this story: in Vietnam a former soldier by the name of Bao (sp?) was conscripted by the Khmer Rouge in 1966 when he was only 17. He became totally de-humanised by the war. He saw his best friend shot dead, his girlfriend raped then strangled. To deal with those traumatic memories Bao chewed a jungle leaf that was prized for its narcotic qualities, and he would eventually lapse into dreams of a perfect world, and then he would again waken up into the hell of war.

One day his troop was ambushed by a South Vietnamese patrol, and after a fierce skirmish only one of the enemy survived. They got him and stood him up to be shot, and they gave him a last request. The prisoner didn't request a cigarette, as was per usual, but he asked to have a portion of a little book read to him that was sitting in his top pocket. Bao was the man who took it out and began to read the words out loud: 'And Jesus said...', but he got no further because suddenly the air was filled with what sounded like thunder, and the trees around were shredded with bullets. Bao dived for cover, and just managed to escape the destruction, because there was a helicopter gunship that came overhead. In the melee that prisoner escaped. The next day the soldier asked his troop leader, this is Bao, 'What did Jesus say?'. The troop leader looked shocked, and Bao said: 'Look, it must have been something important for that guy to want to hear it just before the moment of his death'. Now his leader was furious with him, and told him he was reporting him to the political commissar, and Bao new that he was in serious trouble. On the march back he was struck with painful diarrhoea, and the troop waited by a tree for him, and he went a little distance to relieve himself - there was a huge explosion, and Bao returned to the trees to find his companions hanging in bits from the foliage, they were all dead.

He continued to be a soldier for four more years, and every day he wondered what Jesus said. Finally, when he reached Saigon, and his own side was victorious, he found a Bible on a dead person. He re-covered it in brown paper, and he read it all the way back to Hanoi. He said these words: 'I finally got to read what Jesus said, and I decided I wanted to die to those words to'. But he answered, 'I was spared by God even when I was in my sins, the diarrhoea was what saved me, and that was God - otherwise I would have been in bits like the rest of my troop, but God wanted to save me. He spared me to hear what Jesus had said'.

Now that's a testimony of the power of God and the power of God's Word to intrigue that young man Bao for four long years with the phrase 'Jesus said'. My question to you today is: does it intrigue you? To whom is given, more will be given - those who have a heart to receive and long to know what Jesus said, God will accommodate you, God will make you productive, God will do a miracle in your life. If you're intrigued with what Jesus said, that will determine how much fruit you will bear for God.

Oh Lord, forgive me for hypocrisy, forgive us all when we sing these words and yet our lives declare the opposite. If there is no greater thing than knowing Christ, then I should be getting to know Him more. Yet we would rather have our things. Lord, help us, deliver us, have mercy upon us. Lord, give us grace to prepare our hearts, for out of our hearts spring the issues of our lives. Let us guard them, let us keep them good soil, tended, weeded. Let this seed of this word bear fruit, to the glory of Christ we pray, Amen.
We're going to read the Scriptures together, please turn with me to Mark's gospel chapter 4, Mark chapter 4 verse 21. Now we're looking at the second parable, there are four in Mark's gospel, and we've looked over two weeks at the parable of the sower, the seed and the soil, and this morning were going to look at this parable which is 'The Parable of the Lamp and Its Stand'.

Verse 21 of Mark 4: "And the Lord Jesus said unto them, Is a candle brought to be put under a bushel", or a basket, "or under a bed? and not to be set on a candlestick?", or a lampstand, "For there is nothing hid, which shall not be manifested; neither was any thing kept secret, but that it should come abroad. If any man have ears to hear, let him hear. And he said unto them, Take heed what ye hear: with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you: and unto you that hear shall more be given. For he that hath, to him shall be given: and he that hath not, from him shall be taken even that which he hath".

Maybe we could just pray as we come now to the explanation of God's word, do pray with me that the light of the living Word would shine into our minds and upon our hearts - if that does not happen, this will be a wasted exercise both for me and you. Father, we thank You that Your Word tells us, it's self-testimony is that its entrance lights our hearts. We pray that we would just now, even as we hear preaching, would walk in the light. We thank You that Your Word is a lamp to our feet, a light to our pathway, we thank You that God is light and this is His word. May there be no darkness in it for any of us, may none of these truths be hidden from us because we have not eyes to see or ears to hear, or have hardened hearts. So we wait upon You Lord, give us ears to hear what the Lord says to the church. Amen.

Let me just remind you of what a parable is. We spent a little bit of time on it both last week and in our introductory week. We said that a parable essentially is a comparison, it's putting something alongside something else to compare. You remember, and this is fundamental in our study of parables, that parables were originally to be heard and not to be read. What came out of that was the fact that the hearers of parables had to make an instant appraisal of what the teacher was saying. So there wasn't time for them to sit down with a black-and-white text and dissect each detail, and try and correspond it to spiritual truth, whilst we can do that now they did not have that privilege. They had to, in a moment, grasp what the speaker was saying, and because of that we need to remember that really in all the parables there is one main fundamental point that the Lord Jesus was getting across. Many of the other details, as He interprets them, are usually related to that one main point. So we saw that the basic lesson in parables is: don't get bogged down, first of all, looking for all the significance in the details of a parable, but find the one main point and all those other details will fall into place.

So, as we quoted a scholar who said, 'There is one great idea that leaps out and shines like a flash of lightning upon our minds and hearts in a parable', so we must ask today: what is the idea that is the bolt of lightning to our hearts in this parable of the lamp and its stand? Well I must say to you first of all that several answers have been given to that question, and
explanations offered of this parable. Some people, even commentators and Bible teachers, have interpreted this parable inaccurately because they have confused Mark's parable here in verses 21 to 25 with the Lord's use of the same metaphor, a lamp, a bushel, in different a context.

Let me explain what I'm talking about. You will know that probably the most famous use of this metaphor is in Matthew 5 and verses 15 and 16, where the Lord Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount says: 'Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven'. The purpose of the metaphor of the shining lamp there is that others may see good works and glorify God. But here in Mark 4, the light shining is not your good works, that's not what it means. Also, three times in the Gospels, we find the same expression that we find here, 'with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you'. The same figure is used three times, and yet there are different applications of that statement.

For instance, in Matthew 7 and verse 2 that statement is used as a warning against a judgemental attitude towards others. So if you judge other people harshly, you will be judged harshly. Then in Luke chapter 6 and verse 38, the same statement is used to encourage liberality among God's people in their giving and stewardship. So the more you give to the cause of the gospel, and the poor, and those who are needy, the more will return to you. There is also a different context here in Mark 4 verse 24, where it is quoted as an encouragement for us to appropriate God's word to ourselves. So the more we receive and assimilate God's word, the more light from God's word we will have. Now it's important that we do well to remember that similarities and apparent harmonies in the Gospels are not always what they first seem, and if we carefully examine the differences as well as look for the harmonies, often we will find some deep spiritual truths the Holy Spirit intended for our benefit in the differences that there are in the Gospels.

So what is the meaning of both this parable and this statement in Mark's record? I think it will help us this morning, it always does of course, if we keep in mind the immediate context of where he gives this parable. You remember, we spent two weeks on verses 1 to 20, 'The Parable of Parables' I called it, because really the parable of the sower, the seed and the soil is all about how people respond in their hearts to God's word. You see, the purpose of the parable was for opposite effects - on the one hand, the parable was to make truth more clear to those who had hearts to hear; but the converse was that, on the other hand, parables make truth more obscure to those who lacked spiritual discernment and concern. That's why in verse 9 and in verse 23 we find this statement of the Lord Jesus that 'He who has ears to hear, hear'.

Now having established that, that's the context, how people respond in their hearts to God's word, let's look at these verses. Verse 21: 'And he said unto them, Is a lamp brought to be put under a bushel, or under a bed? and not to be set on a lampstand?'. Now again the Lord, as He always does in His parables, Uses common objects. He's speaking of a lamp, one in every house, and He also is speaking in the backdrop of a familiar scene, the home. The lamp that was in the houses in Jesus' day was a clay dish that was filled with oil, and there was a wick put into the oil and it was lit. Here's the question the Lord Jesus poses: is a lamp brought into a house to be set under a basket, or put under a bed, or is it not brought in to be set on a candlestick, a lampstand, so that that light may shed abroad in the whole house for the greatest benefit?

Now that might seem to be obvious in its application, but it's not immediately because when you look at the original language, Mark says in the Greek language 'Is a lamp come into the
Now you know that lamps don't come anywhere, lamps are inanimate objects, but it seems that Mark is trying to signify that this lamp is a person, and this person has a purpose in coming to light the house. It's not hard to work it out, is it? The person is, of course, the Lord Jesus - and as John put it in John 3:19, He is the light who is come into the world. Now what is the purpose of this light, this lamp? Is it to be put under a basket, under a bed, or on a lampstand? Applying that to Christ, we ask: did the Lord Jesus come into the world to light up the world with the truth of God, or did He come to be hidden? Of course, His purpose in coming was to shine: 'I am the light of the world'. But the fact of the matter was, the reality personally for many of the Jews, particularly the religious ones in Palestine in Jesus' day, was that the light of who Christ was, what His mission and purpose was, was hidden from their eyes that they could not see.

Isaiah 53 tells it well: 'For He shall grow up before Him as a tender plant, and as a root out of dry ground. He has no form or comeliness; and when we see Him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him' - the light was hidden to them. John 3:19: 'This is the condemnation', upon men, 'that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil' - because they hardened their hearts through evil deeds, wickedness, and unbelief, they couldn't see the light and they dwelt in darkness. John 1 verse 5: 'The light shined in the darkness; and the darkness did not comprehend it'.

Now, the Lord's commentary on the parable in verse 21 is found in verse 22, look at it: 'For there is nothing hid, which shall not be manifested; neither was any thing kept secret, but that it should come abroad'. What had been hidden? Christ's glorious identity as Messiah, as the Son of God, as the Suffering Servant, Saviour King was hidden to the unbelieving Jews of His day. That's the interpretation of this parable, but you need to see also, verse 22 says, that what was hidden and what was not manifested, what was kept secret will eventually be shed abroad and will be manifested, revealed. That's interesting, isn't it? Now the obvious question is: when? The answer, I believe, is given in Revelation chapter 1 and verse 7: 'Behold, he comes with clouds; and every eye shall see him, and they also which pierced him: and all kindreds of the earth shall wail because of him. Even so, Amen'. The same ones to whom His light, His dignity, His identity was hidden will have manifested to them in judgement who He is on the day He comes again.

Now we must get our interpretations of all Scripture, particularly parables, right. So the first aspect of truth in this parable is: the light of Christ is hidden from those outside the Kingdom now, but one day those hidden glories will be revealed for all to see. Do you understand? At the revelation of Jesus Christ! As Philippians 2 puts it: 'He was in the form of God, and thought it not robbery to be equal with God: but made himself of no reputation, took upon him the form of the servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father'. To those whom that truth was hidden from when He was on the earth, it will be manifested to them when He comes again to the earth.

The period of hiddenness is merely a prelude to the period of manifestation when Christ's apparent obscurity and weakness will be exchanged for messianic glory and power. We sang about it:

'Our Lord is now rejected,
And by the world disowned,
By the many still neglected,
And by the few enthroned;
But soon He'll come in glory!
The hour is drawing nigh,
The crowning day is coming
By-and-by'.

Now, that is all very interesting, but we might ask: so what? Verse 24 gives us the 'so what': 'He said unto them, Take heed what ye hear', or how you hear. Therefore, because Jesus has spoken the word of the Kingdom and sown it in men's hearts - the parable of the sower - and because we need to have ears to hear, that means hearts that are good soil, not hearts that are crowded by the affairs of this life, the desire for other things; not hearts that are shallow and when difficulty, persecution and temptation come along, we fall; not hearts that are so hard, opening them to other things that make them hard by the trampling of the flesh, the world and the devil over our hearts that we cannot even receive the word of God; but good hearts. If we have those good hearts we will then listen and receive the word of God. So He says: 'Take heed how you hear', because there is this great day of unveiling and manifestation coming, the revelation of Jesus Christ, we need to listen.

This is a lesson for all, whether it is unbelievers or believers: Jesus is coming again, and therefore when we are here we need to listen very carefully to the word of the Kingdom. Now, He gives us a principle that is behind that statement, verses 24 and 25: 'With what measure you measure out, it shall be measured to you: and unto you that hear shall more be given. For he that has, to him shall be given: and he that has not, from him shall be taken even that which he has'. Now again, we have repeated this as we've looked at these parables, the Lord is laying down a principle that every time you receive a fresh truth from God's word and you allow it to become real in your life, you can be sure that God will give you more truths to live out. Yet on the other hand, failure to respond to God's truth results in a loss of what you previously acquired. It's not just a standstill, but things will begin to unravel and your spiritual life will rewind.

Let me illustrate this to you from Hebrews, if you turn to Hebrews 5. This was the danger that these Hebrew professing Christians were in, Hebrews 5 and verse 11, the writer reminds the Hebrews of this danger: 'Of whom we have many things to say, and hard to be uttered, seeing ye are dull of hearing', that's an interesting phrase, 'For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat'. The writer is saying that the time had come when they should have been teachers, and yet they required to be taught again the basics of Christianity which they once had possessed, but obviously had lost. There is a clue to this in Hebrews 2 verse 1, the writer says: 'Therefore we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we should let them slip'.

So the principle is: the one who responds to the word of God receives more of the word of God, but the one who does not respond to the word of God actually loses what he thought he had of it! If you want to study that a bit more, look at the parable of the talents, the parable of the pounds. William MacDonald comments on this principle very well when he says, I quote: 'Obedience is the organ of spiritual knowledge', that's profound, 'Do you want to know more about the Bible?' - that's you, isn't it? - 'Obey what you know!'. Let me repeat that: 'Obedience is the organ of spiritual knowledge. Do you want to know more about the Bible?
Obey what you know, God will give you more'. That's the way it works, he goes on: 'It's interesting to think that you can reach a certain stage, and then you can come to a block. There is something there that you don't want to obey, and you plateau or even go downward'. I have experienced that, probably am experiencing that. Isn't it the truth that we illustrated a number of weeks ago from the Chinese pastor, who you remember had been given all these Bibles, and the man who had gifted them to him realised that he hadn't been giving them out and a large number of them were still in storage. He replied in answer to why that was: 'I have discovered that it is dangerous to learn truth at a rate faster than we can practise it'. He went on to say: 'I don't want them to encounter too much truth too fast, otherwise they will get into the bad habit of never using what they know'. The bad habit of never using what they know! Why is that a bad habit? Because you won't get any further in the school of God, indeed you might even be demoted to a lower class.

So the first aspect of truth to this parable is that the light of Christ is hidden from those outside the Kingdom now, but one day those hidden glories will be revealed for all to see, therefore as believers would it not be better that our hearts were ready to receive the revelation of Jesus Christ now in His word? So that when Christ comes, and we encounter that great day of unveiling, it will not be as great a shock to us, and we will have great gain instead of great loss.

Now you remember that we saw when we looked at the parable of the sower, the seed and the soil that essentially the correct interpretation was to see the sower as the Lord Jesus Himself, and the reaction of the Jews to His ministry. But we also saw that there was a secondary level to that, and this parable was also sending the disciples out to sow, they were the sowers, and these were the same reactions that they were to expect that were the reactions to the Lord Jesus. Now it's exactly the same with this parable, of course the light is the Lord Jesus, He is the Light of the world, and His light has been hidden from men and it's still hidden from men - but though that was the case, and is the case, there is a secondary application to it: that we are to shine the light of Christ, we are to lift Christ's lamp on a lampstand for all the world to see.

So the second aspect of truth to this parable is that the light of Christ will be hidden from those outside the Kingdom, but the light of Christ should not be hidden by those inside the Kingdom. Can I repeat that? The light of Christ will be hidden from those outside the Kingdom, but the light of Christ should not be hidden by those inside the Kingdom. Now the parable tells us that there were three places where a lamp may be placed, but there was only one that was the correct place. It could be placed under a measuring bowl, that's what bushel is - that was the usual means, at bedtime, of extinguishing the light so that you could go to sleep. Or the light could be put under a bed, and that may have been a dining couch - but if that happened the dining couch wouldn't be there for very long, it was a fire hazard! Those weren't the places you put lamps if you want to light the room and the whole house, but it should be put on a stand in order to illuminate, and when it illuminated it fulfilled its purpose.

Now, this is a beautiful truth because the Lord inadvertently is showing us that the divine intention is that the precious things of the Kingdom of God are to be displayed. God wants people to know them - now their hearts might be too hard to receive them, they might be too shallow to embrace them all, they might be crowded with other things, but God's intention is that these precious mysteries of the Kingdom be displayed. What is His means of displaying them? It is the disciples, it was their task to illuminate the divine word! Isn't that how Matthew recorded that in Matthew 10:27: 'What I tell you in darkness', Jesus said to the disciples, 'That speak ye in light: and what ye hear in the ear, that preach ye upon the
housetops'. The mystery of the Kingdom is not to be kept to yourselves alone, but it is to be held forth as a bright and shining light for the whole world to see.

That's what Paul meant when he said in Philippians 2, interestingly the same passage as we have the condescension and exaltation of the Lord Jesus, every knee bowing to Him eventually one day, and then we read in verses 15 and 16: 'That ye may be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world; Holding forth the word of life; that I may rejoice in the day of Christ, that I have not run in vain, neither laboured in vain'.

The disciples were to take this light and shine it forth, but you know I don't think the Lord just meant the individual disciple, because the risen glorified Lord in the book of the Revelation, which is a revelation of Himself, Jesus Christ, tells us in Revelation chapter 1 verse 20: 'The mystery of the seven stars which you saw in My right hand, and the seven golden lampstands', this is the interpretation, 'The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands which you saw are the seven churches'. Ultimately the church, God's assembly of believing people, are responsible to shed the light of Christ abroad! The light of Christ will be hidden from those outside the Kingdom, but the light of Christ should not be hidden by those inside the Kingdom. Did the early church hide the light inside the Kingdom? Oh no they didn't! Listen to one of its apostles: 'That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life; (For the life was manifested', it was revealed, 'and we have seen it, and bear witness, and shew unto you that eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us;) That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ' - 1 John 1:1-3. That which was manifested to us, we declared it to you! They didn't hide it. Even when the apostles were told 'You are forbidden to speak in the name of that Jesus' in Acts 4:20, we read that Peter said: 'We cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard'. We can help it!

Incidentally, you need a filling of the Holy Spirit if you're going to be like that, and we find that Peter had it, and the apostles, in Acts 4 and verse 8, that gave them that boldness. Did they hide it, even under the pressure of persecution and death itself? No! 'We can't help telling you what we've seen, what we've heard!'. Then in Acts again, in Acts 20 verse 27, you remember Paul was leaving the Ephesian elders, and he says these words: 'I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God'. Can I paraphrase that - it's not a very good one, but it's how I think of it: 'I gave you everything that was given to me, I just passed it on'. The early church didn't hide this message, they shone that light, they were the effective proverbial lampstand that set forth Christ and allowed His light to shine, not only in the church, but abroad and beyond - so that they turned the world of their day upside down, and the whole world was ablaze for Christ.

Now, how are we doing with that commission? I think we are hindered somewhat, would you agree? I'm not saying this is the correct interpretation of the parable that I'm going to give you now, but someone has suggested allegorising this a little, that the basket could speak of business, and the bed could speak of laziness - those certainly are both enemies of evangelism. Do they not speak to us of the rocky ground, shallow, hardships come across, persecution along our path; or the thorny soil where temptation, the world and the desire for other things intrigues us, and so we don't sow the seed any more? What about fear, is it not one of the biggest obstacles in all of our lives to sowing the seed of God's gospel today? I know it's mine. Fear of man brings a snare, the Bible says, and we know about it today in our
politically correct society. The Pope doesn't say a lot of things that are true, but one thing he did say recently that is true is that we live in a Christ-o-phobic society, a society that will tolerate anything and everything but Christ. We who preach the Bible know all about that! And that causes fear for us, does it not? It sends shivers up our spine, which brings a paralysis as far as preaching and gossiping the gospel is concerned.

Yet we are called by the Lord to do it as disciples, as the church we are the lampstand. Perhaps there's someone here, maybe only one - that's enough - I'll preach to you now, just that one, and you say: 'David, I want to shine better'. Well, here's a bit of advice from this parable for you. In order to give light into that house, that lamp had to use itself up, the oil had to disappear and be burned. What an application there is for us in that: we need to die to ourselves, we need to decrease if He is going to increase. Jim Elliott, meditating on the verse 'He makes his ministers a flame of fire', said these words: 'Am I ignitable? God deliver me from the dread asbestos of other things. Saturate me with the oil of the Spirit that I may be aflame. But flame is a transient, often short lived thing. Canst thou bear this my soul - short life? In me, there dwells the spirit of the Great Short-Lived, whose zeal for God's consumed Him. Make me Thy fuel, Flame of God'. You know his story, that he was martyred in his twenties by Auca Indians, taking the gospel to them. We still have his testimony with us, and those people thank him and his martyrdom for the spread of the gospel among them. Yet he had to be burned up to shine forth that light.

If you want to shine more, you're going to have to die to yourself. Here's another piece of advice: the oil has to be replenished. The wick of the lamp could only give out as long as it had first taken in. You see, we need to be continually taking in, and one thing we ought to be taking in is: be continually being filled by the Holy Spirit, Ephesians 5:18. If we die to ourselves, and if we get filled with the Holy Spirit, hardships will not put us off, temptation will not put us off, persecution will not put us off, the desire for other things will not put us off, but we will have an understanding and an honest heart - we will receive the word of God and bear fruit to His glory. The question is: are we doing it? Are you sowing the seed of the Kingdom, brother?

I don't know how many of you have been to St Paul's Cathedral, but there in that great church in London there is a stained glass window depicting a man sowing seed. Have you seen it? It was presented as a memorial to a man named Samuel A. Burnett, and Mr Burnett had devoted his entire lifetime to spreading the word of God in the wicked East End of London. Beneath the stained glass window there is a plaque that reads like this: 'Dedicated to Samuel A. Burnett, who served in the East of London for 50 years, and who feared not to sow despite the birds' - that's good.

The question we need to face, and it's a very serious one in the light of the parable of the lamp and its stand, is: there could be an evangelical cover-up, are we covering this light? Are we hindering it getting out, or are we setting it on a stand?

Nee Yung Fa was a Ningbo Cotton Dealer, and he was converted through the ministry of Hudson Taylor. He had also been a leader in what was a reformed Buddhist sect, which would have nothing to do with idolatry, didn't worship things, and that was genuinely searching for truth - but in all the wrong places. At the end of one of Hudson Taylor's sermons, Nee Yung Fa stood in Hudson Taylor's place, and turned to address the audience and said these words: 'I have long searched for the truth as my father did before me, and I have travelled far but I haven't found it. I found no rest in Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, but I do find rest in what I heard tonight. From now on I believe in Jesus'. Nee took Hudson Taylor to a meeting of the
Buddhist sect he was a leader of, and he allowed Hudson Taylor to explain the reason for the change of life that was in him. Then eventually Nee spoke, and Taylor was impressed with the clarity and the power with which he spoke - and another member of the group was converted that very night, and both Nee and he were baptised. Then came the question: 'How long has the gospel been known in England?', Nee asked Hudson Taylor. 'For several hundred years', replied an embarrassed Taylor, vaguely. 'What! And you have only now come to preach to us? My father sought after the truth for more than 20 years and died without finding it! Why didn't you come sooner!'. Difficult to answer, isn't it? He didn't come sooner because the church was hiding its light under a bushel.

The issue this morning is: are you? This word is weighing very heavily on my heart, and I want to tell you that God is dealing with me in my heart. Is He dealing with you? What are you going to do? Harden it? Make excuses? Be shallow? Desire other things more? The church needs fruit. The church needs lampstands. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, needs them. Will you be one? Will I be one? Or will we just live for ourselves and let the world go to hell? That's how serious it is.

Lord, help us, help us, help us, deliver us from ourselves. May Your light shine from us, from our lives to everyone we meet, and right across the world perhaps, that many also will be lighted to the glory of Christ. Open men's eyes that we encounter, that they may see in our lives the light of the gospel of the truth of Christ held forth, for His glory. Lord, don't let the birds snatch this word, for Christ's sake we pray, Amen.
Let's open the word of God together for a scripture reading. We're turning to Mark's gospel chapter 4, and beginning at verse 26. This is the third parable in Mark's gospel that we'll be thinking about later on, and it is 'The Parable Of The Growing Seed'.

The Lord Jesus said: "So is the kingdom of God, as if a man should cast seed into the ground; and should sleep, and rise night and day, and the seed should spring and grow up, he knoweth not how. For the earth bringeth forth fruit of herself; first the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear. But when the fruit is brought forth, immediately he putteth in the sickle, because the harvest is come". Amen.

Now I hope I have reminded you enough what a parable is over these last number of weeks, as we have embarked on dealing with the four parables that are in Mark's gospel - four alone. We spent two weeks on the first parable, because we said it was 'The Parable on Parables', and we looked at exactly what a parable was. Then the following week we looked actually at the facets and details of the parable of the sower, the seed, and the soils. Then last Sunday morning we looked at 'The Parable of the Lamp and its Stand', and then today we're looking at 'The Parable Of The Growing Seed'.

A parable, of course, we have found, is a comparison. It means to put one thing alongside another, to compare them. Some of you have been saying to me on the way out that at school or at Sunday School you learnt that little quip that 'a parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning'. Now I didn't say it to you at the door, I hadn't the heart, but I don't really like that particular definition, because in a certain way it sort of tells you that the meaning has something to do with heaven, when in essence most of the meanings in the parables have a lot to do with earth - maybe more about earth and heaven. So there is earthly meaning to these parables, because they really affect our lives and how we live down here on Earth for the Master.

Now you remember that these parables originally were meant to be heard and not read, and therefore we have to think about that in our interpretation of them. The listeners of these parables had to make an instant appraisal of what the Lord Jesus was saying, and so we have said that there is one great idea that leaps out and shines like a flash of lightning in the parable. Now, I grant you that there are other related truths within parables, and we'll see that this morning, and we've seen it already in the last two parables that we looked at - but those truths are related to the one main truth that the Lord Jesus wished to convey in the parable.

So the question begs this morning once more: what is this great truth that the Lord would have us learn from the parable of the growing seed? Now, it is interesting to note right away that this particular parable is not found anywhere else in the Gospels, it is unique to Mark's gospel. If you look at it, let's just peruse the details of it: 'The kingdom of God', the Lord Jesus said, 'is like a man who cast seed into the ground; and he sleeps, and rises night and day, and the seed springs forth, and he doesn't understand why that is happening. The earth
brings forth this fruit of itself; first the blade, then the ear, then the full corn ear. But when the fruit is ripe, when it is brought forth, immediately the farmer puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come'.

Now of course this is all spiritual language the Lord Jesus is using, and we have seen in previous parables that the seed is the word of God. So what we have here is, I believe - and I'll state it to you right away so that we get the gist throughout our message today of what the Lord is getting across - the message is: the inevitability of the independent growth of the seed. Let me repeat that: the inevitability of the independent growth of the seed - it is inevitable that God's seed will grow when it is received, by faith, into the heart of the hearer. That seed grows independently in the heart.

Now let me first of all address what that does not mean: this parable does not teach that there are not contributory factors to the growth of the seed. It grows independently, but that doesn't mean that nothing else affects its growth. Now first of all, as we look at the spiritual truth, we have to say that a sower must sow the seed - is that not so? Excuse the pun. There is a sower, and he is planting this seed, and that has to happen. Though the growth is independent, and the life is in the seed itself, someone needs to go and put it out onto the soil. It's the same with the gospel, people will not get saved if we just sit and rest on our lees and do nothing about it, but as Paul said in Romans: how shall they hear without a preacher? There needs to be a sower. It pleased God, through the foolishness of preaching, Paul told the Corinthians, to save some - so there are contributory factors to the growth of this seed, though it grows independently.

There must be a sower to sow. Then secondly, not only must there be a sower, there must be water. In 1 Corinthians 3:6, Paul could say: 'I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase'. He's indicating there that though God gave the increase, and the seed's growth was independent of anything else, because the life is in the seed, there was a contributory factor to the growth of that seed, and that was watering - and I believe watering could well be prayer. We need to sow the seed, we need preachers, we need people who gossip the gospel - and it's not enough just to throw the seed out, we need to pray before and after, we need to water the word of God.

A sower must sow, the seed must be watered, and thirdly: the soil must be fertile. Have we not learnt that already in the parable of the sower. If you look back just for a moment at verse 20, you will see that good soil is designated as representing those who hear the word and receive it, and bring forth fruit - some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred fold. But the parable of the sower, as well as teaching the inevitability that though threequarters of the hearers will reject the seed of the word of God in some sense and will not let it go deep down into their heart to bear fruit, there is one quarter of the harvest - there will be a harvest! But it also tells us that we have a responsibility as hearers to cultivate our hearts. If God's seed of the word is going to bear fruit, it's got to rest on fertile soil in responsive hearts.

So this parable is not teaching that there are no contributory factors to the growth of the seed, it doesn't teach some kind of determinism - what I mean by that is that God will save, even if we don't preach, and don't pray, and don't prepare our hearts, and don't seek to prepare the hearts of others. Someone reminded me last week at the door on the way out of how in 1786 William Carey had laid on his heart the burden of world mission, and he laid it before a ministerial meeting in Northampton in England. The eminent Dr. Ryland stood to his feet and said to him: 'Young man, sit down: when God is pleased to convert the heathen, He will do it without your help or mine'. Not so, there is an inevitable and independent growth of
the seed, but there are other contributory factors that God has ordained: the sower must sow, water must be poured on the seed, and the soil must be fertile. So the Lord's not teaching such a falsified view of God's sovereignty that nullifies men's responsibility. If He were, He would be contradicting His own teaching, particularly in the parable He has just taught about the lamp and the stand. What did He say? The lamp isn't to be put under a bushel or under a bed, it has to be set on a stand - and who was the stand? It's you, it's me, it's the church. The converse of that truth is that there can be a cover-up of the truth and the light of the gospel.

Now, though that's not what the Lord is teaching, and I feel urged to give that caveat, God - though He has ordained human instrumentality in the process of the sowing of the seed - this parable is teaching that we, as mere human beings, even sowers and waterers of the seed and tenders of the soil, we cannot create the phenomenon of growth. What this parable teaches is that the secret of the growth of the seed, the secret of its life is in itself - now that is the central lesson of this parable: the inevitable and independent growth of a seed sown into a welcoming and believing heart. The Lord's point is that blessing is inevitable, because the life of the seed is in itself.

Now, what can we learn from this central truth of the parable today? Well, we can learn several lessons. The first is this: we learn something of the unique power of the word of God. We learn something of the unique power of the word of God, the seed is the word - and if you look at verse 27: 'and the seed should sprout and grow, and the farmer himself does not know how'. Now the order in the Greek language there is: 'how, he does not know'. The emphasis is on 'how'. He has sown the seed, he sleeps night and day, leaves it, waits, and it grows! He is dumbfounded at the process, he doesn't understand how. Robertson, the Greek scholar, makes a valuable note on this, and says: 'The mystery of the growth still puzzles farmers and scientists of today, with all our modern knowledge; but nature's secret processes do not fail to operate because we are ignorant'. This secret and mysterious growth of the kingdom in the heart and life is the point of this beautiful parable by Mark. It is mysterious, it is imperceptible, it is going on all around us, though we do not see it - but though we are ignorant of how it happens...we know not how the Spirit moves, convincing men of sin, etc. We know that the seed is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes.

So we learn something of the unique power of the word of God: just as the natural seed has life in itself, so the word of God is infused with life and power. Now I'm far from a horticulturalist, I can't even cut the grass! But I love reading about seeds in nature, some fascinating facts. On one occasion a seed was taken from a 600-year-old rattle necklace that was found in South America, and this seed was planted. In 1968 it germinated, and it grew to a six foot tall plant, and then eventually flowered and bore fruit! 600 years being in a necklace! Professor Thomas Henry Huxley, who was a famous English biologist, said that deeply buried in English soil are tropical seeds of almost limitless variety, brought here by migrating birds, and then dropped into our soil by birds from all sorts of different regions. Those seeds lie dormant in the soil, and they're waiting for tropical weather, for a climate to bring forth their lovely blossom and fruit - maybe global warming will do it, and you'll have a pineapple tree in your back yard! It's amazing, isn't it? But the life is in the seed, you see - and though there are contributory factors of climate and surroundings and so on, that life lies there dormant. Life is in the seed, it remains in it even after 600 years, and life is in God's word - this is a living book!

This parable teaches us something about the unique power of the word of God. I can't remember his name, but I heard the story of - maybe some of you know who he is - a street
preacher down at the Custom House steps years ago. He used to take his hat off and throw it on the ground, and he would shout 'It's alive! It's alive! It's alive!'. The crowd would gather around, who he was about to preach at, and then he would lift the hat and underneath was a Bible. It's alive, this is God's living and abiding word, and there is a strange force in every utterance of God's word. Genesis 1:11 - we are looking at the parable of the growth of a seed - and there: 'And God said, 'Let the earth bring forth grass, and herb that yields seed, and the fruit tree that yields fruit, according to its kind, whose seed is in itself on the earth'. And it was so'. He was creating seeds and plants and fruit, but He did it through His word.

The Son of God came to this earth and gave life with a word. Lazarus' body had been in the grave until it stunk, and Jesus said: 'Lazarus, come forth', and he came forth! Yet with the word of Christ, He could curse the fig tree and took life away from it. With a word He cast out devils, He healed diseases, He calmed tempests. He even caused, in John chapter 18, His enemies to fall back onto the ground with His word. There is a unique power in the word of God. And let me tell you: that is why you are born again. First Peter 1:23 reads thus: 'Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever. For all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away: But the word of the Lord endureth for ever. And this is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you'.

You know, this parable that we're looking at today ought to reaffirm our faith in the Bible. Why substitute the Bible for gimmicks, when this is the living and abiding word of God? 'Heaven and earth will pass away, but my word shall never pass away'. I love music, but music is no substitute for this book. This lives! Martin Luther, discovering ultimately the great unique power in God's word, coming out of the darkness of Romanism he wished to make essentially two contributions to Christendom at large. First of all he wanted to give them a Bible they could understand, and secondly a hymnal from which they could sing. This is what he said: 'Let them loose, and like fire they will spread on their own'. He wasn't taking out the contributory factors of human instrumentality, he was the man that spent all those late nights translating the Bible from Latin into German, but he knew there was power in the seed of the word. It is in itself, it is unique - let them loose, and the flame will spread on its own.

Whatever opposition there is to the word of God, isn't it wonderful to be able to believe today that, as Isaiah said, 'As the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater: So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it'. Do you believe in the unique power of the word of God? That's what this parable teaches us.

Then secondly it teaches us: the unusual productivity of the word of God. The unusual productivity is spoken of in verse 28: 'For the earth yields crops by herself', itself. The Lord is describing the mysterious, imperceptible growth of the seed: 'of herself'. Now that phrase 'of herself' is a translation of the Greek word 'automate', it's the one we get our English word derived from 'automatic'. Kenneth Wuest, in his Greek commentary, says: 'This word means 'self moved', 'spontaneously', without external aid and also beyond external control, with a way and will, so to speak, of its own that must be respected and waited for' - automatic! Automatically, the seed sprouts, because the life is in itself. The only other example of this word used in the New Testament is in Acts 12:10 where Peter, you remember, was in prison, and miraculously the gates opened - and the Bible says there that the gates opened of their own accord. That's that word, 'of its own accord', 'automatically'. This is how the seed works:
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David Legge

automatically it sprouts and brings forth fruit. The nature of the soil, the weather, and the
cultivation of the plant all enter in, but the secret of the growth is in the seed itself. The life is
not in the water, the life is not in the sower, the life is not in the soil, the life is in the seed!

This is the law of nature, but it is also the law of the kingdom of God. Listen to Ecclesiastes
11:5: 'As you do not know what is the way of the wind, or how the bones grow in the womb
of her who is with child: so you do not know the works of God who makes everything'. There
is an unusual productivity in the word of God. One writer put it like this: 'This single fact
creates the confidence shown by Jesus in the ultimate establishment of His kingdom, in spite
of the obstacles which obstruct its progress'. That's profound - why didn't the Lord Jesus, on a
human level, throw the towel in? Because everything was going against Him, the whole way
to the cross, the whole nation rejected Him as their Messiah, and then His own disciples all
forsook Him, and then He's put to death - we know why and all the rest, but with the naked
eye you look at the story, but He knew, He believed that the word of the kingdom that He was
sowing would reap a harvest, because the life was in the word that He was sowing among
men.

I hear sometimes foolish talk of people who say: 'How do you know that there was going to
be a harvest returned for the work, the death and the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ?
How do you know if it's just up to people believing in the Lord Jesus?'. This is how I know:
because the life is in the seed! That's how the Lord Jesus knew, because the seed that He was
sowing was the life - now that should create confidence in you who sow the seed, that should
create courage in you who sow the seed, and that should create some comfort in you who
sow the seed among boys and girls, particularly your own boys and girls. We have to be
careful here, because the soil that this seed sprouts in is the good soil of the parable of the
sower, and that is believing soil that bears fruit. But isn't it wonderful to know that when you
sow this seed, you are sowing life into young lives - and who knows, like those tropical seeds
that are buried everywhere around Great Britain, who knows when the moment will be that
the climate is right, and the water comes down from heaven, and they sprout forth to the
glory of God? Who knoweth? That should be a comfort to some of you.

Now ultimately, as we have seen in these previous parables, Christ is the one sowing the seed
of the kingdom. We know that for definite because, if you look down you will see that the one
who sows is also the one who reaps, verse 29. So the Lord Jesus is sowing the seed of the
kingdom in His earthly ministry, and now He is absent, as the farmer is here. He leaves it
alone, and there's a day coming when He's going to come back, and the Lord Jesus will reap
that harvest, and He will separate the wheat from the tare. But of course He is also, as we
have seen in these previous parables, instructing His disciples as they went into the world to
sow the same seed of the word of God. Now we have this obvious for us in the New
Testament, we are sowers of the seed - 2 Corinthians 5:18-20, 'And all things are of God,
who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of
reconciliation; To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing
their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation. Now th
en we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's
stead, be ye reconciled to God'. In 1 Corinthians 3:9, Paul says: 'We are God's fellow
workers', so this truth applies to the work of God - what truth? The unusual productivity
of the word of God. This applies to the work of God that you are involved in, sowing the seed
among children and young people or adults.

Now how does it apply? Well, here are three practical ways. It applies in that it teaches us
that there is a need for perspective in the work of God, a need for perspective. To put it
bluntly: this work isn't about you, it's not about me, it's about Him and it's about His word. It's about the seed. Listen to 1 Corinthians 3:6-7: 'I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase', verse 7, 'So then neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase'. We need perspective, it's not about us - we have something to do, but it's not about what we do, it's about what God does. It's from His hand that comes the increase, and Paul's argument in 1 Corinthians 3 to the Corinthians was that since the planter and water do not have any power in themselves to bring forth life, why are you Corinthians envying each other, and why is there great rivalry in the work of God? You should just go and do the work God has allotted to you, and rejoice when God shows His hand of blessing on it - 'It's not about you Corinthians, it's not about me as an apostle, it's all about Him and His word!'. You need perspective, sometimes we lose perspective. In 2 Corinthians 3, Paul again addresses this problem: 'Do we begin again to commend ourselves?', verse 5 says, 'Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think any thing as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God'. It's not about us.

This parable gives us perspective, when we consider the unusual productivity of the word of God. It happens in spite of us, we have an involvement but the life springing forth has got nothing to do with us. The second practical thing that we can learn about the word of God: there's need not only for perspective, but patience in the work of God. Look at verses 27 and 28: the farmer slept, he rose night and day, the seed sprung up. Ecclesiastes 3:1-2 says: 'To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven', and verse 2 at the end says, 'a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is plant'. That's really saying that there are seasons, there are seasons in life, there are seasons in nature, and there are seasons in sowing the seed, and often that season is a season of waiting. Sowing, waiting, reaping - and what goes on during that waiting time, that time that we should be patient, is often imperceptible. The farmer doesn't know what's going on under the ground, you don't know what's going on behind the veil of the spirit, but something is going on because the life is in the seed. The farmer sleeps and rises, sleeps and rises, and then one day the seed grows and he doesn't know how.

Hudson Taylor, that great pioneer missionary to China, said that there are three qualifications for missionaries: patience, patience, and patience. That's a qualification for anyone in the work of the Lord. It takes good faith to be a farmer like this man, it takes good patience to be a farmer like this man, and it takes the same faith and patience to be a sower of God's seed. Someone has said that the secret of patience is doing something else in the meantime. This man was sleeping, getting up, at night going to bed, doing his day's work - the thing we can be doing while we're waiting and patiently looking for the harvest is to keep sowing, to keep watering, that's our job! Some go a lifetime without seeing much fruit, but God's word promises that a harvest will come.

Archbishop Trench, I think in his commentary on the parables, tells how in 1690 a certain plant was brought over and planted in the gardens of Hampton Court Palace by Queen Mary. The last 10 years of the 17th century passed, and the plant gave no sign of flowering. The whole of the 18th-century passed, and not a bud did the plant put forth. Eighty-eight years of the 19th century passed, and still no sign of a flower - but in 1889 the plant burst into a blossom, because the life was in the seed. Queen Mary didn't see it - neither did King Billy either, her husband! The next monarch didn't see it, but in 1889 the harvest came.

Some years ago there was a vase that was sealed airtight found in a mummy-pit in Egypt by the English traveller Wilkinson. He sent it to the British Museum, and the librarian there had butterfingers, and he unfortunately broke it and discovered a few grains of wheat, and one or
two peas. They were old and wrinkled, and hard as stone. He planted those peas carefully under glass on the 4th of June 1844, and at the end of 30 days those old seeds were seen to spring up into new life. Those peas were buried several thousand years before they sprouted - perhaps in the time of Moses - and they slept, apparently dead to all intents and purposes, yet they were still living in the dust of that tomb because the life is in the seed!

It's interesting when Luke talks about the parable of the sower in Luke 8:15, speaking of the good ground he says: 'But that on the good ground are they, which in an honest and good heart, having heard the word, keep it, and bring forth fruit with patience' - that's what Luke says. You need perspective in the work of God, you need patience in the work of God, but thirdly: you need perseverance in the work of God. Galatians 6:9: 'Let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not'. This parable teaches that we don't have to raise the dead, that's not our job. We, if we faithfully sow the seed, if we water it in prayer, we can believe God for a harvest though we never see it, we can believe for He has said it! Now that, I don't know what it does for you, but that liberates me! It's not about me!

William Carey spent over 40 years in Burma and India, and when he was asked to explain his astonishing accomplishments, he simply answered one word: perseverance. He said to his wife, Eustace: 'If after my removal', his death, 'anyone should think it worthwhile to write my life, I will give you a criterion. If he gives me credit for being a plodder, he will describe me justly. Anything beyond this will be too much: I can plod'. Perseverance, Ecclesiastes 11:4: 'He who observes the wind will not sow; and he who regards the clouds will not reap'.

The unusual productivity of the word of God teaches us that we need perspective in God's work, we need patience and perseverance in God's work, but thirdly else we learn along with the unique power of the word of God, and the unusual productivity of the word of God: we are presented with the ultimate purpose of the word of God. Verse 29, the seed was sown to bring forth harvest, that's the reason why the word of God is sown. Kenneth Wuest translates verses 28 and 29 like this, listen carefully, it bears out all that we have said: 'The earth bears fruit spontaneously; first herbage, then a covering for the grain', the ear, 'then the fully developed grain in its covering. Whenever the fruit permits, immediately he sends forth the sickle, because the harvest stands ready. Though the growth is imperceptible, it is yet constant, and it yields an increase in the end - when the grain ripens, the harvest will eventually on that day be taken to the heavenly garner'.

This parable presents God's kingdom from the first sowing, hidden in the hearts of men when the Lord Jesus was on the earth, then the patient waiting in this age of grace, until the final reaping for all to see at the end of the age, that great harvest. The ultimate purpose for the word of God is that there should be a harvest to God's glory.

Now let me finish with two very brief challenges to you. The parable of the growing seed surely issues to us the challenge of preparedness for that day of harvest. Ecclesiastes 11:6 reads: 'In the morning sow your seed, and in the evening do not withhold your hand: for you do not know which will prosper, either this or that, whether both alike will be good'. The predicament the church, and this church, finds itself in in these days is epitomised in the song that we sang years ago:

'O where are the reapers that garner in
The sheaves of the good from the fields of sin?
With sickles of truth must the work be done,
And no one may rest till the 'harvest home'.
Where are the reapers? O who will come
And share in the glory of the 'harvest home'?
O who will help us to garner in
The sheaves of good from the fields of sin?'

What a challenge: we need to be sowing, we need to be watering, we need to be waiting. But there is also not only a challenge, but a cause for hope: do not despair. The life is in the seed!
The parable of the sower perhaps concentrated more on the force of resistance to the seed and the soils, but this parable of the growth of the seed concentrates on the force of the life that is in the seed, that causes the seed to grow. There is a unique power in the word of God, there is an unusual productivity in the word of God, and there is an ultimate purpose in the word of God that will be fulfilled. James 5: 'Therefore be patient brethren, see how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, waiting patiently for it until it receives the early and latter rain. You also be patient, establish your heart, for the coming of the Lord draws near'. 'The wicked', Proverbs 11 says, 'works a deceitful work: but to him that sows righteousness shall be a sure reward'. 'They that sow in tears shall reap in joy. He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him' - a cause for hope! Sower, do not despair: God's word has unique power, unusual productivity, and an ultimate purpose - and we shall see it soon.

'God is working his purpose out,
As year succeeds to year:
God is working his purpose out,
And the time is drawing near:
Nearer and nearer draws the time,
The time that shall surely be,
When the earth shall be filled
With the glory of God,
As the waters cover the sea'.

Father, we ask particularly for those who have become weary in well doing - and how easy that is - the feeble knees are weak, and our hands hang down because we so often view things by the naked eye, we operate by sight and not faith. Yet Lord, there is so much dynamite in this parable to persuade us that when we walk by faith, to realise that the life of the seed is in itself, and there is a unique power in Your word, there is an unusual productivity. You are working a work in our day, and if we knew it we wouldn’t believe it though we were told it. We thank You that You are working Your purpose out. So help us, by faith, to have perspective, to have patience, and to be persevering as we serve our Master in this world. May the seed go deep this morning and bear fruit from every heart. Amen.

Transcribed by Andrew Watkins, Preach The Word – September 2007
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"The Parable Of The Growth Of The Mustard Seed"

We're turning in our Bibles to Mark's gospel again, chapter 4, to what is the fourth and final parable recorded by Mark in his gospel record of the life and ministry of our Lord Jesus. I trust that these parables on Sunday mornings have been a blessing and encouragement, a challenge, a help to you - they certainly have been to me. I think this last one will be no exception as we expound it today. We're beginning to read at verse 30, and we will read down to verse 34 - although we'll not really be dealing in detail with verses 33 and 34, because we covered that ground as it relates to certain truths already in the passage, we covered it in previous weeks.

We begin to read at verse 30: "He", the Lord Jesus, "said, Whereunto shall we liken the kingdom of God? or with what comparison shall we compare it? It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when it is sown in the earth, is less than all the seeds that be in the earth: But when it is sown, it groweth up, and becometh greater than all herbs, and shooteth out great branches; so that the fowls of the air may lodge under the shadow of it. And with many such parables spake he the word unto them, as they were able to hear it. But without a parable spake he not unto them: and when they were alone, he expounded all things to his disciples".

Verses 30, 31 and 32 give us what I have called 'The Parable Of The Growth Of The Mustard Seed'. Now we learned in previous weeks that parables in general are essentially comparisons, they are throwing one thing alongside another thing in order to help us understand it a bit more. But perhaps what I haven't laboured as much in these previous studies is that these parables are somewhat different to other parables that we read in the Gospels, because these parables come under the classification as being 'parables of the kingdom'. Now if you want a more detailed record of the parables of the kingdom, they are found in Matthew chapter 13 - we're not going to take time to look at those - but some of them are here in Mark chapter 4, although he doesn't record as many as Matthew. They are addressed, as we see, both to the multitudes, the great crowds, and also to the disciples.

What would happen is, the Lord would deliver the parable to everyone, and then in private He would explain the meaning to His own disciples. So therefore, there were those who did not understand, would not understand what was being said because their hearts were so hard; and then there were others who would understand because they had hearts ready to receive, their hearts were good soil to receive the seed of the word. Now there's also something else important that we haven't highlighted regarding these parables of the kingdom, not only in Matthew 13 but here in Mark 4, and that is the timing with which they were delivered. That is crucial, because as we look at the context regarding the timing, these four parables were given immediately after the religious leaders in Judaism had vowed to destroy the Lord Jesus Christ as an impostor. They had rejected Him as Messiah - indeed if you look at chapter 3 of Mark's gospel, and just scan down from verse 22 to 29, you will see there that they committed the unpardonable sin. We saw that in a general sense that was to harden your
heart against the ministry of the Spirit, but to the nation of Israel, people of God, they hardened their heart against Messiah - and that was, in this context, the unpardonable sin. So the timing of these parables of the kingdom is important to note that, as Matthew 13:1 says, on that same day, the very same day that this blasphemy of the Holy Spirit was committed, the Lord Jesus spoke the parables of the kingdom.

Now, what is the significance of that? Well, they had rejected the King, and so they would not have the kingdom - at least at that moment. So what happens when we are given the parables of the kingdom is that the kingdom takes what some have called 'a mysterious form', or it is internalised in the hearts of men and women until, that is, Christ returns and sets up His kingdom in a manifested form. This certainly is one aspect to the mystery of the kingdom of God. Now a mystery in the Bible simply is a truth that up until now has not been revealed, it's a new revelation. Matthew 13, in the other record of the kingdom parables, Jesus says that in verse 35: 'That it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying, I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter things which have been kept secret from the foundation of the world'. Colossians 1:26 concurs with this, Paul says: 'Even the mystery which hath been hid from ages and from generations, but now is made manifest to his saints'.

So the parables concerning the mystery of the kingdom, which is what we have here in Mark 4 and in Matthew 13, must impart some kind of new information that was never revealed before, that's important as we understand it. When we think of that, we need to then ask - as we revise where we have already been - what was new in the previous parables we looked at? Well, think of the parable of the sower, the seed and the soil, the new revelation was that the word of the kingdom would be sown during this interim period when the Lord Jesus is absent, and it would be sown with varying degrees of success. We'll not go into that, but you will remember how we expounded that. Then the parable of the lamp and the stand, the new revelation is that Christ's light must be shed abroad and set on a lamp stand - and we saw that we are that lamp stand, the church and specific Christians also in their individual capacity. Then last week we looked at the growth of the seed, what is the new truth there? Well, simply that the Lord would be absent, but during His absence, after His first advent, in anticipation of His second advent, the seed would grow. Though it would be imperceptible, it still would grow, God would give the increase and one day there would be a harvest. That was never known before, these are new truths.

Now here's the question: what is new here in this parable of the growth of the mustard seed? It's harder to find, and many Bible commentators and expositors have floundered on this, simply because they haven't been able to find what the new truth is, and they just simply say: 'Well, the truth is that Christ's kingdom will spread across the globe'. Now, that is true, and that is something that seems to be indicated by this parable, but that truth in and of itself was something that was known from way back in the Old Testament. So it doesn't comply with what the mystery is that has to be in the mystery of these kingdom parables. For instance, Daniel 2 and verses 34-35 says: 'a stone was cut out without hands, which smote the image upon his feet that were of iron and clay, and brake them to pieces. Then was the iron, the clay, the brass, the silver, and the gold, broken to pieces together, and became like the chaff of the summer threshingfloors; and the wind carried them away, that no place was found for them: and the stone that smote the image', the stone figurative of the Lord Jesus coming again, 'became a great mountain, and filled the whole earth'. That would have been known to have corresponded to Messiah's kingdom, and so Daniel and other of the prophets have prophesied, many years before Jesus giving these parables, that Christ's kingdom one day would spread across the globe.
So what then is new in this parable of the growth of the mustard seed, that was previously unknown? Let's look at the parable's teaching first of all, and it's left up to us to interpret it, because the Lord doesn't interpret this parable for us. Now there are two interpretations that generally have been given, the first is that this great tree that grows forth from this mustard seed pictures the extension of Christianity which - although starting from small beginnings in the Lord and His apostles - finally spreads over the whole world. Now, that is true to an extent, but in my opinion and the opinions of godlier men, that interpretation does not fit either the content of the parable or the context of the parable. Now let me deal with both of those. First of all, the context of the parable, where we find it in this portion of Scripture. As I've already said, it was after the Jewish rejection of the King, and therefore by default the kingdom - and we see in chapter 4 verse 1 that there was a change of approach of the Lord Jesus now in His ministry, after the Jews had rejected Him. He went to the seaside, He left the synagogue teaching, now He broadens His ministry, and from that moment on He teaches these parables regarding the kingdom of God in the interim period when He would leave His disciples.

He gives in total seven parables of the kingdom, and all seven are found in Matthew 13 - but when you look at Matthew 13, you find out something about them. They are all connected, and they are connected as a complete whole. In other words, there is a theme running through them, and when you look at the previous two parables in Matthew 13 before the one we're looking at today in Mark 4, you find that both of them have to do with the rejection of God's word - not the success of the sowing of the seed of the kingdom, but the fact that God's word would be rejected. We can even see that here in Mark 4 in the parable of the sower, the seed and the soils.

Then, not only is there the context, that it seems all to do with rejecting God's word, but the content of this parable wouldn't seem to indicate to us that it's talking about the success of the church spreading across the world. Mustard seeds were the smallest of seeds, Jesus says, to be sown on the earth. Now many sceptics have said that that proves that Jesus wasn't the Son of God, because a mustard seed isn't the smallest seed that you can get - what the Lord was speaking of was in Palestine, concerning the usage of seeds in His day, it was the smallest seed generally that could be bought and sown. But mustard seeds didn't grow into great trees that we read of in this parable, they grew into bushes - now admittedly some could grow to about 12 or 15 feet, but for that to happen it was unnatural, abnormal growth. This was a herb seed that should grow to a herb plant, not a great tree. You remember in Genesis 1 in creation, God said: 'The earth will bring forth grass, and herb yielding seed after his kind, and tree yielding fruit, whose seed was in itself, after his kind, and God saw that it was good'. Now if this mustard seed grew to a great tree with branches in which birds could nest, it was not after its kind - do you understand? This mustard seed was meant to grow to be just a bush, so if it was growing to be a tree, this was unhealthy growth.

Not only is there that aspect to the content of the parable, but we've got to account for the birds that are in the branches here. In verse 15 where we have the parable of the sower, you see that the Lord is interpreting the birds there snatching away the seed, He tells us that these birds are Satan and his emissaries who snatch the seed of the word of God from people's hearts. Now remember that both of these parables were taught on the same day, and it would seem unlikely that the birds here mean something different than the birds in the parable of the seed, the sower, and the soils. Now we are left to interpret it, as I've said, ourselves, and it's difficult - but we have to remember this principle of Bible interpretation, and it will help us not only here but in many instances of difficult portions of the word of God: Scripture is its own interpreter.
Do any other Scriptures help us to understand what this parable means? Well, yes. When we turn to Daniel 4, we find there - you can turn to it, or just listen as I read it - Daniel speaks of a vision, and this vision was seen of the great 'tree in the midst of the earth, and the height thereof was great', verse 10 of chapter 4, 'The tree grew, and was strong, and the height thereof reached unto heaven, and the sight thereof to the end of all the earth: The leaves thereof were fair, and the fruit thereof much, and in it was meat for all: the beasts of the field had shadow under it, and the fowls of the heaven dwelt in the boughs thereof, and all flesh was fed of it'. Then verse 22 of the same chapter: 'It is thou, O king', Daniel said to the emperor, 'that art grown and become strong: for thy greatness is grown, and reacheth unto heaven, and thy dominion to the end of the earth'. Now that tree there, Daniel interpreted Nebuchadnezzar's dream and told him: 'You are the tree, God has given you your kingdom, and it has spread across the whole world' - the kingdom of Babylon.

Now when we go to Ezekiel 31, we find the same figure used by God, this time the Cedar tree representing the Assyrian empire. Ezekiel 31:3: 'Behold, the Assyrian was a cedar in Lebanon with fair branches, and with a shadowing shroud, and of an high stature; and his top was among the thick boughs', verse 6, 'All the fowls of heaven made their nests in his boughs, and under his branches did all the beasts of the field bring forth their young, and under his shadow dwelt all great nations'.

Now if this figure is similar, and it certainly is, this mustard tree seems to, in a sense, be an imitation of a great world power. It aspires to greatness beyond its means, it's reaching to heaven but it is firmly rooted in the earth, and it is harbouring these birds which already in the context refer to demonic forces. Now I believe the birds here in this parable are the key to the interpretation. We have to say, if we're going to be consistent, that if these birds represent evil activities of Satan in the first parable, they must do so here - and also to be consistent with the Lord's clue to understanding parables. Remember He gave us a clue as to how we could understand the rest of the parables, in verse 13 I think it is of chapter 4, look at it: 'And he said unto them', after giving the parable of the seed and the soils and the sower, 'Know ye not this parable? and how then will ye know all parables?'. There is a key to understanding this parable of the sower that will help us in the others, particularly the mystery parables of the kingdom.

The birds are the natural enemies of the sower, they were in the first parable and we have to conclude they are in this fourth one. That fits in with the rest of the Bible, doesn't it? Ephesians 2 verse 2 tells us that Satan is the Prince of the power of the air; Ephesians 6 and verse 12 tells us there are principalities and powers, rulers in heavenly places who are dictating to rulers in earthly places, and influencing our whole society in many strata. But when we go to the very last bit of the Bible, we see that these figures are intact also. When we turn to Revelation 18 and verse 2, we find the final phase of Christendom - now when I speak of Christendom, I'm talking about the outward profession of Christianity as opposed to true Christianity, where they are genuine born-again believers. Revelation 18 tells us that Babylon the Great will be an eclectic religious movement that will incorporate established Christendom. These birds in verse 2 are seen in cages in that system which they sought to develop, look at it: 'He cried mightily with a strong voice, saying, Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen, and is become the habitation of devils, and the hold of every foul spirit, and a cage of every unclean and hateful bird'. It would seem that birds, in these contexts, depict the way of false teachers, false professors, often mentioned by Paul and by Peter and John in their epistles, and the other apostles.
So what is the lesson in the teaching of this parable, well, it's simple: it's to do with the growth of the kingdom. Though the kingdom of God was a little insignificant, it would seem, small mustard-like seed sown by Christ and the apostles, it would grow to such an extent in the outward capacity that it would succeed, in worldly terms, to such an extent that it would unhealthily, unnaturally, and abnormally grow to an empire in which its enemies could even shelter and nest. Now maybe that seems an extreme interpretation to you, but it's not when you look at Matthew 13 and the other parables of the mystery of the kingdom, particularly Matthew 13:47-50 where there is the parable of the dragnet - that the bigger the net becomes, the greater the chance of catching both good and bad fish. The external nature of professed Christendom, the external nature of the kingdom of God.

That is the parable's teaching, now what is the prophetic message - because we have to assume that because these parables are speaking of the interim period when the Lord Jesus has left, having been crucified, risen and ascended, until when He comes again, this in-between period - these all have a prophetic message for us. We've heard them already, about the sowing of the seed, how God works. The prophetic message here is: yes, certainly there was, I admit, great growth in early apostolic days, Pentecost and the days after it - read the Acts of the Apostles - it wasn't long after those days of early revival blessing until Satan's ministers boldly invaded the church, the early church of Jesus Christ. Now we have proof of that, because 1 and 2 Corinthians were written because of, as Paul puts it, ministers of light who were really angels of darkness, messengers of Satan who invaded the church, false apostles, prophets etc. So even in apostolic days, just after the little seed had been sown and was only starting to sprout, the professing churches then were already departing from apostolic truth.

A case in point of that is where Paul said in 2 Timothy 1 verse 15: 'All who are in Asia have departed from me', they have forsaken me! This is the great apostle that signed his name to about 13 letters in the New Testament, and they didn't want anything to do with him! Two writers have said something interesting on this. F. W. Grant says: 'Men that quote to us the Christianity of a hundred or two hundred years from that moment', that is when Asia turned away from Paul, 'they have need to pause and ask themselves what type of it they are following - whether that of degenerative Asia, or 'honourable' worldly Corinth, or what else'. Robert Gavette (sp?) says: 'How preposterous, then, to take the actual conditions of the church at any time after the apostles deceased as a model of what it ought to be!' - because even in Paul's day it was starting to depart.

That's why we need to get back to the Bible, not the church fathers, or patristic scholars, but the Bible, the apostles' doctrine is our creed. But this sowing of the seed began with a persecuted minority of Jesus, the Lord, and His apostles, and they were called by the Lord the 'little flock'. Now then something happened, they became more popular, and Christianity began to be embraced by governments, and even became the state religion of the Roman Empire. So this little mustard seed was sown and began to grow, and then its growth accelerated externally to an abnormal, unnatural, unusual extent - professing Christendom that would become a resting place for all kinds of false teachers and false professors. This parable is about the outward form of the kingdom of God that existed not long after our Lord departed, existed right throughout church history, and exists today and is with us now.

Now there are at least two mysteries that we can locate, or that we'll have time to do today, that are found in this parable. I think you'll have to agree with me that the first is that from the teachings and precepts of the Lord Jesus, a great kingdom, externally, could grow into an empire that possesses governments - think of the Vatican City - armies that have butchered
people through the Crusades, and Treasuries that are an indictment to our Christian charity. What a mystery, that from this poor Galilean Carpenter there should grow such a great tree across this world.

The second mystery is that the visible church that ought to make war against Christ's enemies, are actually, through their success, becoming a roosting place and haven for them - it's astounding, isn't it? Who would ever have dreamt that this could happen, from that little mustard seed that Christ sowed of the kingdom - who dreamt? Christ prophesied it, He said it would happen. It did happen in the early church, and in His letters to the seven churches He spoke of it happening, critiqued it, and now it is with us - we need to be aware of it.

You might say, 'Well, that's all very interesting. Now I understand the parable, and I have assessed the prophetic message that is behind it, but so what?'. Well, here's the 'So what?', the principle for today, and I want to give this to you in a twofold manner. First of all, the principle in this parable for the church; and secondly the principle for the Christian. Our Lord is teaching in this parable that there cannot, I repeat, cannot be worldly greatness in this age without giving occasion to the devil. Let me repeat that: there cannot be worldly greatness in this age without giving occasion to the devil. There will, indeed, come a time - in the future, that is - of greatness and glory in the kingdom of God to the saints. Daniel prophesies: 'And the kingdom and dominion, and the greatness of the kingdom under the whole heaven, shall be given to the people of the saints of the most High, whose kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey him' - but now that is not our charge. That's why he said to the Corinthians: 'Now you're rich, now you're increased in knowledge, but it ought not to be so now' - that's coming in a day, but not now. Our orders are in 1 Peter 5:6: 'Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time' - but the time is not now. That is profound, let me repeat it once more: there cannot be worldly greatness in this age without giving occasion to the devil.

Now here's the lesson for the church, and I'm only giving you this for your consideration, you can reject it of course - but I think, regarding churches, smaller is probably better than greater. The world's success syndrome which measures everything by numbers has thoroughly engulfed the church, whereas God's word says the opposite. This parable, but you can look elsewhere - Gideon's army was reduced from 32,000 to 300 so that the victory would be attributed to divine power alone; Jesus chose 12 disciples, did you ever think about that? Not 12,000 - He could have chosen 12,000, but He chose 12 because the emphasis in Scripture is quality, not quantity; depth, not breadth! Let me add a caveat to that: that does not mean that there is a virtue in smallness, when the smallness is a result of apathy, or lack of spirituality, or prayer, or sowing the seed of the kingdom and seeking to reap it - that's not what we're talking about. But we must not make the mistake of thinking that largeness is something good, and something even spiritual in the kingdom of God - it may be on very rare occasions, but generally the rule is: small is better. Largeness, of course, if we had time to go into it, in churches can create practical problems for leadership, pastoral care - but what the Lord's point here, I believe, is: there is grave spiritual danger when, externally, the kingdom of God grows large.

I'm going to be quoting in, in our closing moments, Vance Havner an awful lot, who has a great deal to say on this matter. This is what he says: 'The church has moved from the catacombs to the Colosseum in its emphasis on size. We stage mass demonstrations and gigantic congregations. We put celebrities on the platform, and borrow from Caesar to enhance the banner of Christ. We have gone crazy over bigness, actually we need a thinning instead of a thickening. I learned long ago that growing corn or cotton must be thin, we
reduce the quantity to improve the quality. Gideon had to thin his troops, and a similar
procedure might help God's army today. Jesus thinned His crowd, as is recorded in the sixth
chapter of John, and doubtless there was many another occasion. Today the persecuted
minority has become the popular majority'.

When one of the largest Protestant denominations was having a drive for its members, it
adopted a slogan in 1984: 'A million more in 84'. One minister leaned over to another when
the catchy title was announced, and whispered: 'If we get a million more like the ones we
have, we're sunk'. It's not about numbers. We all fall into this trap: real success, the Lord is
telling us, of a church and of His kingdom is not found in the number of members, but in their
holiness - no matter how few they may be! John Wesley had it right: 'Do not give me the big
ecclesiastical battalions, give me a hundred men who fear nothing but sin and love nothing
but God, and I will shake the gates of hell'. Vance Havner again: 'As long as the church wore
scars, they made headway. When they began to wear medals the cause languished. It was a
greater day for the church when Christians were fed to the lions, than when they bought
season tickets and sat in the grandstand. It is wrong to win banners and raise quotas rather
than to know God. Better to have small, growing spiritual assemblies than large, unwieldy,
unprincipled ones'.

That's the message of this parable for the church: small is probably better than big. But
there's a message in this, and a principle for the Christians. I found this quote, I can't allocate
it to anyone, but it really sums up this parable to all of us, if we'll take it to heart today - it
goes like this: 'The beginning of greatness is to be little', the little mustard seed, 'the increase
of greatness is to be less, and the perfection of greatness is to be nothing'. The beginning of
greatness is to be little. The increase of greatness is to be less, and the perfection of
greatness is to be nothing. 'Pride is the great Christian evangelical sin. It was the sin that
made the devil the devil, therefore being the parent sin, he aspired pride to be like God in
heaven. Then he, in his fall, tempted Adam and Eve, and overcame them, and pride entered
into their hearts and into the human gene'. As William MacDonald puts it, the sad result is
that every one of us has enough to sink a fleet. I know that pride gets in my heart, whereas
our Lord Jesus, who sowed the mustard seed, was humble in His birth, humble in His life, in
His death - and being found in fashion as a man, He humbled Himself, and became obedient
unto death, even the death of the cross.

'He humbled Himself to the manger,
And even to Calvary's tree.
But I am so proud and unwilling,
His humble disciple to be'.

'Wast thou, Saviour, meek and lowly?
And shall such a worm as I
Weak and sinful, and unholy
Dare to lift my head on high?'.

Vance Havner has so much worth to say, he says: 'Why did the Son of God spend all those
years in a woodworker's shop? Why did He not visit Rome, and Athens, and Alexandria, and
lecture in the great world centres? Why did He spend, by far, the greater portion of His
earthly life as a carpenter? It does not add up on our little computers in this publicity mad era
of the mass media, when people will do anything under the sun to land on the front page and
show up on television. We would have had our Lord come to the earth full-grown, a world	raveller, a university lecturer. Think what the news media could have done for Him! Instead,
when He performed a miracle, He said, 'Don't tell it'. His brothers urged Him to get out of the backwoods, and up onto the boulevards, and that He needed a good presage'. Listen to this: 'He did miracles and never advertised them, today we advertise them but cannot do them'.

Jeremiah put it like this: do you speak great things for yourself? Do not seek them. Christ didn't, that's the point! Who do we follow? Christian church, Christian history? We follow Christ!

'Wouldst thou be great, then lowly serve;
Wouldst thou go up, go down;
But go as low as e'er you will,
The Highest, has gone lower still'.

C. H. McIntosh says: 'There is always the utmost danger when a man or his work becomes remarkable. He may be sure Satan is gaining his objective when attention is drawn to aught or anyone but the Lord Jesus Himself. A work may be commenced in the greatest possible simplicity, but through lack of holy watchfulness, and spirituality on the part of the workman, he himself or the results of his work may attract general attention, and he may fall into the snare of the devil. Satan's grand, ceaseless object is to dishonour the Lord Jesus; and if he can do this by what seems to be Christian service, he has achieved all the greater victory for that time'.

What is the lesson for the Christian, for the church in this parable of the growth of the mustard seed? Human greatness exposes us to Satan's attacks - that is the lesson. As someone said to me very early in my Christian life: when you see a ladder, don't climb up it, climb down it. That's hard to do. F. B. Meyer said of that great evangelist, D. L. Moody - and you know how God used him - 'Moody is a man who never seems to have heard of himself. No wonder God used him so wonderfully'. A Keswick speaker put it like this on one occasion: 'There's nothing God cannot do if we keep our hands off the glory'. The parable of the growth of the mustard seed, the early church, our Lord and His disciples sowing it, it growing at Pentecost and in subsequent years, and then not long after the first century - even before it turned - the rot started. The external tree started to grow to such greatness that all the Lord's enemies could nest in it. Do we learn the lesson today? Can you say, Christian, can I say:

'Give me to serve in humble sphere,
I ask no more beside;
Content to fill a little place
If God be glorified'.

Wesley, the hymn writer, said:

'Never let the world break in;
Fix a mighty gulf between:
Keep me little and unknown,
Prized and loved by God alone'.

You know the Moravians, I hope you do, I've told you about them. Really in the modern era, they were the ones who revived missionary endeavour. They affected John Wesley greatly, so that he ended up going across the whole world really as his parish, preaching the gospel. The early Moravians had a prayer slogan, and it was this - it sums up our Lord's parable of the growth of the mustard seed, it sums up the message that the Lord has to my heart and yours
today, it goes like this: 'From the unhappy desire of becoming great, good Lord deliver us'. Amen.

Lord, we have been redeemed, born again, not just that we might go to heaven, but that we might be Christ's disciples here on the earth. Lord, let us not keep our lives and lose them, but let us lose our lives and find them, and seek first the kingdom of God. Lord, this is so piercing to my heart, and it should be to all our hearts. Give us the help and the grace, having heard Your word, to obey the truth - to the glory of our Lord Jesus we pray, Amen.

Transcribed by Andrew Watkins, Preach The Word – September 2007
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Studies In Mark - Chapter 26
"In The Same Boat"

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Turn to Mark's Gospel chapter 4 for our reading, Mark chapter 4 beginning to read at verse 35: "And the same day, when the even was come, he saith unto them, Let us pass over unto the other side. And when they had sent away the multitude, they took him even as he was in the ship. And there were also with him other little ships. And there arose a great storm of wind, and the waves beat into the ship, so that it was now full. And he was in the hinder part of the ship, asleep on a pillow: and they awake him, and say unto him, Master, carest thou not that we perish? And he arose, and rebuked the wind, and said unto the sea, Peace, be still. And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. And he said unto them, Why are ye so fearful? how is it that ye have no faith? And they feared exceedingly, and said one to another, What manner of man is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?".

I've entitled my message today 'In The Same Boat'. Now we are entering a new section of Mark's gospel today that spans from our first verse, chapter 4 verse 35, through to chapter 5 verse 43. Therein are contained four of the greatest miracles that were ever performed by our Lord Jesus. So we see Mark's pattern is that after the parables follow the miracles. We have spent four, even five weeks looking at four parables, and now we come to the miracles of the Servant of Jehovah. Now there is a very interesting lesson for us all, because the works of the Lord Jesus are following His words. He had spoken, and now He authenticates His words by the works that He performs - that's very important for us as Christians. It's one thing to say that we are Christians, to quote the verses, but it's another thing to live up to them, to follow in the Master's footsteps.

Here we have a vivid account, more than any other of the writers, of this first great miracle of our Lord Jesus recorded in Mark. Again it indicates that he probably received this account from an eyewitness, most likely Peter the apostle who was in the boat. But I want you to see this morning that, whilst these miracles are coming after the parables, these miracles - particularly here in Mark's gospel, at this moment - are actually parables in themselves, but they, if you like, are parables in action. They are wrought one after the other within the course of a few days, and indeed the one we're going to look at this morning was performed on the very day, the same day that he gave the four parables that He spoke.

First of all we have this storm at sea in verses 35 to 41, which demonstrates the power of the Servant of Jehovah, the Lord Jesus, over the forces of nature. Then in verses 1-20 in chapter 5, we see this wonderful story of the demoniac and his deliverance from the legion of demons, and that demonstrates the power of the Servant over the world of spirits. Then we find in chapter 5 also, verses 25 to 34, that the Lord delivers a woman of an incurable disease, the issue of blood, and that demonstrates the power of the Servant of the Lord over physical illness. Then in this section, finally in verse 35 of chapter 5 to 43, we see that the Lord was able to deliver a young child from death, the power of the Servant over the realm of death.

In each case in this section, these four miracles demonstrate the power of Christ overcoming hostile forces - whether it be the forces of nature, demonic forces, the forces of disease and
illness, or the very force of death itself. Mark’s emphasis is: man's extremity is God's opportunity. God loves to display Himself in the midst of our problems. There are crises of differing kinds in this section. We have a storm that no seaman could overcome. We have a demoniac that no man could tame. We have a disease that no physician could cure, and we have a tragedy that no parent could avert. These differing trials and crises also differed in the type of people that they affected. You have a storm that is affecting a company of men on the sea, some of them were fishermen, sailors. You have demons affecting one man alone among the tombs. You have disease affecting one woman who sought to hide in the crowd. Then you have death affecting a child in her own father's house.

What Mark is presenting to us is the Servant of the Lord, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the One who would become the Saviour of the world, proved His sufficiency for every circumstance, and took an opportunity to show it in the midst of men's extremity.

Now let us look at this first miracle that Mark presents to us, this storm at sea. Let me suggest to you first of all - I have three headings, the first is: the satanic storm. I believe that this storm was satanic in origin. If you look at verses 35 and 36, let's read them again: 'And the same day, when the even was come, he saith unto them, Let us pass over unto the other side. And when they had sent away the multitude, they took him even as he was in the ship. And there were also with him other little ships'. Now that's an interesting statement that we'll come back to again later on: they took Him along in the boat as He was. Immediately, without any provisions or preparations, after teaching these four parables, they pushed off to sea taking the Lord Jesus in the same boat from which He had preached those parables in that afternoon, during that day. They take Him into the middle of the lake, and other little ships accompany them.

Now I don't know whether you know much about the Sea of Galilee, but it's only about eight miles across, and it's notoriously prone to storms, squalls of a very violent nature. It is situated at about 700 feet below sea level, and it's surrounded west, north and east by mountains that rise about three or four thousand feet above sea level - and that causes a phenomenon, because of the geography of where the lake is, that there is a varying climate at lake level and at peak level of the mountains. The climate varies so greatly that freak storms can happen very suddenly.

You might say: 'Well, if that is the case, and this is nothing abnormal, why are you saying that this is a satanic storm?'. Well, the first reason is that it would seem more severe than the usual storms on the Lake of Galilee. These hardened fishermen - we know that Peter, Andrew, James and John, at least, were experienced in sailing - they were terrified. It would seem unusual that, if they had experience out on this lake and of this type of storm, that they would have been so terrified. But also verse 39 gives us a clue as to the satanic origin of the storm, because the Lord's rebuke of it is: 'Peace, be still' - which, literally in the original language, could be translated 'be muzzled'. It was used in chapter 1 and verse 25 of the Lord's exorcism of a demon, where He told it to be quiet.

Satan, we know, in the Gospels was constantly attempting to disrupt the Servant of the Lord's service in the will of God. You remember the people of Nazareth attempting to push the Lord Jesus over the cliff, but He was delivered from that because He was doing God's will. We see in chapter 5 and verses 1-20 that the Lord is on His way to deliver a demoniac of a legion of devils. He is here to deliver the demon-possessed, and I believe that Satan was trying to disrupt Him in that work. But I want you to notice what seems to be an irony even, some might say, a contradiction, though it is not: although Satan is, I believe, involved in
originating this storm, verse 35 tells us that it was the Lord Jesus who said to them: 'Let us pass over unto the other side'. Now right away what that presents us with is the mystery of God's providence.

Let me explain that to you: the Lord said, 'Let us go over to the other side', and yet they're going into the midst of a storm that Satan instigates for them, and the Lord allows them to go through it. It sounds a bit like life, doesn't it? How the Lord permits us to go through certain storms, we don't understand why - and, as the book of Job teaches us, sometimes those storms can be of satanic origin, but God allows them for His own purpose. I can't explain that - neither can you, by the way - but it's a fact. Storms will be allowed into our lives by God, even storms that are instigated by the devil, He will allow them.

Now, as I've already said, this is a parable in action. The message that it gives us right away is that this raging sea is a picture of the storms of life through which all believers are called to pass. The servant is not greater than his Lord, and if He is the Servant of Jehovah and having to go down this path of suffering that will lead to the cross, as Mark so graphically paints for us, we must take up our crosses and go down the same road and face the same storms. We must be in the same boat. Often times it's so perplexing, and we might even wonder if the Saviour cares at all.

Let's see the bigger picture for a moment, because this parable in action is not disconnected from the preceding parables that were spoken. It follows on in the same context. You remember I taught you last Sunday morning that these were the mystery parables of the kingdom, and I'll not go into all of it, but save to say that these particularly spoke prophetically about the interim period when the King was absent. He had presented the kingdom, and the kingdom had been rejected by the Jews, and it is sown in the hearts of men who believe in Him - but He's gone until He comes again to set up His earthly kingdom. So we now have a parable in action that took place on the same day as He spoke those kingdom mystery parables, happening in the same boat from which He spoke them - and what do you think He is saying in this parable in action? 'You will go through storms in my absence!'.

Mark wrote, of course, this gospel to encourage Roman believers who were either facing or about to face Nero's terrible persecutions. It might have seemed for these early Christians that the King was absent, and He didn't care what they were going through - being fed to the lions, and burned to death. Maybe it seemed that He wasn't there because He wasn't preventing these storms taking place, but the Lord wanted these disciples and those who would follow to know He does hear the cries of His disciples, and He reveals Himself in the midst of life's storms. You see, Mark's readers were about to be persecuted, and some of them martyred for their faith, they needed to know that their Lord was the Suffering Servant, who suffered and died for them - but they also needed to know that He was triumphant over death, and in Him they could be triumphant even in the midst of death itself.

It's not surprising that, in the early church Christian art, the church was depicted as a boat driven upon a perilous sea, and Jesus standing in the midst. So this is a parable in action. After giving them these spoken parables about what it would be like when He was away from the earth until He comes again, now He is showing them the type of storms that they would go through - but Jesus will be in the midst! He's telling them there is nothing to fear. Now of course that's the fact, but often it is not the reality that we experience - nor was it the reality that the disciples experienced. They experienced, during this satanic storm, the Servant asleep.
In verse 38 we read: 'He was in the hinder part of the ship, asleep on a pillow: they woke him, and said, Master, do you not care that we perish?'. Let's remember where we are here: the Lord Jesus has just spent the whole day serving the Lord, this is the end of a hectic 24 hours. Remember where we've come from: earlier in the day He has faced opposition from His enemies, who said that He was possessed by Beelzebub. He is misunderstood by His own friends and family. He has just preached to numerous crowds and multitudes several times along the seashore. He had interpreted those same parables privately to His own disciples. He's at the end of the day, He's weary and He's tired. He is now taking the opportunity, as they cross this 8 miles across the lake, to rest.

That's a comfort, isn't it? Even the Lord Jesus needed to rest. He wasn't weary of the work, but He was weary in the work. It presents to us the mystery of the humanity of the Lord Jesus. In a moment, of course, His divinity is going to be displayed, but most of you will know Psalm 121 verse 4: 'He that keepeth Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps'. Yet here the Lord Jesus is sleeping, why? Because though He had His divine nature intact when He was on the earth, He took to Himself another nature, a human nature, the likeness of our sinful flesh - not only that He might taste death for every man, but that He might live life for every man, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest - isn't that what Hebrews 2:18 says? 'For in that he himself hath suffered being tested', or tempted, 'he is able to succour them that are tested', or tempted. It's wonderful, isn't it?

The Servant sleeps. Now this is the only record that we have in the Gospels, this miracle of the Servant sleeping and yet He is interrupted in His sleep by those He has come to serve. It's interesting that He is so tired, so wearied, that He's not wakened by the violent squall, and yet the cries of His own disciple arouses Him immediately. I think that's lovely. It's like some of you mothers, you might sleep through a thunderstorm, but the faintest whimper of your little infant instantly awakens you from rest. But the tragedy of this event is that the disciples did not know or understand His control over the circumstances that were around them, or indeed His care for them in the midst of it. So they wakened Him with the cry: 'Carest thou not that we perish?'. What was their problem? Well, like us, they judged the Lord by feeble sense, but did not trust Him for His grace. They failed to see that behind a frowning providence, there hides a smiling face. Like us, so often they saw the wind, they saw the waves, and they doubted - yet they should have trusted, even in His sleeping, Christ!

I don't know about you, but there are times in life where one can feel that God is unconscious to the storms of your life. Maybe you're too pious for that, but the Psalmists felt it, the prophets felt it, the disciples felt it. Times when you maybe think God has gone to sleep, God is unconscious, He's not aware of what you're going through - or if He's aware, He obviously doesn't care, or He's not answering the cries that are from the depths of your being. Listen to the Psalmist in 13 and 1: 'How long wilt thou forget me, O LORD? for ever? how long wilt thou hide thy face from me?'. Some of you would put him aside, and tell him about God's sovereignty and all the rest - but that's the way he felt. The Song of Solomon pictorially speaks about how the Shulamite opened to her beloved, but her beloved had withdrawn himself and was gone, and she says: 'My soul failed when he spake: I sought him, but I could not find him; I called him, but he gave me no answer'.

Do you ever feel like that with God? Do you ever experience what some have called 'the dark night of the soul'? Can I say to you: if you've never experienced it, and you're truly a child of God, one day you will experience it. It is inevitable - why? Because the servants of the Lord must tread the path of the Servant of the Lord, and it's not always a path of roses, but it certainly is a path of crucifixion! Maybe you find yourself just now in a storm, and God seems
STUDIES IN MARK  David Legge

millions of miles away, and you're asking like the disciples: does He care? I mean, did Jesus know this storm was coming? Do you think He did, when He put His head upon the pillow? It's like the question: did Jesus not know that Lazarus was going to die? So the question comes from his sisters: 'Lord, if You had been here my brother would not have died'. Did He not know? Of course He knew! He knew Lazarus was going to die, He knew the storm was coming, but it was all part of that day's curriculum for those servants of the Lord.

They were in His school of faith, and these were lessons that could only be learned through storms and through trials - and this is a hard lesson in itself to learn. John Newton found it difficult to get his head round it, and he put this mental and spiritual struggle into a poem which is very dear to me, and I've shared it with many of you. It goes like this:

'I asked the Lord that I might grow
In faith, and love, and every grace;
Might more of His salvation know,
And seek, more earnestly, His face.

Twas He who taught me thus to pray,
And He, I trust, has answered prayer!
But it has been in such a way,
As almost drove me to despair.

I hoped that in some favored hour,
At once He'd answer my request;
And by His love's constraining pow'r,
Subdue my sins, and give me rest.

Instead of this, He made me feel
The hidden evils of my heart;
And let the angry pow'rs of hell
Assault my soul in every part.

Yea more, with His own hand He seemed
Intent to aggravate my woe;
Crossed all the fair designs I schemed,
Blasted my gourds, and laid me low.

Lord, why is this, I trembling cried,
Wilt thou pursue thy worm to death?
'Tis in this way, the Lord replied,
I answer prayer for grace and faith.

These inward trials I employ,
From self, and pride, to set thee free;
And break thy schemes of earthly joy,
That thou may'st find thy all in Me'.

The Lord allows the storms that our faith would grow stronger in the test. If we enter the satanic storm and the Servant seems to sleep, it's a test, it's a test of our faith. These disciples failed it, I have failed it, many of us will fail it. So the Saviour comes to them and to us with His censure, this is the censure of the Son of God in verse 39, look at it: 'Do You not
care that we perish? And he arose, and rebuked the wind, and said unto the sea, Peace, be still. And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm', and then in verse 40, 'he said unto them, Why are ye so fearful? how is it that ye have no faith?'. Now first of all He rebuked the winds and the sea, He said: 'Be muzzled!'. It's used, as I've said, in chapter 1 verse 25 of His exorcism of a demon, it's also used of the muzzling of an ox, and it's used of the Lord Jesus silencing the Pharisees. Now what this was was the Lord displaying His divine nature, this was a divine act, and in the Old Testament the stilling of the sea and the storm was ascribed only to Jehovah.

Listen to one Psalm, there's many, 89: 'O LORD God of hosts, who is a strong LORD like unto thee? or to thy faithfulness round about thee? Thou rulest the raging of the sea: when the waves thereof arise, thou stillst them'. The Lord was revealing Himself to these doubting disciples as the Creator whose creation would be subject to the Creator's voice. Yet how slow their minds were to realise the significance of His actions. They should have acknowledged Him as the Son of God, as the Jehovah of the Old Testament in Jesus of Galilee, and they say in verse 41: 'What manner of man is this?'. Who is this? That's not a commendable thing - we quote it like that - they still haven't got who He is!

'Who is this, a Man of sorrows, walking sadly life's hard way, Homeless, weary, sighing, weeping, over sin and Satan's sway? Tis our God, our glorious Saviour, who above the starry sky Now for us a place prepareth, where no tear can dim the eye'

He rebuked the winds and the waves, and they still didn't get it, so in verse 40 He rebukes them. He gently chides His disciples - why? Because they feared, and they feared and therefore failed the test they needed faith to pass. They should have believed. Now let me give you very clearly what they should have believed, as one who has failed this test many times. First of all they should have believed His promise - promise? Yes, there's a promise here in these verses. Verse 35, look at it, before they set out in that boat across the lake He said to them: 'Let us pass over unto the other side'. He didn't say: 'Let us attempt, or make a go of getting over - because, you never know, a storm might come, and we might be all lost and drowned' - no! He said: 'Let us go over to the other side'. He promised them!

Now here's a lesson, Romans 10:17 says: 'Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God', and they never heard that, you see, or if they heard it they didn't remember it. This was a practical test of what they had already heard. He had spoken His word in the boat, in the parables, He had spoken His word before He set off at the shore, and this was a test of whether they believed His word that they would get over to the other side. God permits trials in our lives because it's not enough to learn lessons - did you hear that? It's not enough to learn lessons, we are expected to live lives. We're meant to live our faith, and claim the promises of God, and live in them in the midst of the darkest devilish storms! I know it's hard, but it's a question whether or not we believe God.

They should have believed first of all because of Christ's promise, but secondly they should have believed because of His presence. It's bad enough that they didn't recognize that the Servant of the Lord was the Son of God, but they failed to comprehend the significance that they were in the same boat as Him. I think this is so interesting, verse 36 where it says they took Him along in the boat as He was - now what does that mean? He was tired after the day's ministry, He was - we could say - exhausted physically, but they thought - I think - 'We'll take care of Him. Boy, He's had a hard day, all those people to teach, and explaining things to us, and blasphemy from His enemies, and unbelief from His own family! We'll take
Him as He is into this boat, and He'll be able to have a good rest. He's in our care now'. By their sight they only saw the humanity of Christ, even in infirmity and weakness, but they failed to see by faith that even when He was asleep the divine Lord was taking care of them!

J. N. Darby puts it very well, and so I'll just quote him: 'They should have remembered their own connection with Him. They think only of themselves. Now faith would have recognized that they were in the same ship with Him, that is to say: if Jesus leaves', thinking of the parables He's spoken, 'the seed He has sown to grow until the harvest, He is, nonetheless, in the same vessel; He shares, not the less truly, the lot of His followers, or rather they share His. The dangers are the danger He and His work are in. That is, there is really none. And how great is the foolishness of their unbelief. Think of their supposing, when the Son of God is come into the world to accomplish redemption and the settled purposes of God, that by, to man's eye, an accidental storm, He and all His work should unexpectedly sink in the lake! We are, blessed be His name, in the same boat with Him. If He is the Son of God it will not sink, neither shall we'.

What's the lesson? Well, the first lesson in this parable in action is: His servants will not be exempt from the storm. Satanic storms of persecution and trials will come, but they didn't deviate the Lord Jesus Christ from God's will and from that course. We will be persecuted and tried if we are faithful, but if you're going to survive through those storms, even the satanic ones, you must have faith in Him even when He seems to be farthest away than ever - cry out to Him! So often in the darkest storms, at the last minute, the Lord Jesus allows the storm to reveal Himself. Cry in faith, not in unbelief, and He has promised He will come to you! Where has He promised that? John 14:18: 'I will not leave you orphans, I will not leave you comfortless, I will come to you'.

Here's a second lesson, not only will we go through these things, but I'll teach it to you in a question: does this parable in action teach us that Christ will always miraculously deliver from storms? Is that what it teaches? Some present it like that, but it doesn't teach that, because in Acts 27 Paul went through a storm, and the Lord didn't calm it for him. Paul was a man of great faith, and these disciples, Jesus said, had no faith. Now listen carefully: their faith had got nothing to do with the calming of the storm, Jesus calmed the storm because it was God's will to do it - but their faith had everything to do with believing that they would come to no harm because Christ was in the boat with them. And therefore, if Christ was in the boat, or to put it better, if they were in His boat, it could never sink!

Paul got that message in his storm, though his boat was dashed, because he said to the crew: 'There stood by me this night the angel of God, whose I am, and whom I serve, Saying, Fear not, Paul; thou must be brought before Caesar: and, lo, God hath given thee all them that sail with thee. Wherefore, sirs, be of good cheer: for I believe God, that it shall be even as it was told me'. That was before the storm. The faith isn't to get you out of it, the faith is to get you through it. Warren Weirsbe put it well when he said: 'The greatest danger was not the wind or the waves, it was the unbelief in their hearts. Our greatest problems are within us, not around us' - that is profound. Our greatest problems are within us, not around us. Sometimes God does save us from trouble, praise His name; sometimes He saves us in the trouble. Sometimes He saves us from death, like Peter who was delivered from jail and death itself; but sometimes He uses our deaths to glorify His name, like the beheading of the apostle James.

The point is: we are in the same boat as Christ - have you got that message? That is, I believe, what was behind, in a sense, Paul's writing as it is written in Romans 8: 'For thy sake
we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord'. Verse 28: 'We know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose'.

Does He always deliver from the storm? No, but if we believe in Him, He always delivers in it, always; and always reveals Himself in it. In the mid-seventies the KGB in Moscow were picking up underground church leaders, and they picked up a Baptist leader who they suspected was printing illegal Scriptures on a home-made printing press. They beat and tortured him to find out the whereabouts of the press, but he didn't utter a word. In desperation they brought his 16-year-old son, and they said 'We will beat him to death in front of you unless you tell us where it is'. Immediately the man began to waver, as any of us would. This was too much, how could he watch his precious son die? Then the blows began to descend upon that young lad. He heard the crunch of bones, and the screams of agony. Those sounds went straight to that pastor's soul, and he was just about to cry out: 'Stop, I'll tell you, save my son!', when suddenly the boy cried in the midst of his pain: 'Dad, don't give up, I can see Jesus coming for me and He's beautiful'. 'Dad, don't give up, I can see Jesus coming for me and He's beautiful', and with those words, the son died.

God's Servant is the Master of every situation, and the Conqueror of every enemy, and if we trust Him and follow His orders, we need never be afraid - ever! Amy Carmichael put it like this:

'Thou art the Lord who slept upon the pillow;
Thou art the Lord who soothed the furious sea.
What matter beating wind and tossing billow
If only we are in the boat with Thee?

Keep us in quiet through the age-long minute' - do you know what an age-long minute is? A minute in the storm that feels like an eternity.

'Keep us in quiet through the age-long minute
While the waves are high, and wind is shrill:
Can the boat sink when Thou, dear Lord, art in it?
Can the heart faint that waiteth on Thy will?'.

The answer is: 'No'. No water can swallow the ship where lies the Master of ocean and earth and skies - because we're in His boat, you're in His boat, you cannot sink.

Now unto Him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy, to the only wise God, our Saviour, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever, Amen.

Transcribed by Andrew Watkins, Preach The Word – September 2007
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Now we’re turning to Mark’s gospel chapter 5, and we of course have been travelling some time now in Mark’s account of the life and ministry and gospel of our Lord Jesus. We are presently beginning to read at verse 1 of chapter 5 through to verse 20 - this famous story of the deliverance of the demoniac of Gadara.

Verse 1 then of Mark 5: "And they came over unto the other side of the sea, into the country of the Gadarenes. And when he was come out of the ship, immediately there met him out of the tombs a man with an unclean spirit, Who had his dwelling among the tombs; and no man could bind him, no, not with chains: Because that he had been often bound with fetters and chains, and the chains had been plucked asunder by him, and the fetters broken in pieces: neither could any man tame him. And always, night and day, he was in the mountains, and in the tombs, crying, and cutting himself with stones. But when he saw Jesus afar off, he ran and worshipped him, And cried with a loud voice, and said, What have I to do with thee, Jesus, thou Son of the most high God? I adjure thee by God, that thou torment me not. For he said unto him, Come out of thee man, thou unclean spirit. And he asked him, What is thy name? And he answered, saying, My name is Legion: for we are many. And he besought him much that he would not send them away out of the country. Now there was nigh unto the mountains a great herd of swine feeding. And all the devils besought him, saying, Send us into the swine, that we may enter into them. And forthwith Jesus gave them leave. And the unclean spirits went out, and entered into the swine: and the herd ran violently down a steep place into the sea, (they were about two thousand;) and were choked in the sea. And they that fed the swine fled, and told it in the city, and in the country. And they went out to see what it was that was done. And they saw him that was possessed with the devil, and had the legion, sitting, and clothed, and in his right mind: and they were afraid. And they that saw it told them how it befell to him that was possessed with the devil, and also concerning the swine. And they began to pray him to depart out of their coasts. And when he was come into the ship, he that had been possessed with the devil prayed him that he might be with him. Howbeit Jesus suffered him not, but saith unto him, Go home to thy friends, and tell them how great things the Lord hath done for thee, and hath had compassion on thee. And he departed, and began to publish in Decapolis how great things Jesus had done for him: and all men did marvel".

The title for our message this morning is simply: 'Satan To Jesus Must Bow'. Now in chapter 4 verse 35 we began a section of Mark’s gospel that flows through to chapter 5:43, that describes very graphically to us the power of the Servant of the Lord, the Lord Jesus Christ. Contained in between chapter 4:35 and chapter 5:43 are four of the greatest miracles that were ever performed in the life of our Lord. The first we looked at a couple of weeks ago, in verse 35 of chapter 4 to verse 41, the calming of the storm. That demonstrated the power of the Lord’s Servant, Jesus Christ, over the forces of nature. This morning we’re looking at chapter 5:1-20, that demonstrates the power of the Servant of the Lord over the forces of demons - if you like, the world of spirits. Then we’re going to see later on in verses 25 of chapter 5 through to verse 34, this miracle where Jesus healed an incurable disease, and that
shows us the power that the Lord Jesus has over physical illness. Then finally we will see, in chapter 5:35-43, the power that the Servant of the Lord has over the realm of death itself.

Now in each of these cases in these four great miracles, Christ is presented to us as the Servant of Jehovah who has power to overcome all hostile forces against God and man. To put it very practically to us today: what Mark is showing us, and consequently the Holy Spirit is showing us, is that man's extremity is God's opportunity. God in Christ just loves to minister to us in our deepest need when we cannot help ourselves. Isn't that wonderful? You wouldn't think it was wonderful to look at some of you! But it is! We have a storm that seamen couldn't overcome. We have a demoniac that no one could tame. We have a disease that no physician could cure, and we have a tragedy that no parent could avert. Yet the Servant of Jehovah shows Himself as sufficient, absolutely sufficient, for every circumstance.

Now, as we look at the demoniac of Gadara here this morning, we see three forces: the force of Satan, the force of society, and the force of the Saviour. All these three forces are still with us, very active in our world today. So let's deal with them one at a time: first of all the force of Satan. Verse 1 tells us that after the storm, they further travelled 'unto the other side of Galilee, into the country of the Gadarenes', or Gerasenes as some would render it. Now this was a locality midway along the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee, and it was mostly inhabited by Gentiles. This demoniac may well have been a Gentile, the farmers herding the swine may well have been Gentiles, because they farmed swine. It was probably the dead of night by the time that the Lord Jesus and His boatload arrived at the other side, and you can imagine that that would have made the scene much more eerie - for, there at the dead of night, we read in verse 2: 'Immediately there met him out of the tombs a man with an unclean spirit'.

Now of course, if you're familiar with the Gospels, you will be aware that Matthew, when he records this instance in Matthew 8:28, speaks of two demon-possessed men - but Mark only speaks of the one. The likelihood is that this one that Mark records is probably the more prominent of the two. Whether that is because he was more vocal than the other one, or more demonised, we do not know - but, of course, they're not contradicting one another, but adding to one another. He was possessed, Mark tells us, by an unclean spirit. Now that refers specifically to the demon that was possessing him, he was demon-possessed.

Now let me ask you before we go on any further: do you believe in a personal devil? Most people in the world do not. Many people who profess faith in Christ cannot, their reason won't allow them. I don't believe it is unreasonable, but they do. Do you believe in demons? Do you believe that there is such a thing today as the phenomenon of demon-possession? One commentator I read on this passage said that it doesn't really matter whether this man was possessed or not, he believed he was possessed, and Jesus delivered him from that belief. Well, I'm sorry, it does matter whether he was demon-possessed or not, for three reasons: one, Jesus believed he was demon-possessed, that's why He delivered him. So if this man was only insane, Jesus Christ, the claimed Son of God, was also insane for He believed it as well. Secondly the trustworthiness of Scripture is at stake if this man wasn't demon-possessed, because the Bible tells us he was. But perhaps relevant to the question I asked you a moment ago: whether or not this man was demon-possessed affects whether or not we believe it is possible for someone to be demon-possessed in the day and age in which we live.

Now some try and explain away this miraculous instance by saying that this man was insane, that's all. I think that people in his own day and generation believed that about him, that he
was just the madman of Gadara. One reason why I think that is because the Talmud, which was a Jewish book of rules that often commented upon God's law, gave four characteristics of madness. Here they were: walking abroad at night time, spending nights on a grave, tearing ones clothes and destroying what one has been given by others. So you can see right away how they could have assumed that all that was wrong with this man was a mental illness - but those who have experienced demon-possession today, particularly those on the mission field, testify that there is a difficulty in diagnosing the difference between demon-possession and mental illness.

Now, though this man's behaviour conformed to what was commonly understood in his day as insanity, there was something else going on in his mind and heart. Now here's a lesson that I don't want us to miss: whilst we must be careful to never ever label a mental illness as possession - never, ever to do that - we must equally acknowledge the possibility, indeed the probability, that our society puts the label of 'mental illness' on what may in fact be a classic case of demon-possession. The reason they do that is that they simply don't believe it's a possibility. So we must beware, we must beware of two opposite errors about the devil: one, the error of disbelieving in him; and the other error we must beware of is an excessive, unhealthy interest in him. C. S. Lewis put it well when he said: 'They', that is the demons themselves, 'are equally pleased by both errors, and hail a materialist and a magician with the same delight'.

I think we in the West, as we are more materialistic, we are more inclined to believe too little about the devil - is that so? It's like the desert dweller who didn't believe in rain because he'd never seen it. Just because we may never have seen an instance like this does not mean that it doesn't exist. We must beware of an unbelief in regard to the personality of the devil and his minions, the demons, because as one has well said: 'Unbelief in the devil has often proved to be the first step in unbelief in God'. I think it's obvious that the devil exists, and demons, because his grubby fingerprints of an unclean spirit are all around us.

This man had an unclean spirit - an unclean spirit characterised itself with moral filthiness, and often caused much harm to the person who was possessed. I ask you the question: is it only incidental that with the rise of paganism, occultism, Satanism, over the last number of years in our world, that there has also been a rise of drug abuse, pornography, obscenity, homosexuality? It is not coincidental, it is a sign that Satan and his principalities and powers have a controlling influence in our day and generation, just as they did with this man.

Now we're not told how these demons entered this man, most likely he opened himself to some Satanic or sinful influence. We need to be warned, particularly the young people among us this morning, that Satan easily gets a foothold in our lives when we yield ourselves to sinful practices. We are told what Satan did to this man very graphically. Verse 3 tells us he 'had his dwelling among the tombs; and no man could bind him, not even with chains'. Verse 5 tells us: 'Night and day', always, 'he was in the mountains, and in the tombs, crying, and cutting himself with stones'. Now Jesus taught us in John 10 and verse 10 that the devil is a thief who has come to steal, to kill, and to destroy life. The devil's ultimate purpose has always been to further distort and destroy the image of God in man. If you yield yourself to this thief, murderer, supplanter Satan, he will take everything from you!

Now young people, I want you to listen, because I know that some of you are dabbling in sinful practices and you think there's no harm in it. If you let him in, he will fleece you, he will destroy you, he will distort the image of God in you! This man lost his home, he lost his family, the companionship of a wife and children. He lost his identity - when Christ was
speaking to him, the demon, demons, were speaking back and called themselves 'Legion'. Incidentally a legion was a battalion of over 6000 Roman soldiers. Now we cannot equate to say that there were 6000 demons in this man, but there were certainly many. This man also lost his decency, he's running around naked. He's lost his self-control, he's like a wild animal. His unearthly shrieking cuts through the night air. He has lost peace in his mind and in his heart. He has lost his purpose for living.

We need to waken up today as God's people to the force that Satan is in our world today. We ought never to underestimate the destructive power of Satan and his demons. Our enemy would destroy all of us if he could - do you believe that? Peter said: 'He is a roaring lion, going about seeking whom he may devour'. He's also at work, the Bible says, in the life of unbelievers, making them children of disobedience Ephesians 2 tells us. Now I know that this demoniac, and both of these men as Matthew tells us, are extreme examples of what Satan can do - but they ought to reveal to us the danger of dabbling with dead things, with sinful things, with Satanic things. It ought to cause believers in Christ to resist the devil, that he will flee from us - have nothing to do with him!

Harry Ironside made this telling comment: 'We cannot but reflect on the possibilities of evil when we realise that one man could hold more evil spirits than 2000 unclean hogs' - think about that. The force of Satan today is the same as it ever was. The second force we encounter is the force of society, and it is found in verse 4. He had been often bound, this man, with fetters and chains: 'and the chains had been plucked asunder by him, and the fetters broken in pieces: neither could any man tame him'. Now I know I'm speaking generally, but generally speaking all that society does with problem people that they can't cure by an operation or by a tablet, is to isolate them, to put them under a guard - whether it even be lock and key - if necessary, bind them physically. The problem with this man was: he displayed a demonic Herculean strength that some may be aware of, which takes over people who are oppressed, particularly possessed, by the devil. But the lesson here is that the world's ingenuity was no match for the enemy of souls. He broke out of their puny chains and cords.

Isn't it ironic that that's exactly the same way our society behaves towards the things of the devil, particularly sin - they think they're in control, don't they? 'I'm in control of my life. I'm in control of my habits. I make choices, and I can do that for myself', and society believes the same. They don't realise that they lie in the lap of the wicked one, the devil is in control. Even attempts to tame this man had failed. With all its wonderful scientific and technological advances and achievements, our society is the same today as it ever was in this demoniac's day: it can't cope with the problems caused by sin and Satan. It doesn't know what to do with them. You only need to listen to the radio this week, and some of the terrible instances that were taking place across our city even - the police don't have an answer, the judiciary don't have an answer, social workers - though they may do a very worthy work, as the last two people I mentioned - have no answer. Politics has failed and will fail. The lie has been given to evolution, that we've been taught since we were knee-high at school: man is not getting better, man is getting worse! Society doesn't know what to do with him!

All that is compounded by the fact that the society in the demoniac's day rejected the Saviour just as the society we live in does today. Verse 17 very graphically shows that to us: 'They began to pray', to implore, 'him to depart out of their coasts'. I don't know whether people say this to you, but sometimes they say to me when I'm seeking to witness to them: 'Look, if you could show me a miracle, I would believe. Show me a miracle, and I will believe, I will trust in your Christ!'. Now experience proves that no matter how many times people say that,
they don't believe, and they wouldn't believe even if they saw a miracle - why? Because people generally speaking are not so much worried about what is true, they're worried about what they love and cherish in their lives. Did you get that? No matter what most people say, they are not concerned about what the truth is, they are concerned about their way of life and what they love and cherish.

The Bible says men love pleasure rather than God, that means that if you come to someone and say: 'Look, I can give you a better world, personally for you a better life, and I can give you a better life that actually will affect other people's lives and create a better world around at least your environment and those whom you touch, but there is a cost to it. It will disturb your comfort, it might even affect your livelihood somewhat' - what will they say? Most of the time they'll say: 'Just leave things the way they are, don't disturb me'. Now that might be depressing, but that's the truth. People will say: 'Don't even disturb me with what the truth is, I am quite happy in my own little world, with my own little gods'.

'Re room for pleasure, room for business,
But for Christ the Crucified,
Not a place that He can enter,
In the heart for which He died'.

These people saw a miracle, a miracle of miracles - what did they do? Come up the aisle, pray the sinner's prayer? No! They said: 'Jesus of Nazareth, get away from us!'. Frightening, isn't it? But it's obvious that our society today has the same reaction. It's staggering to me how many Bible commentators spend a great deal of time answering the criticisms of others toward the Lord Jesus for putting these demons into the pigs. It's remarkable, 'These poor pigs', that's what everybody's worried about! You go and read the books: 'Poor pigs' - and also the livelihood of the owners - 'How could the Lord Jesus do the like of this?'. This farmer would have lost the equivalent today, someone has said, of a quarter of a million dollars - I don't know whether that's true or not - but it was an extreme amount of money.

Now let me, just to deal with this for a moment, point out a couple of things that are very important in the big theme of what we're talking about here when we're thinking of the force of society. First of all: the Lord Jesus did not cause these pigs to run headlong into the sea, He permitted it, and there's a big difference. If you don't learn that difference in theology, you'll get into all sorts of strange twists and strange doctrines. It was Satan's destructive power that destroyed those pigs. He permitted them to go into the swine, He didn't force them headlong into the water. But here is the lesson, and perhaps this is what many of these writers and preachers balk at: there is a cost to sin! You see, you might say - and I heard even on the radio this morning - 'If there's two consenting adults, and they're not harming anybody else, what's wrong with it?'. This is what's wrong with it: apart from the fact that they're hurting the Holy God, they are harming other people! It is a myth that we are all an island, and do not touch or affect others.

There is a cost to sin, here it is pigs. Now, a second answer to these accusations is: some things are more important than a man's livelihood. You see, our society can't accept that: they don't want to pay a cost for sin, and they certainly don't want to lose their livelihood - not for religion anyway. When people's pockets are hit, see it over and over again through the scriptures, because of the conversion of deep-dyed sinners, what do they do? They curse God! You see it in Acts chapter 19, Demetrius the silversmith, who was making little idols of the goddess Diana. He had a great business going, and all of a sudden through the preaching of
the apostle Paul there were conversions, and he was losing out of pocket - and he started a riot!

Then thirdly we need to see that what this shows us about these pigs is that the soul of a man was worth, to Jesus, all the pigs in the world. I know that's not very politically correct today, because we have to treat our animals better than we treat human beings in the age in which we live. I love animals - don't like cats - but I like most animals; but the fact of the matter is: do not let it be drummed into your head that a man is an animal. The soul of one man was more important than 2000 pigs, and this was a dramatic sermon to these farmers, to the demoniac himself, to the disciples: that the wages of sin is death - society doesn't want to hear that! They say: 'Be gone with your gospel! Be gone with your Jesus!'. Staggering, isn't it?

The force of Satan, the force of society, and finally the force of the Saviour - the force of the Saviour. Praise God, this is still with us, and Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever! Glory to His name! All may change, but Jesus never! Now picture this demonic, I think he must be the ugliest mutation of a human being that has ever been seen. You need to see him just now, you need to see what sin did to him, what Satan will do to you if you give him a foothold in your life. He is this gruesome looking beast, though he was a man - naked, a mass of bleeding lacerations, scabs, infections, covered in scar tissue, living in a mental delirium of pain. He is the most unlovable creature alive! Yet Jesus loved him, and Jesus pitied him.

Was it his fault that he was in this predicament? I imagine it was. Is it the drug addict's fault that he is in a predicament, and the prostitute's fault? Probably. Does it mean we ought not to love them? No. You see, that's what amazing grace is, that is real power - power to love the unlovable, even go through a storm for the unlovable, that's what Jesus did for this man! That's what He has done for us all: He has endured the billows and waves of God's wrath on the cross, because He loved the unlovable, because the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which is lost! More: He had power not just to love the unlovable, but power to change him - He had power over the demons.

Oh, I love it, verses 6 and 7, you look at it please, this demon or demons confessed that Jesus was the Son of the Most High God - now that is the title of Divinity. The demons knew that He was God, and then they not only knew that Christ was God and God's Son, but they knew there was a judgement day coming for them. They said: 'Do not torment me', verse 13, they asked for permission to go into the swine - and Jesus had authority to give that permission. James 2:19 says: 'Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble'. You know, these demons believed more than most people in our world believe today. They believed that Jesus was God the Son. They believed there was a judgement day coming. They believed that Christ had all authority over them.

What was the result? Praise the Lord, verse 15: 'They come to Jesus, and see him that was possessed with the devil, and had the legion, sitting, and clothed, and in his right mind: and they were afraid'. He is able to save to the uttermost all who come unto God by him, seeing He ever liveth - Jesus is stronger than Satan, and Satan to Jesus must bow! Ecclesiastes 8: 'Where the word of a king is, there is power: and who may say unto him, What doest thou?'.

Now here is an application as I close, twofold. One: there is no one, I repeat, there is no one who is too hard a case for Jesus Christ. Are there any 'Hallelujahs' in the building this morning? You're all asleep! Jeremiah 32:27 says: 'Behold, I am the LORD, the God of all
flesh: is there any thing too hard for me?’. Jesus told this demonic: 'Go and tell what great things' - Jesus of Nazareth has done for you? No! - 'the Lord'. Then later on we see he went and told the great things that Jesus had done, what's that saying? He is the Lord, Jehovah, the Son. You're praying for someone, aren't you? They're a hard case, but they're not too hard for Christ and His gospel to crack. No one is.

Here's a second application: whatever controlling force dominates you, you Christian, the Lord can break it and deliver you, whatever it is, whatever it is. You just have to believe it, but He can do it! Christians are bound by all sorts of fetters, you could even be oppressed of the devil as a Christian - not possessed now, but oppressed through fears and anxieties and all sorts of problems - but this man was delivered of all his fears, and all his demons. It's no surprise that he wanted to be with the Lord Jesus - would you not want to be? Verse 19 tells us that the Lord Jesus told him to go home. Kenneth Wuest translates the Greek: 'Go into your home, to your own', it's speaking of his own flesh and blood. Now, I haven't got time, but imagine what it was like for him to come to the front door, and the children greet him, and the wife! Verse 20 says that he didn't only go home to witness to his family, he went out and proclaimed - 'keruso' (sp?) is the word, to make a public declaration - to Decapolis, the ten cities, and he was probably known around that area as the madman of Gadara...now he's the preacher. They probably thought he was even madder!

He wanted to stay with Jesus, but Jesus told him to go home. A different command than He gave at other times, you remember He told people 'Don't tell what I have done to you' - now that was because that wasn't according to His plan in the Palestine area, but this was a Gentile area. Isn't it interesting that the Lord knows better than His people what is the best position for them to be in. You might want to do something, but the Lord doesn't want you to do it. Whatever you're doing or not doing for the Lord, there's two things you ought to do that this man did: you need to go home and tell them, and you need to go out and proclaim to them.

Some years ago an eye surgeon just fresh from college commenced his business. He had no friends, no money, no patients. He was very discouraged, until one day he saw a blind man. Looking into his eyes, he said to him: 'Why don't you have your eyesight restored?'. He said: 'How could I do that?'. He said: 'Come to my office in the morning'. An operation was performed and proved successful, and the patient said: 'I haven't got a penny in the world, I can't pay you'. 'Oh yes', said the doctor, 'You can pay me, and I expect you to do so. There is just one thing I want you to do, and it's very easy: tell everybody that you see and were blind, and tell them who it was that healed you'. Do you do that?

Let's bow our heads. Sorry for the late time, I only started at 5 or 10 past, that's my own fault - but let's not let the time distract us. Father, we just ask as we close this meeting in Your presence, that those who are oppressed by Satan and sin would find deliverance through the Saviour whose force is not diminished in the 21st century. We thank You that His blood will never lose its power. Even those who are possessed in our world can be delivered through the Master, those whom we love and long that they might be saved - none of them are too hard for Him. Even the things in our own lives that we feel we can never get victory over: He is able to deliver! May He deliver folk in this place this morning, for Satan to Jesus must bow. Amen.
“The Difference Faith Makes”

I've entitled the message this morning: 'The Difference Faith Makes'. If you are a stranger to us, or a visitor, we have been going through Mark's Gospel now for some 28 or 29 weeks, and we're still in chapter 5 - but this is a wonderful portion of Scripture that really teaches us the difference that faith makes. Now of course in chapter 4, from verse 35 right through to the end of this chapter that we are looking at this morning, Mark the Evangelist records for us the power of the Servant of the Lord, the power that the Messiah, the Servant of Jehovah has. Of course, that was very graphically depicted in chapter 4 verses 35-41, where the Lord Jesus displays His power over nature as He calms the storm. Then we saw also last Sunday morning in the first 20 verses of chapter 5, we see the power of the Servant of the Lord over demonic forces - and that demonstrated His power not only over evil, but His power to love the unlovable: that was the demonic possessed with a legion of demons.
Now this morning in the verses we looked at, verses 21 to 43, we're going to see the Servant's power over sickness - an incurable disease that afflicted this woman for 12 years, and how the Lord Jesus delivered her completely from it. Then we also see, mixed with that miracle, another: the Lord Jesus' power over death, Jairus' daughter raised to life again, verses 35 to 43. In all of these instances that are comprised in the four greatest, perhaps, miracles that the Lord Jesus did, we see that man's extremity is God's opportunity. I've repeated that each week, but I'm repeating it because I want you to get it: our need, and our desperate dire need, is always God's opportunity to do something great.

I know there's a lot of people here with needs, and that ought to help you. We have seen that the Lord Jesus was victorious over danger, over demons, we're going to see today that He is victorious over disease and over death itself, the last enemy. He is sufficient for every circumstance that we can face. This morning we will see Him cure the incurable and raise the dead.

So let's witness it as if we were there with the company that saw these great things. First of all let's see His power over disease. Look at verse 21, we read there: 'When Jesus was passed over again by ship unto the other side, much people gathered unto him: and he was near unto the sea'. Now let me look with you at verse 17 to remind ourselves what had happened before this event: after He had delivered the demoniac of his demons, we see that those around that Gentile area began, in verse 17, to pray Him, to implore Him to depart out of their coasts. Isn't that remarkable? One crowd on one side of Galilee is sighing with relief when Jesus leaves them, and here on the other side a great crowd has gathered to welcome Him. How typical that is of society in general, isn't it? Those who will have nothing to do with Him, and those who want Him in their lives, in their circumstances.

Now the first person we are introduced to in this narrative we find in verse 22, Jairus: 'Behold, there cometh one of the rulers of the synagogue, Jairus by name; and when he saw Jesus, he fell at his feet'. One of the rulers of the synagogue, which tells us that this man was in a place of position. He was probably the president of the board of elders, if you like, who were all responsible for the allocation of duties in the synagogue, and for seeing that those duties were carried out with seemliness and order. So this was a high office, and he would have been held in great esteem in the community. What a lesson we have here, because this man is afflicted because his child is sick unto death. We see right away that position, power, or privilege do not exempt people from problems.

What a problem he had, verse 23: 'He besought Christ greatly, saying, My little daughter lieth at the point of death: I pray thee, come and lay thy hands on her, that she may be healed; and she shall live'. Problems are no respecter of persons, and we see that in this portion in particular - because we have, when we consider the woman with an issue of blood, a poor woman; yet Jairus was likely quite wealthy. One was accepted, Jairus, because of his position and privilege; the other, the woman, was an outcast because of her affliction, the issue of blood. One had family, Jairus, that he loved so well, too well to lose; and yet this other woman, because of her affliction, was cut off from the community of God, most likely divorced from her husband if she ever had one - she was alone.

But the common denominator that links them together in this story is that both of them were beyond natural help. No one could do anything to help them! That's why they are tied together here, that's why one episode is enclosed in the story of the other - and that's the only time that this ever happens in the Bible. There are so many similarities between these two stories, and yet there are so many contrasts. They are similar in time period, and yet
they are differing in experience. The girl lived 12 years of happiness, which is similar to the 12 years of distress and pain and discomfort that this woman experienced in her continual suffering. Twelve years, and yet such a difference in their circumstances - is that not like life? We're all living through 2007, yet we all have very different experiences to look back on. We find here that the girl died after 12 years, and the woman who was effectively a living dead person for the same 12 years, she is healed. For 12 years they lived such different lives, but now adversity is binding them together - but they are unaware of it. Yet God's all-seeing eye, and the Holy Spirit in the record of these events of Christ's miracles, has linked them together because of their sufferings.

We all have different experiences in this life, but there are some things that will eventually link us all together: the suffering of this age. It will come to us all, if it hasn't already done so. Now note something: something significant happened to this man Jairus when his only daughter fell ill. I suspect his prejudices were forgotten. Remember that Jesus of Nazareth was an outcast to the religious leaders of His day, but that prejudice had been forgotten all of a sudden. His pride seems to have disappeared, he had forgotten about his peers and even what the public would think. The Bible says he fell at Jesus' feet and begged earnestly: 'Lay Your hands on my daughter'. Disease and death are the great levellers, aren't they? No respecter of persons.

I think of that verse concerning Naaman in 2 Kings 5:1: 'Now Naaman, captain of the host of the king of Syria, was a great man with his master, and honorable, because by him the LORD had given deliverance unto Syria: he was also a mighty man in valor, but he was a leper'. It affects us all, brings us down to earth with a bump - suffering, sorrow. It not only serves to put us in our place, but it serves to put Christ in His place. What I mean by that is: Jairus fell at the feet of Jesus. Now we don't know, Jairus may have witnessed Christ's power in the synagogue - and in Mark's gospel we find in the synagogue in chapter 1:21 the Lord Jesus casts an unclean spirit out of a man, we find in chapter 3:1-6 that the Lord Jesus healed a man with a withered hand in the synagogue. Now if Jairus didn't witness it first hand, he certainly would have heard about it because of his official position. But isn't it amazing - and this is conjecture, but I believe it's on good grounds - this man probably moved from disdain and scorn of the Lord Jesus Christ, and how He was operating, to actually fall at His feet - why? Because terror was touching the one thing, the one person that he thought had been out of bounds.

When that happens, and the thing that we fear most takes hold of us, here is the lesson from Jairus: we need to do just what he did, fall at the feet of Jesus with our problem. It might be to fall at the feet of Jesus with our family, with our wives, husbands, our children. It's wonderful to see here that the tenderhearted Servant needed no further urging. We read in verse 24, look at it: 'So Jesus went with him', He is always ready to hear the plea of the needy and the sorrowful. But here we find an unanticipated problem, as far as Jairus was concerned - verse 24, the second half, we see that 'much people followed, and thronged the Lord Jesus', and then verse 25, 'And a certain woman, which had an issue of blood twelve years', she touched the hem of the garment of the Lord Jesus.

An unanticipated problem - Jairus had a big enough problem, I hope you would agree - his daughter is dying, his only daughter at that. Now an unanticipated problem arises - have you ever had those? Think of the biggest problem you've ever gone through, well, this was it for Jairus - and yet another problem raises its head that exacerbates the initial problem. I can just imagine him saying within himself, if he didn't say it out loud, 'This is all I need now!'. Now we always have to maintain that Jesus was in control of the situation, as we always have
to maintain and declare: that we believe in the doctrine of divine sovereignty and God's providence over all situations. Yet for Jairus this situation must have seemed out of control. You have to be honest, and I've got to be honest, that though we tick the box of God's sovereignty in our list of beliefs and doctrines, there are times that our lives just seem to be out of control, chaos has broken loose!

The Lord Jesus stopped on His way to heal Jairus' daughter. One commentator put it well, I like this statement: 'It must have been excruciating for Jairus, as he and Jesus were slowed down like an ambulance in heavy traffic'. Trying to get to the person in need, but not able to get there! For Jairus this incident was an unnecessary interruption as far as he was concerned, his need was greater! This woman had suffered for 12 years, what would it matter if she waited another hour or two? His daughter was at the verge of death! Do the interruptions in your life seem unnecessary? 'Did God really need to let that happen? After all I've been through and gone through? It seems so unnecessary'. I have learned a lesson the hard way, and I think Jairus was learning it, though he didn't realise it: God is never in a hurry. Write that down somewhere, because that will stand by you someday: God is never in a hurry.

I imagine that Jairus was getting frustrated: 'Come on Jesus! My little daughter is dying, and You're worried about someone touching You in this great crowd?'. Now Jairus was probably already asking: 'Why is my little daughter near to death? Why do I have this problem?', and now he's asking, 'Why is there now an interruption in the solution to this problem?'. Now we're going to get the answer to that a little bit later, but look with me now at the other character that we face in this story in verse 25, this woman who suffered from an issue of blood 12 years. It was probably a uterine haemorrhage, and verse 26 said that she suffered from the people that were meant to make her well - the physicians - she spent all that she had financially, probably selling furniture and all her goods to get medicines, and quack potions, and superstitious methods to be freed from this illness...'but rather she grew worse'.

I heard a story in 2004 that has stuck with me, some of you might remember it. It was about a lady in our city here by the name of Iris Geoffrey from the Woodvale. She won over £20 million on the lottery, and she never checked her ticket - and I think it was nearly a month after before she realised that she had almost threw it away. But the previous April, 2003, she had been diagnosed with cancer of the gullet. Her eldest daughter Wendy said these words: 'Our first thought was not about buying big houses or flashy cars, it's to see if anything can be done to help our mother'. Iris said, her mother: 'We'd give it all away, all 20 million', if she could be well. It reminded me of this woman, she did give everything away so that she could be well.

The Talmud, which is a body of Jewish civil and religious laws added to the Old Testament by the Jews, it listed eleven cures for this particular uterine haemorrhage that this lady had. Listen to this, this is remarkable: some were potions, some were superstitions, and in one place it says, 'Take the gum of Alexandria, the weight of a small silver coin; of allum the same; of crocus the same. Let them be bruised together, and given in wine to the woman that had an issue of blood. If this does not benefit, take of Persian onions three pints, boil them in wine. Give her to drink and say: 'Arise from thy flux', and if this does not cure her, set her in a place where two ways meet, and let her hold a cup of wine in her right hand, and let someone come behind and frighten her and say, 'Arise from thy flux'. In another place it actually recommends that the afflicted woman carry a barley corn - wait for it - which had been taken from the droppings of a white she-donkey, to be cured of this illness.
Is it any wonder this woman was desperate? She probably had gone through all these processes with the hope that she would be cured, to no avail - worse! Worse! In verse 27, another 'but' as far as we are concerned, 'She grew worse, but when she heard of Jesus' - hallelujah! She too had heard about the Lord Jesus, like Jairus she had a knowledge of Him. Now it may not have been experiential, but it was intellectual at that point - and she reasoned, verse 28, 'If I may touch but His clothes, I shall be whole'.

Now, there's something not too theologically sound about this woman's reasoning - but it didn't matter about that with the Lord Jesus. That teaches us something: she was a bit superstitious in her faith, she thought touching the garment would do something - granted, because it was His garment. Add to the fact of her superstition the secretive nature in which she goes about it: this was not a walk down an aisle, and a hand up in the air - this was in a crowd. She didn't want people to know what she was doing - but though this woman expressed an imperfect faith, it was faith in the perfect Saviour! God honoured her little faith and healed her - not because of the quality of her faith, or the size of her faith, but because of the One in whom her faith was. Please note also that this was a proper healing, it says: 'the fountain of her blood', verse 29, 'was dried up'. Now 'a fountain' is the source, that means the source of her problem was healed.

Now meet someone else in this passage. We've seen Jairus and this woman, now in verse 30 we encounter the Lord - of course, He is through the whole portion, but here we are given a glimpse into His heart in the midst of this difficult situation. 'And Jesus, immediately knowing in himself that virtue had gone out of him, turned him about in the press', the crowd, 'and said, Who touched my clothes?'. Now here we will see an insight into what it cost the Lord Jesus to heal this woman and, I believe, heal all whom He healed. Now note that this cost was unseen by the disciples, this cost was unseen by those that He healed, but this cost was felt by the Saviour and the Saviour alone. What a picture of Calvary: none of us know what it cost Him to pay the penalty for our sins. Incidentally, menstruation made a woman ceremonially unclean for the time of the month that she had it, but this woman didn't have it at a part of the month, or for a whole month, she had it for twelve twelvemonths, she had it for 12 years! She was cut off from fellowship with God and with God's people. In theory, because she touched the Lord Jesus Christ, she defiled Him ceremonially. I think the woman was shocked, not only because He knew that she had touched Him, but she was astounded that He was willing to be made sin that she might be made the righteousness of God in Him.

Now we have seen this already in this gospel of the Servant: the Lord touched the leper, and in the Old Testament ceremonial law He was defiling Himself. What a picture of what we sang this morning: 'He took my sins, my sorrows, and made them His very own; bore the burden of Calvary, and suffered and died alone' - now that's true power. This is the power of the Servant, this is the power of the cross, this is the power of the kingdom of God that displays the love of God. Now if that service was costly to the Lord, as it was here, it will be costly to you, it will be costly to me. If we are to heal others and do good to others, it's going to cost us! That's a universal rule, it's not just a spiritual law - you'll never produce anything worthwhile unless you're prepared to put something of yourself into it, isn't that right? You put your very life, your very soul into it!

No pianist will ever become really great, or perform a really great performance if he glides through a piece of music even with faultless and effortless technique, and nothing more. The performance will not be great unless at the end of it there is the exhaustion which comes from the outpouring of self - soul in it! No preacher who ever preached a real message from God's word, descended from his pulpit without a feeling of being drained of something. If we're ever
going to help men and women, and boys and girls, we need to appreciate that we're going to have to spend ourselves. It's going to cost us something!

Now note please in verse 31: the disciples did not appreciate how much it cost the Lord to heal this woman. They said to him: 'There's a crowd around You, and You're asking who touched You?'. The healed woman didn't appreciate what it cost the Lord, that virtue went out of Him - and other people will not appreciate what it costs you to heal others, and to help others, and to serve others. It's hard to carry that, and yet if you don't face it you're going to do nothing for the Lord. Others will judge you by their own standards, but no one really knows other than Christ the virtue that goes out of you when you touch others' lives - He knows, and that should be enough!

Now we need to ask the question: why did the Lord Jesus call the woman out? She was healed, wasn't that enough? If she was the shy sort, could He not just let her go on her merry way? Well, it was for her benefit that He called her out, because there is a joy in confession. You will never really grow in your faith unless you come out of the crowd and confess Jesus Christ as your Lord - but there's more than that in it: He wanted to establish a personal contact with this woman, and that's what Christian faith is all about! It's not just about heaven when you die, it's about discipleship now - a relationship day by day, you knowing Him, and Him knowing you!

I think the primary reason here for calling this woman out was for the benefit of Jairus and the Lord's disciples. Remember our initial question, Jairus is asking: 'Why is my daughter near to death?', then he asks when this woman comes on the scene, 'Why this interruption in the midst of my greatest problem?'. Part of the answer is found in the response to this woman that Jesus gives, if you look at verse 34 please: 'Daughter, thy faith...'. Now that's the only time Jesus ever called any one 'daughter', she is now part of the family of God - but this is the emphasis I want you to see, 'Thy faith hath made thee whole'. Not, 'Your touching my garment', but 'Thy faith'.

Now, lo and behold another problem enters the scene for Jairus, verse 35: 'While Jesus yet spake, there came from the ruler of the synagogue's house certain which said, Thy daughter is dead: why troublest thou the Master any further?'. Now we're introduced to this little girl. Please get the import of this phrase: 'While he was speaking' - what was He speaking? He was speaking these words: 'Thy faith hath made thee whole'. I can imagine it, that there the Lord Jesus is, and this crowd has witnessed what seems to be a miracle - no one can tell, only the woman felt it - and He is saying: 'Woman, thy faith hath made thee whole', and as He's speaking those words I can imagine these messengers coming down and infiltrating into the crowd, thinking to themselves: 'Well, that's well and good, but the wee girl's dead! Trouble the Master no more, she's dead! Those are empty words!'.

'Why do I have this problem?', Jairus, 'Why is there an interruption in the solution to my problem?', Jairus, 'Why is there this conclusion to my problem when I came to the feet of Jesus? I lowered myself from my position, I humbled myself and I brought all, why this now?'. One answer, a one-word answer: faith, faith! You see, at first Jairus came probably with a wishful belief that this Man could do something for his predicament, but his faith would have been elevated by this experience with the woman with an issue of blood, and with the exchange that the Lord had with the woman about her faith making her whole. Now what the Lord is doing to Jairus is: 'Don't just believe Me with a wishful belief about a healing, but believe Me for a resurrection!'. Have you got it? The trying of our faith works patience, and the reason why we have these problems at times, and the interruptions to the solutions of our
problems, and adverse conclusions as far as we are concerned in our human reasoning, is that our faith would be strengthened.

Now here is where we need discernment: does Jairus listen to the voice that tells him, 'Give up, trouble the Master no more, she's dead! Full stop, end of the story, nothing can be done'? Or does he listen and grab hold of the words that He spoke to the woman: 'Thy faith', and then words that He speaks to him in verse 36 in his situation, look at the end of it, 'When Jesus heard the word that was spoken, Jesus said to the ruler of the synagogue, Be not afraid, only believe'. Now I'm not running around here telling you to go to everybody that's sick, and just believe that they'll be healed, and they'll be healed - no, no! The Master must speak the word to you, and there's very few people today whom the Master is speaking to. The Master must give you the word, He gave this man the word: 'Fear not, believe only'. Does he listen to His word, or the word that says, 'She's dead, nothing more can be done'? Now the thing, notice please, that carried Jairus through all this experience were the words of the Lord - they made the difference!

Look at verse 36, the word of faith that was spoken: 'Be not afraid, only believe'. There's verse 39, which is a word of hope: 'Why make ye this ado about nothing, and weep? the damsel is not dead, but sleeps' - a word of hope! Then in verse 41 a word of love, He speaks to the little girl: 'Talitha cumi; which is, being interpreted, Damsel, I say, arise'. Now when Christ speaks into your life, do you give up, or do you believe? That will make such a difference to you! Can I say that common sense is found in this passage of Scripture. In verse 35 you find it, these people say 'She's dead, why bother Him any more?'. Now, that's common sense - it makes sense, doesn't it? She's dead, why bother Him any more? We find common sense in the disciples in verse 31: 'What are You saying, 'Who touched me?' for, everybody's rubbing up against You in a crowd!' - that's common sense. But common sense doesn't often make faith-sense! You need to hear that: if you are ruled by common sense and common sense alone, you're in trouble as far as the spiritual life is concerned.

In verse 39 he told them 'She's sleeping', and they laughed in His face, and that's often the reaction when we speak with words of faith and not common sense - people laugh at you: 'Huh, aye, we'll see'. It is often the reaction when we stand at an open grave and talk about resurrection, and hell, and heaven - tears turn to scorn, but faith laughs at impossibilities and cries: 'It shall be done!'. Do you know what the Lord Jesus did in verse 40? He put out the unbelief. Those that laughed at Him, those that scorned Him, He put them out - and that's what I need to do, that's what you need to do: put out unbelief in our hearts, and believe God's word when He speaks to us.

We have seen Him victorious over disease, and in verse 41 we see Him victorious over death. We read that He took the child by the hand - now please note Jairus' prayer of weak faith is just answered. Look back with me at verse 23: 'He besought Christ greatly, saying, My little daughter lieth at the point of death: I pray thee, come and lay thy hands on her, that she may be healed; and she shall live'. His prayer of faith was answered in detail, God is the God of detail! He took the child by the hand - that is one of the outstanding features of the Servant's ministry, He used His hands to touch people when He healed them. In this very gospel He took Peter's wife's mother by the hand and raised her up, He took another by the hand in chapter 1, touching the leper. He tenderly takes the little children later on in this gospel, we'll see in chapter 9 and chapter 10, He takes them up in His arms and blesses them, laying His hands upon them. This is the hand that was going to be nail-pierced, this is the hand of infinite tenderness - and it's still the hand of sympathy today! Isn't it wonderful to
know, as John says: believers in Him are in His hand, and nothing can take them out - nothing!

In Aramaic the tongue of the Lord Jesus spoke, not the language the New Testament is written in, He said: 'Talitha cumi'. This brought a tear to my eye, that literally means: 'Little lamb, arise'. Little lamb, arise! I think Mark kept it in the Aramaic because there was something incommunicable in that statement - whether it was the tone, I don't know, but there was something in it that spoke of the tenderness of the Lord Jesus. Can you hear those words fall on the girl's cold, dull ears? Can you see her eyes flutter and open wide? And the first thing she saw was the face of Jesus. Then she looks around and sees Mum and Dad, and three stunned apostles that Jesus took into the room - Peter, James and John. Do you know what that is? The Servant's power over death - and do you know something? Whether the Saviour comes or calls, it is a foreshadowing of what we all are going to go through. We're going to hear our name! We're going to open our eyes! We're going to see His face! We're going to be with our family, the family of God.

It is wonderful: this child had just died - this is the first person we read of that Jesus rose from the dead. Do you know who the second was? Not a child, but a young man, the widow of Nain's son - he was being buried at that moment in Luke 7. The next one was John 11, Lazarus, who was an older man, and he had been in the grave four days! Each one: the newly dead, the funeral cortege, the dead for four days, were all raised by the power of God - and when the Lord comes it's going to be the same! Those that have just died, imagine it! You've been sitting beside someone holding their hand as the breath has gone from them, what will it be like for those in that moment when the breath comes back again? Imagine standing around the grave and lowering the coffin, and the corpse comes to life again! That's going to happen, some of you don't believe it - oh, I know you believe it up here [in your head], but not in here [in your heart]! The dead for centuries will be raised! Where do you want to be when the Lord comes back again? This cheerful Charlie, I'd love to be at a funeral of a believer! Wouldn't it be wonderful?

Verse 43, and with this I finish: 'He charged them straitly that no man should know it; and commanded that something should be given her to eat'. I love the Lord Jesus Christ. Two commands that He gave: the first, don't tell anybody; and the second, go and get her something to eat. The thoughtfulness, the consideration of the Lord Jesus - why did He say 'Don't tell anybody'? Because He wanted the parents and the child to enjoy a brief time of privacy and company before the word would get out, because the whole neighbourhood would be at their door! What a thoughtful Saviour He is, and yet how practical: 'Get her something to eat'. In all the excitement this wee girl, who probably hadn't eaten for days because she was sick, needed fed.

The woman with the issue of blood touched Christ, Christ touched this girl, and their faith made a difference - and faith ought to make the difference in our sickness and in our sorrow. Jesus knows the difference between the touch of faith and the touch of indifference. Believer, are you and I just rubbing up against Him in the crowd, or are we touching Him by faith? In your sickness, in the sickness of your loved one:

'The healing of His seamless dress
Is by our beds of pain;
We touch Him in life's throng and press,
And we are whole again'.

224
But He doesn't always heal, sometimes we are called to go through death, and to go through pain, and to go through sorrow - and yet in the midst of that as well: when other helpers fail and comforts flee, Help of the helpless, He abides with thee. The difference faith makes...may it make that difference to all our hearts today.

Let us all pray: Father, we thank You that the Lord Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever. We thank You that He still has power to heal sick souls, sick with sin. This woman was made whole, saved, we thank You that He still has power to heal sick bodies - and yet we realise that there is a calling for the more to endure suffering, to bear the burden and cross of pain, that in the midst of their weakness Your strength might be made perfect - and they will need faith to get through and overcome. There are those who are sorrowing and, Lord, they need that faith too. Lord, help us we pray, to touch the Master, to feel His touch in our lives as His little flock. Put Your word in our hearts, Lord, Amen.

Transcribed by Andrew Watkins, Preach The Word – October 2007
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ow let us turn to Mark chapter 6 please, the first six verses of Mark 6. Speaking of the Lord Jesus Christ, it says: "And he went out from thence, and came into his own country; and his disciples follow him. And when the sabbath day was come, he began to teach in the synagogue: and many hearing him were astonished, saying, From whence hath this man these things? and what wisdom is this which is given unto him, that even such mighty works are wrought by his hands? Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, the brother of James, and Joses, and of Juda, and Simon? and are not his sisters here with us? And they were offended at him. But Jesus, said unto them, A prophet is not without honour, but in his own country, and among his own kin, and in his own house. And he could there do no mighty work, save that he laid his hands upon a few sick folk, and healed them. And he marvelled because of their unbelief. And he went round about the villages, teaching".

Let's all pray for a moment: Father, we thank You for the Gospel records of our Lord Jesus in His life and ministry. We thank You for what a precious privilege it is to have it. We pray that as we study this portion concerning the unbelief of the people of Nazareth, that we will be found to be a believing people that see the Lord Jesus work mightily among us. Hear our prayer, and take a dealing with every heart, for the glory of Christ we pray. Amen.

Now the harmony of the Gospels shows the personal pain that the Lord Jesus Christ experienced in His early ministry. A year earlier than this particular event in Nazareth that we are reading about in chapter 6, the Lord Jesus suffered intense rejection in Nazareth, His hometown. On that occasion the day seemed to begin well, on the Sabbath He was again in His family synagogue standing reading Isaiah chapter 61 verses 1 and 2 from the scroll of the Old Testament prophets. In Luke chapter 4 it's recorded: 'All spoke well of him', but the tide changed - because when the Lord began to preach quite confrontationally, the mood became violent. We read in Luke 4:29: 'And they rose up, and thrust him out of the city, and led him unto the brow of the hill whereon their city was built, that they might cast him headlong'. These loving inhabitants of Nazareth tried to kill their own 'home-grown boy' just at the beginning of His ministry.

More recently, as we have it here in Mark 6, the Lord undergoes further personal humiliation. Before this event in chapter 6, of course, we studied in chapter 3 that His family on another occasion - not in Nazareth - attempted to restrain Him and take Him back to Nazareth, because they thought that He was mad. But here we find the Lord Jesus again persistent in His gracious reaching out to His own people, again He is attempting to reach those in His hometown with His message. So, where we left off last Sunday morning, the Lord Jesus walks 20 miles from Capernaum to Nazareth - and this, indeed, is His last recorded visit to His hometown. Another opportunity for those people to hear Him again, to hear the word of the Lord; another opportunity for them to believe on Him and be saved - yet we find on this final visit where the Master passed by, the people's hearts are still hard in unbelief.

'Sometimes they crowd His way
And His sweet praises sing,
Resounding all the day,
Hosanna's to their King;
Then 'Crucify!' is all their breath,
And for His death they thirst and cry'.

It's lovely to see how gracious the Lord Jesus is to the hardest of hearts, isn't it? It is wonderful to know that the Lord Jesus, even now, to the hardest heart in this congregation is reaching out again - and yet, that said, we can never and ought never to presume upon His gracious tenderness. For as we read, and we'll look at it in a moment or two in verse 6, 'He marvelled because of their unbelief. And he went' - and rather than read the rest of that, let me just stop there for a moment to get that impression that ought to be left on us. He went!

'O sinner' - are you here today, unconverted, never been born again? - 'Thine ears have been deaf to His voice!
Thine eyes to His glory been dim.
The calls of thy Saviour have so wearied thee,
O what if they should weary Him?'.

It's serious, isn't it? How gracious He is, reaching out again to Nazareth, and yet this is the last time - He will never reach out to them again. The Nazarenes missed the deadline, I wonder will you? Let's return to the passage, verse 1, the second half of the verse says that His disciples went with Him, they followed Him there. Now the significance of that is that the rabbis, when they moved about the countryside, they were always accompanied by their own little circle of disciples. So what Mark is trying to relay to us here is that as the boy Jesus - as far as they are concerned - comes home to town, He enters as a teacher with His disciples in tow. Immediately there is intrigue, He's not coming home on a normal visit, He's coming home on official business, He's coming home as a Rabbi with His disciples.

Now in verse 2, at the beginning, we see that it was the Sabbath day and He began to teach in the synagogue. Now let me just point out to you that it seems here that the Lord Jesus had to wait until the Sabbath day to do any teaching, and that implies that there were no crowds flocking Him here in Nazareth, there were no faith-filled people bringing their sick folk to be healed. Indeed, in verse 5 the implication is that the Lord Jesus Himself had to seek out a few sick folk to lay hands on and heal them.

Here He is, as verse 2 says, in the synagogue - which of course was His family synagogue - and He begins to teach. I think - and I think I'm qualified in saying this - it's hard to preach and to teach at home, especially at home with the people of God that you've grown up with. Someone has said: 'There are no greater critics of a man than those who have known him from boyhood'. I don't know whether that's true or not, I'm not going to say it's true - I think there are exceptions, and maybe you're one of them! - but I'm sure it's true of most in this circumstance. In verse 2, in the second half, we see that they were astonished, 'hearing him they were astonished, saying, From whence hath this man these things? and what wisdom is given unto him, that even such mighty works are wrought by his hands?'.

Now that word 'astonished' there has the sense 'deflated', imagine a tyre going down, that's the way they felt! Webster puts it like this: 'They were completely flabbergasted', that's the modern idiom in our language that really would describe the way they felt. Now what was the reason for this? Because the reason for them being flabbergasted is the crux of the message of this passage, and we've got to get to it if we're going to really learn what God wants to say to us. The reason is in verse 2c, 'From whence hath this man these things? Where did He get
Now He didn't perform any miracles here in Nazareth, of course, apart from these ones that may have been in private amongst some few sick folk. So they probably heard about the miraculous deeds that He was performing round about the nation - but this perplexity they had caused them to be flabbergasted: 'Where does this boy that we know from He was knee-high, where does He get these words from, this wisdom from, and this power from?'. Now here really was their perplexity: Rabbis, and He was coming out as a Rabbi to them, they needed to be trained - and Jesus was not the product of rabbinical school, He was a carpenter. For many years He was their carpenter! 'So', they say, 'Where does He get all this knowledge, and where does this supernatural power come from?'.

Now, they came to a diabolical conclusion, they said His power comes from the devil, and is not of God. Of course, we've dealt with that already in Mark 3:22, there were those religious folk who said that He was casting out demons by the prince of demons, Beelzebub. Now let me say this very clearly to you, and this is important for you to take note of: these people of Nazareth that were attributing the works of God to Satan by implication, they had the bare facts right. Let me repeat that: they had the bare facts right about the Lord - what am I talking about? Let me spell it out: He was untrained, He was a carpenter, He was wise and He was powerful. Now here is the lesson for us: we do not always come to the right conclusions on the bare facts alone - did you hear that? We don't always come to the right conclusions on the bare facts alone, but we interpret facts according to our presuppositions. We interpret facts according to our presuppositions - what are presuppositions? Presuppositions are simply assumptions that we make, and often they are unwarranted assumptions and they can lead us to wrong conclusions.

Let me illustrate this by a somewhat humorous anecdote, but it brings the message home to you. If you heard someone say: 'There are different kinds of love', you would say, 'Well, that's right'. Then this person says: 'Like, I love my wife, and I love my dog' - different kinds of love. Now the presupposition that you probably would make to that statement is: a man should love his wife more than his dog, therefore this man does love his wife more than his dog - and then he says: 'When it rains, I send out the wife to get the dog'. You realise that that presupposition, that assumption you made was incorrect. You had the facts, but because you made a presumption, an assumption, you got the conclusion wrong.

Now here, as far as the Nazarenes were concerned, their facts, the bare facts that were obvious, were right. He was untrained, unqualified in their culture to be a rabbi. He was a carpenter, they did grow up with Him, they did know His family, and He was manifesting great wisdom and power. Now, let me show you the presuppositions of their unbelief that drove them to this fatal conclusion, listen carefully to them for they have great application to all of us today. Here is their first presupposition on these facts: one, they concluded that God doesn't use common people. This Jesus was not educated as a rabbi, He was a craftsman - that's literally what the Greek word means. He was a working man, not of the right stock or trade to be a rabbi.

Now the irony of this statement coming from the Nazarenes was that the popular attitude around in those days was that the Nazarenes were the lowest of the low, and this should have been offensive to the Nazarenes - 'Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?', people said. Yet they applied this same axiom to their greatest Son, indeed the Son of God! Now here's a lesson for us all: man's ways are not God's ways. These Nazarenes could not reconcile the
fact that the village carpenter could be the great Prophet of God. God, imagine it, when He
came to earth, came as a common man. What grace, that the great Creator could wear the
apron of a village carpenter! He took upon Himself the common life with all its common tasks
- as Paul says in Philippians 2: 'He made Himself of no reputation'. They made the
presupposition: 'God doesn't use common people', and God pointed out that His way is to use
common people.

Now note also that, although it's not here of course, we know that He chose twelve common
men as His disciples - they wouldn't have been the dozen I would have chose, or you, but
those were the ones He chose to be the foundation of the church! Turn with me for a moment
to Acts chapter 4 and verse 13, Peter and the apostles are preaching a defence to the Council
that is forbidding them to speak in the name of Jesus the Nazarene - you can see the
inference of how offensive they felt it was. Verse 13, do follow with me if you have a Bible,
'Now when they saw', verse 13, 'the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were
unlearned and ignorant men' - stop there. That would be better translated 'uneducated and
untrained men'. 'Ignorant' today has a pejorative sense, that's not what it means, it's talking
about the fact that they were uneducated and untrained as far as Judaism was concerned. Yet
why were their eyes fixed on them? Because the power of God was evident in their lives.

Now keep that passage open, because we're going to come back to it - but the point is this:
God, as He came incarnate, though His glory could be seen by all, did not come in the pomp
and trappings of this world's esteem. He came as a common man, that is profound. When this
same Christ chose twelve disciples, who would be the Apostles, who would be the foundation
of the church, He chose uneducated and untrained men - and then, keep your finger in that
passage and come with me to 1 Corinthians chapter 1, we see that when He gave gifts to the
church over and above the apostles to every believer, we find in chapter 1 verse 26: 'For ye
see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not
many noble, are called: But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the
wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are
mighty; And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea,
and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: That no flesh should glory in his
presence'.

When He gave gifts to men to do His work, generally speaking He gave those gifts to common
men and women. You should be excited! I'm not saying that's all that you are, but that is all
you are, that's all I am - a common man, common men and women! God still works in this
way, nothing has changed - the church might have changed, education may have changed,
our presumptions may have changed, yet God's Word has not changed - and His record is:
God uses common people, that's His plan.

Now, that said, let me please emphasise: we must never despise education, we must seek as
much as we can get in one sense, and not be fools for the sake of it. We must beware of
parading our ignorance as a virtue, and I think some people do that - but we must never
think that this world's awards mean anything in the spiritual realm. We've got to revisit this
truth, as Zechariah spake: 'He answered, saying, This is the word of the LORD unto
Zerubbabel, saying, Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the LORD of hosts'. I
was talking to someone even this week, who is just climbing the ladder of education to serve
the Lord - and I'm not despising that, that could be perhaps the way God is leading folk, but
the impression you're left with is: you need these things, these accolades today, or people
just won't listen to you!
Turn back to Acts chapter 4, because God’s word does not hold that view up as credible - Acts 4, the same verse, verse 13: 'Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated and untrained men, they marvelled' - at their education, or their training? - 'they took knowledge of them, that they had been with Jesus'. The Spirit will give a superior knowledge than any school, than any university, than any Bible College, than any seminary can give - and we must beware of evaluating Christians by their job, by their position in life, or by their education.

Let me illustrate it to you by speaking of John Bunyan. John Bunyan was in prison because he would not cease from preaching - a bit like the Apostles here in Acts 4. Of course, he was a non-conformist being outside the Church of England, and he could have been released from prison - many people don’t realise this - if he just had agreed not to preach in public without being ordained in the established church. He could have walked free, the door was open for him. There were times, if you read his life story, where his wee daughter would have come to the door and pleaded with him: 'Daddy, Daddy, come home' - she didn't understand what it was all about. He said that that experience was like having your skin peeled from off your body alive. When he was released, people would gather to hear him preach, and up to 3000 people would come to hear him when he was in London. His fame even reached the ears of King Charles II. The King ridiculed John Owen, the great Puritan, for one occasion of hearing what he called 'the illiterate tinker prate'. The King received from the learned and eloquent John Owen this reply, listen to it carefully: 'May it please your Majesty, could I possess that tinker's ability for preaching, I would most gladly relinquish all my learning'.

God uses common people. These Nazarenes had made the presumption: 'He hasn't been trained in the rabbinical schools, He can't be of God'. Let us not make the same assumptions. Their second presupposition was: yes, God doesn't use common people, and He certainly doesn’t use someone we know - or at least we think we know. Does God use people we know? Look at verse 3: 'Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary' - He was their carpenter. 'The son of Mary' is a slur upon His mother for they're inferring that He was born illegitimate, for usually in those days they spoke of someone as being a son of their father. It speaks of His brothers and sisters - incidentally it shows that the Roman Catholic doctrine that Mary remained a virgin is false, here we see His brothers and sisters - and the absence of a mention of Joseph would indicate that he has probably died by now and Jesus, therefore, being the eldest, has assumed the position of man of the house. He is responsible, He is the figurehead of this home, and the point that these people are making is: 'We know this man! Not only is He untrained - don't you think He can pull off this stunt of making out that He's something special, we know Him!'.

They thought they knew Him - why? Because they were familiar with Him, He had been their neighbour for 30 years. They had played with Him, they had prayed with Him, they had commissioned Him to build a table and a stool - He was a commoner, no better than they, as far as they were concerned. This shows us the great truth that sometimes we are too close to people to see their greatness. They were, and it says they were offended by Him. The Greek word there is the word 'scandalitso' (sp?), it means 'stumbling stone', and we have derived our English word 'scandalised' from it. They couldn't explain Him, so they rejected Him. What lessons there are there! How often do we reject things we can't explain?

Then look at verse 4, 'But Jesus, said unto them, A prophet is not without honour, but in his own country, and among his own kin, and in his own house'. Now on three separate occasions, it's recorded four times, but on three separate occasions the Lord Jesus spoke that proverb. Really, if you were to translate it into our modern day idiom, it would be what we
say: 'Familiarity breeds contempt' - it's the same truth really. Often because we see people's faults that we're close to, we see their inconsistencies and their foibles, we find it hard to respect those we are more familiar with. Now that was not the case with the Lord Jesus, that's why there's a greater condemnation upon the Nazarenes. This proverb says nothing about the Lord Jesus, but it says a great deal about the Nazarenes!

A tourist on one occasion was eager to see everything in an art gallery, and he fled from picture to picture scarcely noticing what was in the frames. On the way out past the guard at the door, he said: 'I didn't see anything very special here'. The guard said: 'Sir, it's not the pictures that are on trial here, it's the visitors'. These Nazarenes were on trial - the babe, the boy, the man Jesus was in their midst, and they were blind to Him. 'What think ye of Christ?', is the great diagnostic spiritual question of the ages - and you must answer that question, soul that is yet unsaved. The trouble is, so many people in Ulster are so familiar with Jesus, the cross, the gospel, that they're blind to it.

Can I apply this to Christians? Because it's so easy to apply it to non-Christians - but there is a danger for us too. We in the church are so exposed to the person of Christ, and the words and works of Christ, that we become desensitised to it all! Where is the blessedness I knew when first I saw the Lord? Where is the soul-refreshing view of Jesus and His word? Has it gone? You're no longer refreshed in your soul when you see Him, when you hear about Him. We are so familiar, like these Nazarenes, with the person of Christ that we enjoy no blessing from looking on Him, or hearing Him, or being in His presence. This especially applies to what has come to be known as 'second generation Christians'. Your parents are saved, your grandparents - third generation, fourth, maybe fifth if you're like me - and because you've been with Christ, like the Nazarenes you've grown up with Him, from you were able to hear you have heard about Him...do you know what's happening in the church at large today in evangelicalism? Because we are into a second and a third and fourth-generation Christianity, Christ is not exciting enough! I'll tell you, there's nothing more exciting than God becoming man, and living among men as a common man, and doing a common job, and going among men and ministering without house, or home, or place to lay His head - and performing mighty miracles that no man ever performed - and then allowing Himself to be laid on a cross, and die for sins, and come alive three days later - what could be more exciting? The problem is: it's not exciting enough, it has lost its lustre for many.

Do you see the presuppositions of their unbelief: God doesn't use common people, and He certainly doesn't use things and people that we are familiar with. Here's the second point I want you to note: these presuppositions led to the powerlessness of their unbelief, the paralysis of unbelief. Verse 5: 'He could there do no mighty work, save that he laid his hands upon a few sick folk, and healed them'. Now verse 5 has perplexed many, where it says: 'He could do no...' - now that does not mean that the Lord wasn't able to exercise His power. What it does mean is that He wasn't in the right circumstances to do that freely. Let me explain: first of all, this is the incarnate God who has omnipotence, He is all-powerful, and omnipotence cannot be limited apart from when - mark this - it is self-limited. Do you understand? When He chooses to limit it.

Now what the Lord Jesus was exercising here was His submissiveness to the divine conditions upon which God would reveal Himself. God has always declared that He will reveal Himself to the hearts of men when they have hearts of need that are full of faith. Have you got it? It wasn't that Christ couldn't do it in the sense that He was powerless, but He was not free to do it because God had already stipulated that men would only have God revealed to them by faith - and there was no faith here.
Could it be - and I have asked this question as I studied this passage - that the disciples learned more from the Lord not doing miracles in Nazareth than they had from witnessing the four mighty miracles that we studied in previous weeks? I think it's possible. They are learning this fact: God works in response to faith. Last week, the title, remember? 'The Difference Faith Makes' - and now they are learning a great message: unbelief freezes the exercise of God's power. In verse 6 we read that the Lord Jesus marvelled - by the way, the only other time we read of Jesus marvelling is in Matthew 8:10, when He saw the faith of the Gentile Roman centurion that was greater than all the faith that was in Israel. So once we see Him marvelling at great faith, now we see Him marvelling at no faith. Usually Mark says that the people were amazed at Jesus, and here we have him saying that Jesus was amazed at the people. Our question that we must answer today is: is He amazed at our unbelief? My unbelief, does it amaze Him?

Can I apply this to us all as a fellowship in our closing moments? Unbelief robs the Christian, but it also robs the church of the power of God. We have a great responsibility - it is not just 'Let go and let God', though that may apply in some circumstances it certainly doesn't apply here - we can either help or hinder the work of Jesus in the midst of His people. What are you doing? Are you helping? Are you hindering? The Scottish preacher A. J. Gossup on one occasion had the famous preacher Alexander Whyte ask him why he hadn't come to the evening service as usual that evening. Gossup replied that he was preaching to a certain congregation. 'How did you get on?', asked Alexander Whyte. He said: 'Well, I found it very cold'. 'Cold?', said Alexander, 'Cold? I preached there two years ago and I haven't got the chill out of my bones yet!'. Now let me stress that it's not cold for me to preach here, I enjoy preaching here, I think I enjoy preaching here better than I enjoy anywhere else - yet we still, all of us, can have paralysing presuppositions. Preaching in an atmosphere of expectancy can cause the poorest, weakest, most pathetic message to take light, and to do something amazing! Yet an atmosphere of critical coldness or bland indifference can cause the most Spirit-packed preaching to fall lifeless to the earth. This is why miraculous signs in themselves never produce faith, faith is a personal commitment, faith is a choice on your behalf that only you can make. That's maybe why the Lord Jesus gave signs sparingly, and whenever He gave signs it was in answer to faith.

Now, often our presuppositions are faith-killers and paralyse the power of God. Let me give you four for your consideration. One: God doesn't do any miracles any more - if you want to kill faith, that will do it right away! You are presupposing - oh you've got the facts about Christ and the word of God and all - but you've everything in a box, so much so that you're not expecting God to do anything supernatural any more. The second presupposition: everything is bowing the knee to Baal these days, it's a lost cause now. Yet God is saying to you: 'There are 7000 that have not yet bowed the knee to Baal, it isn't as bad as you think'. Three: the Lord is coming soon, things are going to get worse and worse, we ought not to expect anything. Nonsense! For even in the last days there is an invitation, that Christ stands at the door and will open and commune with those who will answer His call. Four, another presupposition: this atmosphere is so foreign to the non-Christian when we preach the gospel - I'm not talking about a building by the way, I'm talking about a message - and if you talk about 'sin', and you talk about 'judgement', and you talk about 'hell', and you talk about 'blood', and you talk about 'a cross', and you talk about 'only one way to God' it makes them edgy, and they won't see and they won't hear - they couldn't possibly be affected! That's not what God says! If it's affecting you by causing you to have a presupposition that is killing faith, you need to deal with that.
The result of unbelief in verse 6, the second half, 'He went round about the villages, teaching' - that means Jesus carried on His ministry elsewhere. When it says there 'He went around the villages', look at it, in the Greek that literally could go 'He went round about the village in a circle'. Do you get what that's saying? He visited all the villages that were adjacent to the village of Nazareth, and He passed them by. The result of unbelief was the paralysis of the power of God in their midst when the living God in the flesh was there.

Can I finish with a story that I heard recently from the Evangelist and Bible teacher Peter Brandon on a recording. Some of you will know him, a mighty man of God. He was in a certain town taking meetings, and he had only arrived and he needed to do a couple of messages for himself. He went into the greengrocers, and right away the person - it was a small village - noticed that he was a stranger, and said: 'You don't belong here, what are you doing in this town?'. He explained who he was, that he was a preacher and he was coming to the local Gospel Hall to take meetings. The greengrocer answered: 'Well, I'm glad that you're going to the Gospel Hall and not the Church of England!'. He thought to himself, 'Oh?', and asked her why. She explained: 'Well, the Church of England invited a preacher, and this preacher got that whole church to fast and pray for two whole weeks'. She says, 'Nobody came through my doors to buy any food or drink! But add to that fact, when the meeting started', she said, 'It was awful' - now I'm only quoting this from memory, so forgive me if I make the odd mistake and you know the story better. She said: 'People would come into my shop and were visibly affected. One man who I've known for years was so down that I asked him what was wrong, and he said, 'I was at the meeting the other evening, and if I die today I know I would go to hell". She says: 'It's awful, and add to this', she also said, 'You can feel God everywhere'. Peter Brandon went to the Gospel Hall where he was booked, and he hastens to add that they are a lovely group of believers - and he remarked to them: 'I believe that you've had a special mission, and there's been a touch from God on the town', and the reply he got was, 'What mission?'. He told the story, not me - do you know what the lesson is? Listen to this carefully: God goes anywhere faith wants Him, and unbelief is a killer, presumptions are killers, and we as God saints should be saying:

'Pass me not, O gracious Saviour,
Hear my humble cry:
While on others Thou art calling,
Do not pass me by'.

Does God use others because He can't use us? Oh He does, you better believe He does.

Father, make us a faith-filled people, increase our faith in Your word, and in Your Christ, and in Your plan, and in Your promises. We cry to You, our Father, let us not be a people whom You pass by because of our presumption, but may the power of God be manifest in our midst as we take You at Your word. For Christ’s sake, Amen.

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Transcribed by Andrew Watkins, Preach The Word – September 2007
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ow we're turning in our Bibles to Mark's gospel chapter 6 please, and we are beginning
to read from verse 7 - and the title of my message this morning is: 'The Reproduction
Of Power In Effective Service'. Verse 7 of Mark 6: "And he called unto him the twelve,
and began to send them forth by two and two; and gave them power over unclean spirits;
And commanded them that they should take nothing for their journey, save a staff only; no
scrip, no bread, no money in their purse: But be shod with sandals; and not put on two coats.
And he said unto them, In what place soever ye enter into an house, there abide till ye depart
from that place. And whosoever shall not receive you, nor hear you, when ye depart thence,
shake off the dust under your feet for a testimony against them. Verily I say unto you, It shall
be more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrha in the day of judgment, than for that city. And
they went out, and preached that men should repent. And they cast out many devils, and
anointed with oil many that were sick, and healed them".

Now if you can remember two Sunday mornings ago, if you were here, in verses 1 to 6 of this
chapter 6 we saw the Servant of Jehovah rejected in His hometown of Nazareth. There we
see, because of their unbelief in Christ, the power of God, divine power, was restrained. Look
at verse 5: 'He could there do no mighty work, save that he laid his hands upon a few sick
folk, and healed them'. We entitled our message that morning: 'The Paralysis of Unbelief'.
Now this morning we are seeing that the Servant of Jehovah sends forth His servants to
preach His message. In verses 7 to 13 that we have read, we see the third tour of the
Galilean villages that our Lord Jesus takes recorded by Mark. The first was in chapter 1 verse
14, the second in chapter 1 verse 30, and here we have the third. Rather than divine power
being restrained, we find that the theme in these verses is: divine power is being reproduced
in the twelve disciples.

Let me remind you of something that we've already studied, turn with me to chapter 3 of this
gospel, verse 14. We saw that the Lord Jesus 'ordained twelve, that they should be with him,
and that he might send them forth to preach, And to have power to heal sicknesses, and to
cast out devils'. There He chose them, primarily, to take His place when He left this scene -
but also to propagate His message. There He chose them in chapter 3 to be with Him. They
were Peter, or Simon; Andrew, Peter's brother; James the son of Zebedee; John, James'
brother; Philip; Bartholomew, who is also named Nathaniel; Matthew, or Levi; and Thomas;
James the son of Alphaeus; Thaddeus, his other name Judas the son of James; Simon the
zealot; and Judas Iscariot, the betrayer of the Lord Jesus Christ.

In chapter 3 He was calling them to be under His tutelage, He called them to be with Him with
a view that He would eventually send them out to propagate the message in His place. Now in
chapter 6 they are going forth as His glorious heralds of His message. So the time has come,
having been at the Master's feet, when they must be launched out in service for Him. He is
sending them, Mark says, if you look at it in verse 7. He sends them forth. Now the Greek
word there is 'apostello' (sp?), the word we get 'apostle' from. 'Apostle' means 'sent one', 'apostello', 'to send them'. Literally here's a definition of it: 'To send forth as an ambassador on a commission to represent another, and to perform some task'.

Now let me pause there for a moment, and let us launch into the future, into this particular time where we are in the church of Jesus Christ - and we find that in the line of the early apostles, in one sense, though there cannot be any more twelve apostles, we are also ambassadors for the Lord Jesus Christ. In that sense we are 'sent ones' - 2 Corinthians 5:20, Paul said: 'Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead', in Christ's place, as Christ's representatives, 'be ye reconciled to God'. So there is much application for us today in a similar, though not an exact position; we too are representatives of our Lord Jesus Christ in this day and generation.

Now here's the lesson for us right away: we ought, like the early disciples, the twelve apostles, to be with Him - that is our primary responsibility, that ought to be our priority. It's no good serving the Lord Jesus if we're not spending any time at His feet. He called them first to be with Him, then there had to come a time when they were no longer only with Him but with others. Here we see this realised in chapter 6: He is launching them out in service. Now let me ask you, child of God: have you got that balance, and indeed that order intact in your Christian experience? Priority: be with Him, then launched out into service.

Now Judaism understood a kind of legal recognition that an action performed by authorised individuals on the behalf of another was considered as the actual action of the person represented. Now maybe that's complicating you, let me simply put it like this: their Jewish law of the land acknowledged the sent one as the man who commissioned him. The sent one was as if he was the man who commissioned him. So if you were appointed as a representative, in the legal sense of the term you were that person. In keeping with that thought, we find in verse 30 that, having come back from their mission, 'the apostles gathered themselves together unto Jesus, and told him all things, both what they had done, and what they had taught'. They were reporting to Him, because they had been operating on His behalf, as if He was operating. How that fits in so well with the theme of this portion, because what we witness here is not the power of the apostles, it is the power of the Lord Jesus Christ reproduced in His representatives. Like us today, as ambassadors for Christ, as apostles with a small 'a', as ones He has sent out to represent Him, we also are called upon to reproduce His power.

Now let us see how He sent them out. Look at verse 7, we see that He 'began to send them forth by two and two' - so He sent them out in pairs. Now Mark alone notes that the Lord Jesus sent the twelve out two by two. Luke, in chapter 10 of his gospel, notes that the Lord sent out the 70 two by two. The big question is: why did He send them out two by two? Well, one answer to that question might be that it gave them authenticity in a legal sense - as they were bringing testimony, the law required that in the mouth of two or three witnesses a truth should be established. So they were going out to propagate the truth of this message from Christ on His behalf, as His representatives, and it would fulfil the law's requirements that they went in twos.

But I think there might be a second reason as well. We read in Matthew chapter 18 that the Lord Jesus said: 'If two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven'. There is a great strength in praying with other people, and operating in service with other people, not just on your own. Prayer ministry would have been multiplied in going two by two. But a third reason for sending them
out two by two may be the simple and most common sense reason, that it gives encouragement, companionship and cooperation. Of course Solomon in Ecclesiastes said these words: 'Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labour. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath not another to help him up. Again, if two lie together, then they have heat: but how can one be warm alone? And if one prevail against him, two shall withstand him'. Now there Solomon tells us that when we go out with company to serve the Lord we have assistance, we have comfort, and we have a defence. Later on he actually says in verse 12 of Ecclesiastes chapter 4 that three, additional to two, also has with it its advantage: 'a threefold cord is not quickly broken'. Now please notice that I think this is fulfilled in the Lord Jesus sending the disciples about two by two, because the Lord sent them in twos, but He was working with them and in them - so that in the two disciples and the Lord Jesus empowering them, there is a threefold cord of fellowship that is not easily broken.

Now we see that that is something that was reciprocated right throughout the whole ministry of the apostles - not necessarily that they went two by two, but they all went in cooperation with the Lord Jesus. Turn to the last chapter of this book of Mark, and the last verse of the last chapter: 'And they went forth, and preached every where, the Lord working with them, and confirming the word with signs following' - that is exactly what we have here in chapter 6. The two in cooperation, but all of them, both of them in cooperation with the Lord. So here we have the first ingredient of the recipe of effective service for the Lord: one, fellowship with one another; two, in fellowship with the Lord - now that is vital. We need to be in fellowship with one another, in fellowship also with the Lord.

Now the question is: ought we to obey these injunctions today? Literally, should we be going out two by two? Well, William Irvine took these verses literally - and Matthew 10, and Luke 9 and 10 - and established the Cooneyite movement which we still have with us today in our land. They went out two by two, and were called the 'Two By Twos'. Their gospel became known as 'The Jesus Way', because they espoused that salvation is not by grace through faith, but by following the example of the Lord Jesus. Their preachers became known as 'tramp preachers', because they lived in poverty, obeying to the letter these words that we have read together this morning. They had only one change of clothes, they took no money with them, they lived in other people's homes and desired to obey literally these injunctions that the Lord Jesus gave to the twelve apostles and His 70 disciples.

So should we be obeying these words literally today? Now this is very instructive for us in how we understand to apply the word of God in our own contemporary situation. Here are a few problems if we are to obey these verses literally: the first is found in chapter 10 of Matthew, turn with me to it please, we're going to do a bit of a Bible study! Matthew 10 verse 5, this is the same situation, Matthew's record: 'These twelve', verse 5, 'Jesus sent forth, and commanded them, saying, Go not into the way of the Gentiles, and into any city of the Samaritans enter ye not: But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel'. Problem number one: when the Lord Jesus sent forth the twelve in this manner, He didn't send them to the Gentiles - in fact He expressly told them not to go to them, but to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. So if we are to obey these commands literally, we're not allowed to go and preach to Gentiles - as the Cooneyites, incidentally, do - we should be all emigrating to Jerusalem and preaching to Jews. There's something different going on, it's obvious, in this portion.

Here's a second problem that arises in the next verse of chapter 10 of Matthew, verse 7: 'As ye go', the Lord Jesus says, 'preach, saying, The kingdom of heaven is at hand' - that is a
different message than we are called to preach today. Let me just explain it briefly without going into too much detail: the kingdom of heaven was at hand for these Jews, because their Messiah was with them in the land offering Himself to them as their Messiah. He is not in the land today, and that same message is not being preached today. So it was a different message, and they were told to go to different people.

A third problem with this, if you turn to Luke 22, a third problem with taking these injunctions literally is that here in Luke 22 verses 35 and 36 these initial injunctions are now revoked by the Lord Himself, and opposite instructions are given. Luke 22 and verse 35: 'And he said unto them, When I sent you without purse, and scrip, and shoes, lacked ye any thing? And they said, Nothing. Then said he unto them, But now, he that hath a purse, let him take it, and likewise his scrip: and he that hath no sword, let him sell his garment, and buy one'. William Irvine and the Cooneyites failed to understand that these commandments in Mark 6 that we're looking at today, these were particular commands, to particular disciples, to fulfil specific stages of the ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ while He was here on earth.

Now here's a fourth problem if you're not convinced yet: in Matthew 28 we have the final commission of the Lord Jesus to the twelve. In Matthew 28:19-20 He says: 'Go ye therefore, and teach all nations', not now just to the Jews, but all nations, 'baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the age'. This was another message, a message not just to the Jew but to the global nations, a message of grace through faith.

Now here's a fifth problem if we are to take these verses literally in Mark 6: in the book of the Acts, the church did not practise these injunctions, the apostles also did not practise them. Now sometimes they did send people out in twos, but other times they sent folk out alone, and up to - I think I've counted it right - some were sent in a company of eight. So they did not obey these verses literally. So that's a good lesson for us: we must make sure that when we interpret the Bible, that we're not applying things literally that were commands intended for a specific person or people at a particular time in biblical history.

Now, all that being said, there are general principles found in these injunctions in Mark 6 that are related to service, their service and our service, because these principles are timeless - and it's those I want to concentrate on this morning. The first we have already hit on: if we are to have effective service for the Lord, we must be in fellowship with one another, and in fellowship with the Lord. Now here's the second: we have looked at how He sent them out in pairs, look at verse 7 again because He also sent them out with power, He gave them 'power over unclean spirits'. Now here we are seeing the One who, in these first six verses of Mark 6, could do no mighty works because the divine conditions of faith in the hearers were not met; and now He is giving power to others - it is obviously a divine power, so the power is being reproduced.

It's one thing to cast out demons, which the Lord did, but only God can confer these powers on others. As Darby said: 'Any can work miracles if God gives the power, but God alone can give it'. Here we see the deity of our Lord Jesus Christ imparting the power to work miracles on the earth. But here's the point we need to grasp: as the Lord Jesus wanted these disciples to serve Him in power, He wants us to serve Him in power today. The word for 'power' is the word for 'authority'. He gave them authority to exorcise the demons. You remember - we'll not take time to look at it - in chapter 1 and verses 26 and 27, the people marvelled at the Lord Jesus because He cast out the devils. They marvelled at His power - the word is His
'authority'. Now He is giving this to His disciples. This same power and authority is being reproduced in His representatives.

Now, we haven't got time to go into all this today: we cannot do what the apostles did in many respects, but the fact of the matter is - as far as we are concerned - the Lord Jesus Christ came down from heaven, He died on the cross, He was buried, He rose again, He went up to heaven and after He went up to heaven the Holy Spirit came down from heaven and empowered the church to go out, and to touch men and women for heaven. We are to serve the Lord with His own divine power. Now that word for 'gave them power' over the spirits is in the imperfect tense, that means He kept on giving them the power all through their tour of Galilee. It was a limitless supply of power - Hallelujah, for that is available to us: God's commandments are always His enablements!

Do you remember what Paul said in 2 Corinthians 3? 'Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think any thing as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God; Who also hath made us able ministers of the new testament; not of the letter, but of the spirit: for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life'. Do you know that power in your life? Do I know it in mine? Do you know it in your service for the Lord? Do I know it in mine? I'm reminded of that statement of the puritan Philip Brooks: 'Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers, pray for powers equal to your tasks'. Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers, for your powers are pathetic; but pray for powers, divine powers, equal for your tasks, for the things that God is calling you to do.

How did He send them out? He sent them out in pairs, He sent them out with power, thirdly He sent them out promising provisions - verses 8, 9 and 10. Now we have a problem here - and the problem is with us of course, it's always with us whenever there's a problem with the scriptures - the first problem is this: Matthew 10 in his record, in verses 9 and 10, tells them in the same instance to take no shoes, nor staves; whereas Mark in his record says the Lord Jesus told them to take sandals and a stave. That's a problem. In Luke chapter 9 and verse 3, he records that the Lord told them not to take staves also. Now some try and reconcile this by saying that these staves that they weren't allowed to take with them were fighting staves, but they were allowed to take with them a walking stick - that was permitted to get over the terrain, and some of those people would say that the shoes here are different than sandals. That may be the case, but if you note: Matthew and Luke use the plural of staves - you're not allowed to take staves with you, and you're not allowed to take shoes with you. So, bringing them into harmony: you're not allowed to take staves and shoes, but you can take one pair of sandals and one staff - and that interpretation is completely in keeping with the whole meaning of this portion. What is it? 'Don't take extra provisions to rely on your own ingenuity, but rely on My promise of provision! I will care for you!'.

Now, a second problem that we might have is that in the light of Luke 22 that we read together, should we assume that because this particular injunction in Mark 6 was revoked by the Lord Himself, that the Lord's provision would no longer be given? Of course not! In fact the Lord says in Luke 22: 'When I sent you out without these things, did you have need of anything?', and they said 'No' - that was the lesson He was trying to get across to them. Now in Luke 22 the point only is that they were about to face worse opposition and hospitality than they ever met in their first mission, and therefore it was important that they learned how to trust the Lord without anything.

The command in verse 8: 'Don't take a scrip', that is a begging bag - only sandals, the sandals are for protection; and only a staff, that's maybe for protection from wild beasts, and
getting over the rugged terrain. The point was: they were to trust the Lord for everything else! I want you to picture the scene as these twelve go out, there wasn't any danger of them being envied because of their possessions. People would never have been attracted to Christianity by the prospect of becoming rich quick! Not with these twelve! I think it's an interesting point that the church today often think they must attract unbelievers by being attractive - I agree with that, but attractive in what sense? Because in worldly terms, these early disciples were unattractive, but they were attractive in this respect: that they manifested divine power! The likeness and power of Christ was in them - and there's a lesson in that for us all.

Then verse 10, they were told to abide in one home wherever they were until they departed again. Now why was that injunction given? Well, it stopped them shopping around for more comfortable lodgings. I'm thinking of John Wesley, riding all over the United Kingdom and further afield on horseback, and when night fell he gets off his horse, lies in a hedge, and sleeps there all night. This convicts me, I'm sure it convicts many of us in this materialistic, affluent age. What the Lord Jesus was saying to these disciples was: if you're engaged in evangelism, you can't be fussy about your food or your accommodation, you've got to realise that your mission is a matter of life and death to the hearers! Everything else is secondary to that! Is that how I operate, is that how you operate? You see, their mission, they were being sent out as representatives of the One who did not please Himself, who was not self-seeking, and they were not to compromise the message by seeking luxury, comfort or ease.

I wonder are people not able to hear our message today because of the discordant note of our lives that is a distraction, and maybe even a contradiction of the One whom we represent? I know this for a fact: many unbelievers are turned off by tuning into TV evangelists, the get rich quick schemes that they propound - all, of course, in the name of the penniless Man of Nazareth! The apostolic church could say: 'Silver and gold have I none, rise up and walk'; much of the modern church can say neither. Why is that? Simply put: because we often rely on our own resources rather than God's supernatural provision. Is that true?

So here are a few things that the servants of the Lord must learn, attributes that are needed in the servants of the Lord. One, this is what we find in these injunctions in verses 8, 9 and 10, one: we need dependence on the Lord, not dependence on wealth. Now that, put in one word, is faith. We need dependence on the Lord, not on wealth - faith. You see, the minimum of provision was meant to call these disciples out in the maximum of faith. They didn't have any resources, and so they had to be totally cast upon the Lord. Had they not been taught the Lord's social security plan in Matthew chapter 6 and verses 19 and following? 'Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven' - and that was a 100% guaranteed policy! 'Trust in me, and I will provide for you' - as Hudson Taylor put it, 'The Lord pays for what He orders'.

What the Lord was teaching the servant was: 'As long as you're doing my work, I will supply your need'. Now we see this exemplified in Paul's letter to Timothy, when he said these words, 1 Timothy 6: 'Godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out' - now mark these words - 'And having', one, 'food and', two, 'raiment let us be therewith', three, 'content'. Food and clothing, and that word 'clothing' could also mean 'covering', so it might be a roof over your head - but with food and covering for your body and for your family, be content. He goes on: 'But they that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is the root of all evil: which
while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows'. He's not saying it's wrong to have a few pounds in your pocket, he's saying it's wrong to depend upon that resource and not depend on God.

We've got to serve in faith. Cameron Thomson put it like this: 'God pours out His choicest blessings on those who are anxious that nothing should stick to their hands. Individuals who value the rainy day above the present agony of the world will get no blessing from God'. Dan Crawford, that servant of the Lord, said of his own experience: 'A society missionary friend expostulated with me as a married man not claiming a fixed salary, something sure was his idea. It was then that God spoke to me out of His word. What settled the matter as to faith being the only definite thing was the following truth of God, 'The promise was by faith that it might be sure'. The promise was by faith that it might be sure - in other words, the only sure thing is faith. Our resources, whether they are financial, or whether they are technological, or intellectual - none of them are sure, but God is sure, and our dependence is to be in Him and Him alone!

The servant of the Lord needs to depend on the Lord, not on wealth, that is faith. Secondly, the servant of the Lord needs a readiness to relinquish comfort, a readiness to relinquish comfort. Now there is no virtue in becoming a monk, putting sackcloth on your back for no reason - but the servant of the Lord must be willing, when it is called upon him, to relinquish comfort. If the first attribute is faith, the second is sacrifice. Now, I know my flesh loves pampering and luxury - but that is not ideal for the servant of the cross. As one has said, we must beware of the soft and effeminate luxuries that kill the soul. William MacDonald put it like this: 'So disciples must make a deliberate choice. On the one hand there is poverty, hunger, tears and unpopularity for the Son of Man's sake; on the other there is riches abundant, food, gaiety and man's approval. Those who choose the latter receive their reward now and remorse later; those who choose the former inherit the kingdom with all the joys that go with it'.

This is the basic point: the Lord Jesus was the poor Servant of Jehovah who did not please Himself, and yet He is able to pledge Himself to provide the needs of His servants if they go out with nothing. Do you believe that? Do I believe that? Do you act upon that? Do I act upon it? The poet said:

'Give of thy sons to bear the message, glorious;  
Give of thy wealth to speed them on their way.  
Pour out thy soul for them in prayer, victorious;  
And all thou spendest, Jesus will repay!'.

He sent them out in pairs, He sent them out with power, He sent them out promising them provision; and fourthly in verse 11 He sent them out prepared for rejection: 'Whosoever shall not receive you, nor hear you, when ye depart thence, shake off the dust under your feet for a testimony against them'. They were not obliged to remain and cast their pearls before swine. In public testimony against those who rejected the message of Christ, they were to shake off the dust under their feet - symbolising God's rejection of the hearers. Now, you see, the Jews often did this when they were in a Gentile village or city and went out, a heathen place, they would shake the dust from off their feet. The Lord is commanding them to do this against the Jews, who rejected Him as their Messiah!

Now don't misunderstand: the disciples were not being called by the Lord to be rude or hostile in their approach, but this actually was a merciful prophetic act. This was intended to shock
the hearers into realising that the judgement of God was upon them. It was designed to prick them into thinking about their destiny and standing before God. Ultimately it was a pronouncement of judgement that was to bring them to repentance - and let me tell you, it wasn’t just for the time when our Lord was upon the earth. For in Acts 13 we read that Paul and Barnabas shook off the dust from their feet when the citizens of Antioch in Pisidia had rejected the gospel of God’s grace.

Here’s another attribute that the servant of the Lord needs. We’ve seen that they need faith, they need sacrifice, but thirdly they need candour - truthfulness, directness. They need to be prepared to preach judgement! There’s a sense of urgency here, look at verse 11: ‘Verily I say unto you, It shall be more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment, than for that city' that rejects Christ, or that person that rejects Christ. If you're a person in this building this morning who rejects Christ, you've got to know that you're in a worse situation than Sodom and Gomorrah, and fire rained down from heaven upon them! You've heard, they hadn't heard the gospel, you've heard. You have a Bible, they never had a Bible in their hands. You have sat in gospel meetings, evangelistic campaigns, they never had that - but God judged them because they rejected Him with less than you have, what will God do to you?

This candour was evident in their preaching, for in verse 12 'they went out, and preached that men should repent'. Please note first of all that preaching was their main task. They were to preach the gospel, and it was the preaching that led to the expulsion of demons and healing of the sick. Sometimes there are groups of people calling on unbelievers to come and get healed, and not even giving them the gospel. We see them on our streets round about this district, having little prayer clinics for people's healing of the body when their souls are damned! That's not Christ's order: He preached to them, and the word used here for 'preach' is 'kerusso', and it literally means this: to make a public proclamation with such gravity, formality, and authority as must be heeded. Are those three ingredients in our preaching? Gravity, formality, and authority? Basically what I'm saying is: how can you preach judgement at an evangelistic fancy dress party? You can't do it. Therefore, a lesson for us is: we must beware in our methods - and I believe there are many - but we must beware in our methods that we do not lose our message.

The message they preached was 'Repent', change your attitude toward God, change your attitude toward self, change your attitude towards sin - and in verse 13 there were signs followed. They anointed people with oil and they were healed. The oil, I believe, is symbolic here of the ministry of the Holy Spirit - and we ought to be anointed with that holy oil of God's Spirit as we serve Him in effective power. Now let me recap, lest you've missed anything. What is effective service that will reproduce the power of the Lord Jesus? One, fellowship with one another in the fellowship of the Lord. Two, availing of divine power which He gives us constantly with a limitless supply. Three, dependence on the Lord, not wealth, that is faith. Four, readiness to relinquish comfort, that is sacrifice. Five, preparedness to preach the truth faithfully.

How do we figure? How do I measure up? How do you? The Italian patriot, Garibaldi, was standing on the steps of St Peter's Basilica in Rome, and he said to the men gathered around him: 'I offer you neither pay nor provisions. I offer you hunger, thirst, forced marches, battles and death. Let him who loves his country with his heart and not with his lips only, follow me'. The Lord Jesus similarly says: 'Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me'.

241
Father, You alone know who among us has truly heard Your voice, and what the Spirit says to those in the churches. We pray this morning that that word that may have found a place in someone’s heart will stay there, and be cultivated and bear forth much fruit to the glory of God. Help those who are struggling with the matter of surrender, and may they go through with God. We pray too for those who may be under the judgement of God where they stand just now because of their unbelief. May they trust the Saviour before it’s too late. Thank You for Your word, thank You for Your presence. We ask Your blessing now as we go, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.
Now we're turning to Mark's gospel chapter 6 please. Now if you're new to the Iron Hall, even if it's only on Sunday mornings, for a while now - with a few interruptions - we have been studying Mark's gospel. Believe it or not, we are still in the midst of chapter 6, and this is our 31st study! So we're going slowly, but I think it's important that we glean all we can of the spiritual information that the Holy Spirit has given to us through Mark.

We're going to read from verse 13, please, of Mark 6: "And they", that is, the disciples that the Lord Jesus had sent out, "cast out many devils, and anointed with oil many that were sick, and healed them. And king Herod heard of him" - and let me just pause there, because Mark calls Herod, that is Herod Antipas, a King. Now that was what Antipas would have wanted, but in reality Herod was only a tetrarch. He set himself up with the persona of a king, but he was the ruler of a fourth part of the nation. When Herod the Great died, the Romans divided the territory among his three sons, and Antipas was made tetrarch of Peraea and Galilee.

"When Herod heard of him; (for his name was spread abroad:)", that is, the name of the Lord Jesus, "and he said, That John the Baptist was risen from the dead, and therefore mighty works do shew forth themselves in him. Others said, That it is Elias. And others said, That it is a prophet, or as one of the prophets. But when Herod heard thereof, he said, It is John, whom I beheaded: he is risen from the dead. For Herod himself had sent forth and laid hold upon John, and bound him in prison for Herodias' sake, his brother Philip's wife: for he had married her. For John had said unto Herod, It is not lawful for thee to have thy brother's wife. Therefore Herodias had a quarrel against him, and would have killed him; but she could not: For Herod feared John, knowing that he was a just man and an holy, and observed him; and when he heard him, he did many things, and heard him gladly. And when a convenient day was come, that Herod on his birthday made a supper to his lords, high captains, and chief estates of Galilee; And when the daughter of the said Herodias came in, and danced, and pleased Herod and them that sat with him, the king said unto the damsel, Ask of me whatsoever thou wilt, and I will give it thee. And he sware unto her, Whatsoever thou shalt ask of me, I will give it thee, unto the half of my kingdom. And she went forth, and said unto her mother, What shall I ask? And she said, The head of John the Baptist. And she came in straightway with haste unto the king, and asked, saying, I will that thou give me by and by in a charger the head of John the Baptist. And the king was exceeding sorry; yet for his oath's sake, and for their sakes which sat with him, he would not reject her. And immediately the king sent an executioner, and commanded his head to be brought: and he went and beheaded him in the prison, And brought his head in a charger, and gave it to the damsel: and the damsel gave it to her mother. And when his disciples heard of it, they came and took up his corpse, and laid it in a tomb".

The portion that we have just read together is somewhat of a difficult one from the point of view of bringing application to you as a people of God in the 21st century - and yet, with many difficult passages of Scripture, I think the deeper you dig the more marvellous the jewels are that you discover. There is a great deal that is instructive within this portion of structure to us all. First of all, I believe we will encounter what a preacher of the word should
be like - and that is personified for us in John the Baptist. We will also see the converse of that truth, and that is what a hearer of the word of God should be like - or should we say, what a hearer of the word of God should not be like, which is very graphically characterised for us in the person of Herod the tetrarch and his family.

So what we have here, in application at least, is how we ought to deliver the word of God, and how we ought to respond to the Word of God - how we ought to be as messengers of God's message, and how we ought to receive the message that God sends us. It is vividly portrayed here, look at verse 14 for instance. We see there the wickedness of Herod the King, he heard of the Lord Jesus, and: 'He said that John the Baptist was risen from the dead, and therefore mighty works do shew themselves in him'. Now why does that show his wickedness? Well, it seems amazing, to me at least, that Herod - who incidentally was a Sadducee, and the Sadducees didn't believe in the resurrection - Herod was willing to believe that John the Baptist, whom he had beheaded, had risen from the dead - and yet he was not willing to believe in the God who he supposed had power to raise the dead. It shows us the irrationality of unbelief. We have been sold the lie that atheism and agnosticism are the rational philosophies, but they are not.

Now, of course, a worse sin for Herod was the fact that this was not John the Baptist, this was the very Son of God, and he was resisting Him and His ministry, and preferring his own sin and lust for power. Look with me at verse 15 - others were speculating who this One was: 'Others said, That it is Elias. And others said, That it is a prophet, or as one of the prophets'. Now let me cast your mind back to chapter 1 verse 24, because there the demons that the Lord Jesus was casting out, they had the identity of the Lord Jesus right: 'I know thee who thou art, the Holy One of God', the demon confessed. Yet these Jews were getting it wrong. It's interesting that often those who get the identity of the Lord Jesus Christ wrong, they do recognize something wonderful about Him. If you think about several of the major and even minor religious faiths and beliefs in our world - even some of the cults of Christendom - you will note that many of them, if not all of them, reverence and revere the Lord Jesus Christ to some extent. Wasn't it Gandhi who said: 'I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ' - but he liked our Christ. But Christ does not ask our respect as a great man, He demands our faith and our obedience as He is the Son of God. There's a universe of difference!

Look at verse 16 now: 'When Herod heard thereof, he said, It is John, whom I beheaded: he is risen from the dead'. Now Herod thought that John the Baptist had come back from the dead, perhaps in judgement to him, to haunt him for beheading him - but one thing is sure: John's supposed resurrection from the dead to Herod, proved that there was something special about this man, he was a prophet. Now what I want you to note is that Herod, with all his shortcomings - and there were many - he was supernaturally curious. He was not disinterested in spiritual things. This is evident from verse 20: 'Herod feared John, knowing that he was a just man and an holy, and observed him; and when he heard him, he did many things, and heard him gladly'. Then when his wife's daughter, in verse 26, asked for the head of John the Baptist: 'The King', it says, 'was exceeding sorry'. He didn't want to see John dead, he feared him, he recognized God working in him.

Now later on in the gospel record we find that this man Herod was also supernaturally curious towards the Lord Jesus. If you look at Luke 23 and verse 8, we read there: 'When Herod saw Jesus, he was exceeding glad', this is at the trial of the Lord Jesus, after Pilate had sent Christ to Herod, 'for Herod was desirous to see him of a long season, because he had heard many things of him; and he hoped to have seen some miracle done by him'. Herod was
supernaturally curious, so he could not have been classed as an agnostic or an atheist - yet what I want you to see today is that though he was spiritually curious, and we could say 'believing' in a loose sense of the word, he lived and operated both in his private life, his personal life, and his political career on the basest of all levels. That's interesting, isn't it? Verse 26 shows us that again: though he was sorry that they had requested for the head of John the Baptist, 'yet for his oath's sake, and for their sakes which sat with him, he would not reject her'. He regretted having to take this action, cutting off John's head, but sadly his ego was greater than his regret.

Now how can we apply these very searing facts? Well, I think it's obvious that hearers of the word of God, at least many of them, are exactly like Herod. Most people would not say that they are atheists, they believe in some kind of deity. They might even believe in God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and they acknowledge the truth of God's word, some of them - but in their own personal lives and experience they choose to silence the voice of God's Spirit to their heart. Their minds give assent to the gospel, but their lives are an affront to it. Maybe they are supernaturally curious, they like to be tantalised and fascinated by supernatural power - healing, miracles, or about prophetic predictions, and they want to know what the Bible and the book of Revelation tells us about what's going to happen in the future. Their spiritual intrigue gives them a buzz, but their hearts remain untouched, unaffected by the Person, the claims, and the work of Jesus Christ the Son of God - and that is evidenced in the fact that their lives remain unchanged.

Herod is a prime example of this, and so we conclude upon his example that whatever people say - they might say: 'Well, I'm seeking the truth, and if I find the truth one day, well, I'll imbibe it and live it and do whatever it takes to accept it' - but in reality people, generally, aren't really that concerned about the truth. Do you accept that? People are more concerned with enjoying themselves in this life - and, incidentally, if the search for truth clashes with their search for pleasure, fulfilment, and satisfaction, what will they drop? They'll drop the truth. If you go to someone and say: 'I've got a message for you, and it's the truth of God, and if you accept it by faith it will revolutionise not only your present life but your whole eternal outlook'...but once you explain that that truth is going to affect their lives to such an extent that they'll have new desires, new passions, a new way of life, they say: 'Look, I'm happy the way things are at the moment, just don't bother me'. They might be the most unhappy person that you have ever met, and whilst they will acknowledge the facts, they don't want the effects of the man Christ Jesus on their life.

Herod is a dramatic illustration of this: John the Baptist was the voice of God to him, and Herod had him beheaded - he silenced God's voice in his life! Now he thinks John has been resurrected from the dead, and the pangs of conscience are now stabbing Herod for what he had done to the voice of God. He is finding out that the way of transgressors is hard, and eventually in Luke 23 that we have quoted, when he comes and stands before the Lord Jesus Christ himself, he comes before a silent Christ! He doesn't even speak to him!

Now let's bring out the lessons that we have here. First of all I want you to see the preacher, John the Baptist, the Lord's servant. Then secondly I want you to see the hearers, Herod and his house, for they are the great sinners. First of all the preacher, John the Baptist, the Lord's servant. Now the Lord's assessment of John the Baptist is conclusive, in Matthew 11 Jesus said: 'Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist' - what a commendation! In John 5:35, the Saviour is recorded as saying: 'He was a burning and a shining light'. Now if you're a preacher, there are many lessons for you in the character of John the Baptist - but we are all, in a sense, preachers, we
are witnesses to the truth of the gospel, we are called to gossip the gospel, and there is much that all of us as Christians can learn from John.

Here's a couple of things: we're told where his home was - not here, but in the other gospel records and at the beginning of this gospel itself, we're told that he lived in the wilderness. It's often a lonely occupation being a preacher, certainly if you're going to be a witness for Christ you will find estrangement among your peers and friends and relatives for giving testimony to Christ and His good news. His home was the wilderness, we see also his clothes described for us - he wore garments of camel's hair, and he wore a leather belt around his waist...just as Elijah, who was his forerunner and who was to be expected before Messiah, wore such clothing, so did John the Baptist. We read of his food: he ate locusts and wild honey. Now: his home, the wilderness; his clothes, camel's hair and a leather belt; his food, locusts and wild honey - they all depict for us the simplicity that marked this man. He lived a simple life, indeed he subordinated all these things to the glorious task of making Christ known.

Now, note what these things are. The Lord Jesus in His Sermon on the Mount said: 'Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than meat, and the body than clothing?'. What did John eat? What did he wear? Where did he live? Well, we've said it, one thing is certain: he didn't take much thought about them. He lived a simplistic life. One man has commented on him like this: 'To his hearers he reminded them not of the fashionable orators of the day, but of the ancient prophets who lived close to the great simplicities, and avoided the soft and effeminate luxuries which kill the soul' - what a statement! He avoided the soft and effeminate luxuries which kill the soul! His whole life, really, was a protest against the godlessness and self-serving materialism of his day. His life, not just his message, but his whole persona was a call to the people of God of separation: to be holy, to be distinct, to live for God not for themselves.

Now, boy, do we need that today! I'm deeply challenged by John in this regard. It was Bishop Quayle who had the remark made to him: 'Preaching is the art of making a sermon and delivering it', and he answered that statement like this, 'Why no, that is not preaching. Preaching is the art of making a preacher and delivering that'. How true. E.M. Bounds says it takes 20 years to make a message, because it takes 20 years to make a man. This man, John the Baptist, was filled with the Spirit of God from the womb, he was a Nazarite from birth, consecrated to God as a child, and he was completely committed to God the whole of his life - that's what every preacher should be, that's what every witness of Christ should be, that's what every Christian should be!

After the Lord Jesus Himself, John the Baptist, I think, is the model preacher in the word of God. Here's a couple of other things he was: he was a road builder, he prepared the way of the Lord. He was not making a name for himself, he was not pursuing a career, he was not building an empire around his ministry: he was building a road to somebody else. Some of you can remember the old telephone exchange, and whenever you reached the operator sometimes it took a while for them to connect you, but after saying that they were trying to do that, once they had achieved their objective their voice would fade out and you'd be left with the person with whom you wanted to speak. That's what John the Baptist was like: he was a voice in the wilderness, but his voice was only to get you to hear the voice of Christ, he was pointing towards another, he magnified the Lord in all things. He himself said: 'I must decrease, and Christ must increase':
'Preach Him to all, and cry in death: 
Behold, behold the Lamb'.

Not only was he a road builder, he was an axeman. In Matthew chapter 3 and verse 10 he said: 'Also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees: therefore every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire'. He was an axeman who got to the root of sin and exposed it for what it was. When I think of that, how he preached against sin, I'm reminded of Billy Sunday, that great evangelist who said: 'I'm against sin. I'll kick it as long as I've got a foot, I'll fight it as long as I've got a fist, I'll butt it as long as I've got a head, I'll bite it as long as I've got teeth. When I'm old, and fistless, and footless, and toothless, I'll gum it till I go to glory, and it goes home to perdition'. He hated sin, and he preached against it, and he was impartial to the audience that was before him. When John preached to religious leaders in Matthew 3 verse 7 we read that: 'He saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees come to his baptism, he said unto them, O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?'. Here in our passage, Mark 6, when he's standing before royalty he still preaches against their sin. He was not intimidated by people, he was not afraid to preach judgement. Matthew 3:12 says he spoke of Christ who would come: 'Whose fan is in his hand, and he will throughly purge his floor, and gather his wheat into the garner; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire'. Here in our portion, verse 18: 'John had said unto Herod, It is not lawful for thee to have thy brother's wife'. 'You're unlawfully married to your brother Philip's wife', and the force of the expression there is that John kept on repeating this charge! This wasn't a one-off message, no isolated rebuke: over and over again and again John laid the axe at the root of Herod's sin.

He preached against sin, but he could because of his own moral consistency. He didn't change his message with the times. Indeed, we would have to say that John the Baptist was the antithesis of the times in which he lived. His morality probably was the same, but he didn't dilute it. Hugh Latimer, that great martyr, before his death was appointed as Bishop of Worcester in the reign of Henry VIII, and it was the custom in those days for each new bishop to make presents to the King on New Year's Day. Latimer went with the rest of his Bishop brethren to make the usual offering, but instead of a purse of gold, Latimer presented the King with a New Testament in which there was a leaf, a page doubled down to this passage: Hebrews 13:4, 'Whoremongers and adulterers God will judge'. You know Henry had six wives? Latimer was a bit like John the Baptist, wasn't he? Fearless! Fearless to preach against sin! John Wesley, the great evangelist said: 'Give me 100 men who fear nothing but sin, and desire nothing but God, and I care not whether they be clergymen or laymen - they alone will shake the gates of hell'.

What was the result of such preaching? Well, some heard and confessed their sin, Matthew says, and John baptised them; and others heard and covered their sin, the religious establishment, and Herod and his house here. Now when we are praising such preaching like this, of course you realise that we are giving God's appraisal of it - but don't you think that this will win friends and influence people for you in the world today, or even in the church. No, no, no. It was Leonard Ravenhill who said: 'The man whose one word sermon is 'Repent', will eventually lose his head'. I think he's right.

So we have to move on from this preacher to the hearers, Herod and his house, the great sinners. It was the playwright, I think, who said: 'Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned' - and here we have a woman scorned. In verse 17, Herod had sent John the Baptist to prison for Herodias' sake. She wanted him dead, because he was continually preaching against their adultery. I believe, personally, verse 19 indicates that she could not kill John the Baptist
herself because Herod had put him in prison, and I believe Herod was trying to protect him from her. But verse 21 says, and one translation put it like this: 'on the strategic day', a day arrived when this vengeful but patient Queen received her moment. Royal feasts were extravagant things, often filled with much alcohol and immorality, and it was unthought of for a Gentile or Jewish mother to bring her daughter to dance before a group of men, and yet Herodias - because of her spite, her vengefulness and her grudge towards John the Baptist - actually encouraged her daughter Salome, that's what she's called in historical records, to go and dance in an erotic way before these men. The plan was that Herod would be so pleased, titillated and tipsy that, bombastically, he would promise something to the girl - we know it was up to half his own kingdom - and at that point she was to ask for the head of John the Baptist on a platter.

When it was fulfilled, the plan was hatched, in verse 26 we read: 'The King was exceeding sorry'. He was greatly distressed. Now mark this, the only other time we find that Greek expression in the New Testament is regarding the Lord Jesus Christ - Mark 14 - in Gethsemane, when He said: 'I am exceedingly sorrowful, even unto death'. He was extremely distressed, but please note: here is a man who knew what the truth was, but for the sake of his own house, and peace in his own house, and to save his own public face, he sold the truth. The book of Proverbs tells us: 'Buy the truth, and sell it not'.

What glee must have marked Herodias' face as she gloated over the gruesome sight of John the Baptist's head on the platter, his stone cold lips would never utter of her adultery again. I'm sure the tension was palpable in that palace home. Herod feared John, verse 20, he feared John - and it insinuates that he privately visited John in his prison and listened to his preaching. It seems that he was himself in a state of personal perplexity about what he should do. The Authorised says in verse 20: 'He did many things', that could be translated, 'He was greatly puzzled'. He recognized something special, something unique in this man, but he just wasn't prepared to go all the way with God!

The Lord Jesus does this in lives, in homes, and even in Christians' hearts. He said Himself: 'I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law. And a man's foes shall be they of his own household. He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me'. But Herod, like another King in the Old Testament this time, King Ahab, Herod allowed his wife to stir him up to do wickedly. There is a great parallel between Ahab and Jezebel, and Herod and Herodias. Jezebel, incidentally, also achieved her own evil objectives - killing Naboth for his vineyard. Here, like Ahab, Herod finds himself trapped. He knew the truth, but he wouldn't obey!

I wonder is there someone here, perhaps, this morning: you need to realise that if you keep denying the truth, whether you're an unbeliever or not, if you keep silencing the Spirit of God's voice in your heart there will come a day when you will get trapped. You might get trapped by a relationship - love will blossom, and then you start to choose the wrong rather than the right. You may get trapped because of a career, and Christ becomes second to it. One day your conscience used to be stirred because of the deals that you're doing, but eventually that conscience once stirred dies. That's what happened with Herod, that can happen to unbelievers who hear the Gospel over again and again, but do not obey, do not put their trust in Christ, and they become harder and it gets harder for them to be saved. But believer, don't think this has got nothing to do with you, because in our lives as Christians a neglected conscience will suffer a progressive process of desensitisation to God's voice, to the point where even as a Christian we can get to the stage where we no longer hear God
speaking, and we even resent when He does speak to us! It well behoves us, therefore, to be much in the word of God, and to cultivate a conscience that is void of offence toward God and men by filling our minds and hearts with God's word - but not only knowing it, doing it.

The next time we meet Herod Antipas in the Bible is when he is trying the Lord Jesus Christ. He hoped for Christ to perform him a miracle, yet the Lord would not even speak to him, let alone please him to do a miracle! Now Jesus knew what was in all men's hearts, and we have it in Luke that He called Herod Antipas a fox - what an apt description of him! The Lord knew he was a crafty man, the Lord knew that this King would try to gain the whole world at the expense of his own soul, and He even knew he was doing it. Unbelievers do that, Christians do that you know - they're willing to lose their life here on earth for Christ, that could have been gain for Christ. They'll go to heaven, sure, but they'll not live for Christ down here. This is a lesson, if ever there was one: those who lose their lives here to gain them in heaven, gain their life here as well in Christ; but those who protect, they think, their life down here and lose it up there, also often lose it down here as well. They try to grasp the whole world with both arms, and eventually - if they ever get it - it eludes them. That happened to Herod Antipas in AD 39. Herod Agrippa, Antipas' own nephew denounced his uncle to the emperor, and Antipas was deposed and sent into exile - lost his power, lost his authority, lost his world.

In verse 29, John's faithful disciples heard what had happened and they claimed the corpse of John the Baptist. They buried it, and went and told the Lord Jesus. What a sad, sad story. Can we sum up our application? What do we learn from the preacher, John the Baptist, the Lord's servant? If we are going to be the Lord's servants we need to be simple, simple lives that speak to a dying world. We need to be truthful, truthful about sin, truthful about our Saviour. Thirdly we need to be faithful, even if it means being faithful unto death - whatever the cost, we must do it! This is the gospel of the suffering Servant of Jehovah, the Lord Jesus Christ - and here is John the Baptist, the forerunner, and he's a suffering servant, and we will be suffering servants for we are to carry our cross! What a lesson:

'Wouldst thou be great, then lowly serve; Wouldst thou go up, go down; But go as low as ever you will, The Highest, has gone lower still'.

You know, the one encouraging feature of this story is that the voice may be silenced, but the message cannot be overthrown - hallelujah! Like every martyr, John the Baptist's words did not fall to the ground. William Tyndale, the father of our Bible in the English language, when they were collecting wood to burn him he was crying out: 'Lord, open the King of England's eyes!', and He did. He died, but his work still exists in the Authorised Version of the scriptures. Ridley and Latimer, as they were being fastened to the stake - Ridley's own brother tying a bag of gunpowder around both their necks! - and as the burning faggot was laid at the feet of Ridley, Latimer spoke his famous words: 'Be of good comfort Master Ridley, and play the man, we shall this day light such a candle, by God's grace, in England as I trust shall never be put out'. The voice may be silenced, but the message cannot be overthrown.

Are we hearing the Spirit's voice calling us to be suffering servants? Are we obeying? I'll tell you: if you are, you will do a work for Christ that will last for all eternity.

Father we ask for grace and for help, for O we need, we need a greater capacity to receive what You're saying to us - because we feel it overwhelms us. How unwilling we are to tread the path the Master went, and yet we realise that only he who bears the cross may hope to
wear the glorious crown. We thank You for those who are saved in our presence here this morning. For those who are not, Lord, who are hearing Your voice calling them and have not yet received You, may they do it now before they don't hear the voice any more. But Lord, so many of Your people, preacher included, hear Your voice calling us to this crucifixion road; and how often we ignore it, and it is our own eternal loss. Lord help us, help us to deny ourselves, the world forsake, take up our cross and humbly follow Thee. Amen.

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Turn with me please to Mark's gospel again, to chapter 6. Mark chapter 6, and of course, if you're visiting, you will be unaware that we are travelling through Mark's gospel. We have been 30 or so weeks in it now, and now we reach verse 30 of chapter 6 - the subject, apologies to the Tape Ministry for not giving you this in advance, you'll need to catch this one - I'll go slow! 'The Rhythm Of Rest And Readiness In Service' - now some of you younger ones at the back will be able to catch that for them! It will become clear why I have chosen that title this morning for this passage.

Mark 6 verse 30: "And the apostles gathered themselves together unto Jesus, and told him all things, both what they had done, and what they had taught. And he said unto them, Come ye yourselves apart into a desert place, and rest a while: for there were many coming and going, and they had no leisure so much as to eat. And they departed into a desert place by ship privately. And the people saw them departing, and many knew him, and ran afoot thither out of all cities, and outwent them, and came together unto him. And Jesus, when he came out, saw much people, and was moved with compassion toward them, because they were as sheep not having a shepherd: and he began to teach them many things".

Now as we will see, in the will of the Lord, next week: verses 30 to 34 come just before that great miracle of the feeding of the 5,000, a miracle that took place round about the beginning of the third year of the public ministry of our Lord Jesus. Now if you can remember where we've come from immediately in this chapter 6, you will remember that the apostles have just returned to Capernaum from their first preaching mission. If you look back at verse 7, you remember it says that the Lord: 'called unto him the twelve, and began to send them forth by two and two; and gave them power over unclean spirits' - and we see the result in verses 12 and 13, 'And they went out, and preached that men should repent. And they cast out many devils, and anointed with oil many that were sick, and healed them'. Now of course our last study considered the execution of John the Baptist in the preceding verses to ours today. It would appear that it was the news of the death, the execution of John the Baptist, that terminated this first trip in ministry of the apostles.

So we read in verse 30: 'The apostles gathered themselves together unto Jesus, and told him all things, both what they had done, and what they had taught'. Now, when I was meditating upon these verses, I couldn't get any further than verse 30 - because I believe within it there is a great exhortation for us all. This was a time of sorrow for the Lord's disciples and for the Lord Himself. The greatest one that was ever naturally born of woman, that great prophet and forerunner of our Lord Jesus who would prepare the way before Messiah, had been martyred. So at this time of sorrow, verse 30 tells us they went to Jesus. That's what we should do. Not only was it a time of sorrow, it was a time of success - having accomplished all they did, they told Him all things that they had said and done. Now, a word of caution: we shouldn't tell everyone else what we do and what we teach, and yet we see here that the Lord wants to
know what we are involved in concerning His service. I thought of that wonderful verse in Song of Solomon, I think, which depicts our Lord Jesus Christ and His church, and He saying to her speaks: ‘O my dove, that art in the clefts of the rock, in the secret places of the stairs, let me see thy countenance, let me hear thy voice; for sweet is thy voice, and thy countenance is comely’. The Lord wants to see us, He wants to hear us, He wants to be with us in times of sorrow and in times of success. It appears here, immediately, that the Lord wanted to discuss with these apostles their ministry for Him, and indeed prepare them for the next mission that they would be engaged in.

Now, imagine how they felt. In one respect they were probably exhilarated by the success of how the Lord had gifted them, had used them - but in another guard, it appears that they were weary and exhausted by the exercise of their gifts in the service of the Lord. I think it's wonderful just to see in our portion today how caring and compassionate the Lord Jesus was toward His exhausted servants. This, of course, is the gospel of the Suffering Servant, you remember; and it shows us how He suffered and how He served. It tells us how we must serve, and how we must suffer - but it's not a sadistic suffering. The Lord Jesus understands, and He knows how exhausting it is to serve at times, and so He recognized their need for rest and quietness, and He took them by boat to a secluded area on the shore of Galilee - a little place, we believe, where the Jordan empties into the Galilee, and it is a solitary, deserted place.

These apostles needed time out. The Lord Jesus perceived that they needed time out, and He led them to that place where they would get it. Now of course, if it ended there that would be very idealistic - but there was a great problem that arose. The overzealous crowd would not leave our Lord alone, nor His apostles. I imagine that when they saw the familiar sail going down Galilee, young and old started to charge north along the edge of the lake. As they journeyed, I imagine the numbers, indeed the multitude, gathered: hundreds of villagers joined them on their pursuit. You can just see them shouting and gesturing to one another: 'Jesus is in that boat, let's follow Him and see where He’s going to'. They wanted to see a miracle, they wanted to see a great work, hear great words. Finally, according to Mark 6 and indeed the other gospel records, thousands converged on Bethsaida where the Lord Jesus was intent on going to get some rest for Himself and for His disciples.

Now the remarkable thing to me in all of this instance is that, in spite of the interruptions to the Lord's plans and the disciples' plans, the Lord welcomed them all. Indeed, it says He taught them and He healed them. Now there are many lessons that we can learn from our four verses today, and we'll try our best. I want to summarise them under two heads. The first is this: these Scriptures teach us that there is a need for a rest, there is a need for rest - particularly the first two verses. We'll look at them in detail in a moment, but let me remind you that rest is a creation principle. Right back at the very beginning of all things, the Lord ordained that one day in seven should observe rest. He rested on that day, we ought to rest on one in seven. Now, that of course was not a rest of exhaustion, it was a rest of completion - the Lord had finished all that He was to do. But we suffer exhaustion, and therefore it is incumbent upon us physically, emotionally, mentally, and - as we shall see - spiritually, to take a day during the week, at least a day, and rest.

Now that principle was enshrined more concretely in the law that was given to the children of Israel in the book of Exodus. The Israelites were encouraged to take a day, the Sabbath day, and that would become a sign between God and His covenant people that they were being faithful to His law. Then when we go on to Leviticus we find that even the land, the earth, was to rest every seventh year. So even beside the legal elements of the law of Moses, we see
that there is an overarching principle that transcends every era and epoch, that we as human beings in a great creation have been created to rest - we need it.

Now of course immediately we address such a subject, there are two dangers that are obvious. The first danger is that of constant activity. We need rest because none of us can keep going, working all the time. The second obvious danger is that you can have too much rest - too much withdrawal is not only unnecessary, but undesirable. So what we are speaking of here, as my title suggests, is a rhythm, it is the rhythm of the Christian life to rest, to also meet with God secretly in a secret place, and then it is also to go from that rest into the marketplace to serve the Lord.

Now let's deal with the first danger first of all, of constant activity. Now let me say first of all that 'rest' here can be understood in two ways - this, of course, was physical rest that the Lord Jesus was encouraging the apostles to partake of. But it was also spiritual rest, because they were resting physically, but they were resting in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ. Now, you could have physical rest without spiritual rest. You obviously are aware of how that could be? And you can have spiritual rest without physical rest. You can be engaged in a spiritual exercise that does not entail switching your brain off, or lying down, or being on a seat - but nevertheless you are receiving spiritual nourishment and activity and refreshment. You can have these both together - they each can stand alone, physical and spiritual rest, but we see in the life of our Lord Jesus Christ that many a time He went into a desert solitary place, and there He rested, but His rest was engaged in prayer and He received a great rest in solitude and meditation before His Heavenly Father.

Now no one can work without rest, and it is true equally that no one can live the Christian life unless they give themselves times not only of physical rest, but of times with God - because God's work has to be done in God's strength. So there is a rhythm, the rhythm of rest and readiness in the service of the Lord. Now it is my belief that our rhythm is likely to be more service and less rest. I'm not speaking now of physical rest, but I'm speaking concerning our time spent with the Lord. I reckon that is the imbalance that we experience: we are out of rhythm because we're not resting with the Lord enough. Now obviously there is the other extreme, and that affects others, people who are not serving the Lord because they're physically resting too much. It depends which sense in which we look at it, but irrespective of what sense we look at it, we will look at it and see many lessons we get out of it.

The first thing I see about this need for rest was that it was a conscious decision. Please look at this, in verse 31 the Lord Jesus says: 'Come ye yourselves'. Now listen: this rest was not just an absence of work - for some of you that is Saturday or even Sunday, or a Friday afternoon or some other day in the week where you cease employment and therefore rest ensues. This was more than just an absence of work, this was a decision to suspend work. They decided to stop what they were doing and draw aside. Now some people think: 'I'm going to wait for a day when it will be convenient for me to take a rest', or spiritually, 'I'm going to wait for a day when it will be convenient for me to draw close to the Lord'. What happens? It never happens! Waiting for something that is within our own power to do is ridiculous! We ourselves have the choice to, as James said, draw near to God and He will draw near to us.

Now the word 'rest' here is in the middle voice, now that simply means that as it is used here it means 'to give oneself rest'. There is that slant: that they did this of their own volition, of course guided by the Lord, but they themselves had to make a conscious decision to draw aside and rest physically and spiritually. Now conversely to that the word 'leisure', what they
couldn't get at the end of verse 31, leisure enough even to eat, that literally means 'an opportune time'. So the word 'rest' means 'to give oneself rest', to make a conscious decision; but this word 'leisure' means 'an opportune time', an opportunity that would just arise - do you see the difference? They couldn't get an opportunity to arise to eat, to rest, because opportunities to do those things often, when you're serving the Lord the way the apostles did, don't arise - you have to make them.

So it was a conscious decision: they had to make time to rest and to be before the Lord. Can I ask you: do you do that? Oh, I know we're all busy, and maybe some of you with families, you've got responsibilities. Maybe you're looking after elderly relatives or something like that, or maybe your career is taking off and you're very, very busy. All these things, everybody has their own encroachments of time - but, you see, you've got to make time. Whether it is early, early in the morning, or late into the evening, you've got to get alone with God.

Well, there's a second thing I note: it was a conscious decision, but they went into a solitary place. Now the Authorised Version when it says 'a desert place', it's not meaning that it was the wilderness, it literally is the sense 'a deserted place', a place where they would not be disturbed, where it would be tranquil and would be conducive to a physical and spiritual time of solitude. Now, do you have such a place? You need it. I have got my study, maybe you have got your kitchen, maybe you've got the bedroom, maybe you've got the park, maybe it's the car - I don't know where it is, I don't know when it is, but one thing is certain: you need such a place. Not only must you make time, you must create a place to get away from the hustle and bustle. Now, if you don't have such a place, you need to do all in your power to get one. That's what our Lord did and His apostles - not only did they go into a solitary place, but they had an innovative strategy for getting there. Look at the verses: 'They departed into a deserted place by ship privately'. Drastic measures had to be employed for them to accomplish this desired end to get alone! They took a boat and sailed! Sometimes that's the only thing we can do: to privately disappear to be alone with God. Sometimes you need to hide to get this rest!

This rest is a great stress reliever, and that's why the Lord Jesus desired it for His servants. We see that when you look down at the end of verse 31: 'there were many coming and going, and they had no leisure so much as to eat'. Now we've seen this before, almost an identical situation in Mark chapter 3 where the disciples and the Lord didn't have time to eat because of the many people that were coming to them to be served and to be healed and ministered to. I'm asking the question of myself and of all of us: could one of the reasons be why there's so much stress and strain and among Christian people today, the fact that we do not take enough time out of our busy schedules to have both physical and spiritual rest - physical rest and spiritual devotion. I imagine that many of the breakdowns that we suffer, and heart attacks that we experience, might not be as common if we followed the exhortation of our Lord - the busiest of us - and made a conscious decision to regularly seek out a solitary place, even if it needs innovation and strategy to get it, in order that we might be relieved of much of the strain and stress that our ordered lives bring upon us.

It was Vance Havner, of course, who famously said: 'If you don't come apart and rest, you will come apart'. Church life can be extremely busy, and you know that the more you have to give the more people will take from you. In your service for the Lord, perhaps in this assembly or in another capacity, you know that the people who are doing the work are usually the ones that are given more work to do. Therefore you have to have checks and balances in your life, as I have found to my own detriment, where you take rest, physical and spiritual, before God.
'Mary had a little lamb,  
T'was given her to keep,  
But then it joined the local church  
And died for lack of sleep'.

That's a good one, isn't it? How true it can be! Even God's Servant Son, think of it, took time to rest. He made a conscious decision to fellowship with His friends, to find renewal from His Heavenly Father - it didn't just arise, it had to be taken. Please note finally under this heading: it was a conscious decision, it was a solitary place, it was an innovative strategy, it was a stress reliever, but it was a specific period. 'Come ye apart yourselves, and rest a while'. Now that leads us very well into the second danger. The first danger, you remember, was that we are constantly in activity and therefore we need to rest; but the second danger is that we have too much withdrawal, too much rest. Now, of course this is less of a problem if we're talking about devotional rest, spending time before God - that should be encouraged, and I imagine that that's something that we need to do, all of us, more. But even that we cannot do forever. There comes a time, as we will see in the life of our Lord Jesus, and in every servant of God, when we must be occupied with other things, other than prayer and meditation.

Now take the rest for the body first of all. Resting the body is only for the purpose of bettering our work for the Lord, that's why we're given it. Richard Baxter, when he was writing to some ministers, said these amazing words - and let me substitute the word 'minister' for 'Christian' so that it can apply to everyone here - 'Recreation to the Christian must be as whetting is with the mower', now 'whetting' is an old word for 'sharpening', so 'Recreation to the Christian must be as sharpening to the lawnmower, that is, to be used only so far as is necessary for his work'. He goes on, 'May a physician in plague-time take any more relaxation or recreation than is necessary for his life, when so many are expecting his help in a case of life and death? Will you stand by and see sinners gasping under the pangs of death and say: 'God does not require me to make myself a drudge to save them?''. Is this the voice of Christian compassion or rather of sensual laziness and diabolical cruelty?'. Our physical rest is meant to better our service for the Lord, but if we think about resting in the presence of the Lord in a devotional sense, of course that is much more important - but we still ought not to make the mistake of the monks and the mystics, thinking that that alone will do us. Oh, God knows that we need more pray-ers, and we need more meditators and people who are in communion with God - and that is a great lack in this day and age - but that is not all that there is to do. The Lord said: 'I must work the works of Him that has sent me while it is day, for the night cometh when no man can work'.

Well, there is a principle that we have found here that our Lord Jesus enshrines for us, and it is this: there is a need for rest, but now we're just about to see that there is another principle that regulates that first principle. There is a need for rest, but there is something that overrules the need for rest, and that is the need for help. The Lord was interrupted in His rest because of the need. Look down at it, verse 34, the Lord Jesus saw a people, those who had followed and gathered around Him like sheep without a shepherd. Now let us pause for a moment, because this is amazing to me - many a time I have resented interruptions of my time, invasions in my space, but we never find the Lord Jesus with such an attitude! Indeed, in John 4 and verse 6 the Lord Jesus was weary on a journey, and He sat down at the well at Sycar at the sixth hour, and He took that as an opportunity to witness to the woman, the woman at the well. In His weariness, stopping to rest, He didn't ignore the need for help.
It's the same, you remember, if you recall in our recent studies in chapter 4 of this gospel, you remember the storm in the Lake. In verses 38 and 39 we read: 'The Lord was in the hinder part of the ship, asleep on a pillow: and the disciples awake him, and say unto him, Master, carest thou not that we perish? And he arose, and rebuked the wind, and said unto the sea, Peace, be still. And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm'. The storm could not awaken the Lord Jesus, but the cry of His faithless disciples aroused Him! There was a need for rest, but there was a need for help - and when the need for help arose, the need for rest was demoted.

Of course, the Lord desired to rest here in Mark 6, it was His suggestion. He desired to rest in the hinder of the boat, He desired to rest at the well of Sycar, and He earned it - He was ministering morning, noon and night! But when it was interrupted, He didn't resent it! We're not like that, at least I know I'm not - why are we not like that? Well, very simply: because we do not see the crowd as sheep having no shepherd. We do not see the need. The hymn writer said:

'Let me look at the crowd, as my Saviour did,  
Till my eyes with tears grow dim.  
Let me look and see the wandering sheep,  
And love them for love of Him!'.

Now please note here, because I don't want to put a guilt trip on people that is unhelpful - those of you who are hammering yourselves into the ground serving the Lord, you need to remember: you are not the Lord. I know that's obvious, but it's something we often forget. We're so zealous to become more like the Lord, that we forget that in this life, in these bodies, with these dispositions, we will never ever attain the perfectness and the likeness of Him in fullness. So we need to rest more than He needed to rest! If we don't, we will become irritable. Also, there is so much need that it's not possible to meet all of it, even if we never ate or slept - as the disciples experienced at this moment. I recall what W.P. Nicholson was accosted with at the door when he announced that he was going on his vacation of a couple of weeks holiday. A woman at the door said: 'Mr Nicholson, the devil never takes a holiday', and he said, 'I would be like the devil if I didn't take it!' - that's exactly right, isn't it? We are not the Lord, we want to get to be like the Lord, but we've got to be realistic as well concerning the frames that we have, the dispositions that we been given by God, and the work of sanctification that's still needed to be done in us - but even though I say that, and rest is of the greatest importance, the need for help must always be allowed to interrupt our rest. In other words, others needs must be above our own rest, or others needs must be above our own needs. Is that the way we live?

Now how does that apply to devotion, because you might think it sounds like I'm saying that, you know, if there is a work to be done, forget about your prayer time - don't think that's what I'm saying at all! We must protect our times of devotion with the Lord, and like the Lord Jesus - if it means getting up during the night, or a great while before day - we must make sure that we have it. But even in the midst of those experiences, if the need arises, we don't say: 'Go away! I'm praying!', we meet it. This is balanced Christianity. We will become imbalanced if we overemphasise work at the expense of rest, or if we emphasise rest at the expense of work. We see this holy equilibrium in the life of our Lord Jesus Christ: devotion that does not result in action is not real devotion; prayer that does not result in work is not real prayer. So, as someone has said well, 'We must never seek the fellowship of God to avoid the fellowship of men, but fit ourselves better for it'. We are with God that we might be with God and go to men.
So here we see the rhythm of the Christian life, it's like the natural life. You cannot work well unless you have rested well. Equally, you cannot rest well unless you have worked well, till you're tired. The Christian rhythm is a continuous going into the presence of God, and moving from the presence of God into the presence of men, and then coming from the presence of those men into the presence of God again. What principles the Lord Jesus lays down for us: the need for rest, but overruling that principle is the need for help. If you have a compassionate heart, one thing is sure: you'll never have an idle hand, for you'll see the need. Whilst you are realistic to know that you can't meet every need that there is, you will do your best to make a difference. The more you care, the busier you will become; the more effective your gift is and your ministry is to others, the more people will come to be ministered to by you and be served from you. How important it is that we get this rhythm of rest and readiness in service, that we strike the balance!

Along with the great danger of being engaged in much service but little time of devotion before the Lord, I think the greater danger, perhaps, today, is being engaged in much physical rest and no work for the Master. I'm going to make a controversial statement - surprise, surprise - your retirement is not a time for you to indulge your senses and your flesh. It is a God-given opportunity for you to serve the Lord in ways that you have never served Him before. If you want to lynch me for that afterwards, that's OK. We're here for Him: 'Ye are not your own'. Your time is not your own, your money is not your own, your gifts are not your own, your home is not your own - you are bought with a price.

How is the rhythm in your life? Only those who serve, like the apostles served here, are warranted - truly warranted - to accept the invitation of the Master: 'Come ye yourselves apart, and rest a while'. I'm finished, but there are wonderful words that I want us to sing as our closing hymn, and they encapsulate everything I've just said, everything that this passage of Scripture is all about. Listen to the words before you look them up, listen to them:

'Come ye yourselves apart and rest awhile,
Weary, I know it, of the press and throng;
Wipe from your brow the sweat and dust of toil,
And in My quiet strength again be strong.

Come ye aside from all the world holds dear,
For converse which the world has never known;
Alone with Me and with My Father here,
With Me and with My Father not alone.

Come tell me all that ye have said and done,
Your victories and failures, hopes and fears;
I know how hardly souls are wooed and won,
My choicest wreathes are always wet with tears.

Come ye and rest, the journey is too great,
And ye will faint beside the way and sink;
The bread of life is here for you to eat,
And here for you the wine of love to drink.

Then, fresh from converse with your Lord, return,
And work till daylight softens into even;
The brief hours are not lost in which ye learn
More of your Master and His rest in heaven'.

Wonderful words.

'With that deep hush subduing all,
Our words and works that drown
The tender whisper of Thy call,
As noiseless let Thy blessing fall
As fell Thy manna down.

Drop Thy still dews of quietness,
Till all our strivings cease;
Take from our souls the strain and stress,
And let our ordered lives confess
The beauty of Thy peace.

Breathe through the heats of our desire
Thy coolness and Thy balm;
Let sense be dumb, let flesh retire;
Speak through the earthquake, wind, and fire,
O still, small voice of calm'

Amen.

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ow do turn with me to Mark chapter 6 please. If you're a visitor, we have been going through Mark's gospel now for many weeks, and we have now reached the famous parable of the feeding of the 5,000. I've entitled my message this morning: 'The Servant's Unlimited Supplies' - and you can put the apostrophe wherever you like in the word 'servants', because it could speak of the Servant of the Lord here who provided the unlimited supplies, or it could speak of the disciples who received them and distributed them among the crowd. In the same way, we have the ability to do that also - so put the apostrophe wherever you like - 'The Servant's Unlimited Supplies'.

We read from verse 30 please, these verses we dealt with last week - verse 30 to 34 - but they do lead up to this great miracle. Verse 30: "And the apostles gathered themselves together unto Jesus, and told him all things, both what they had done, and what they had taught. And he said unto them, Come ye yourselves apart into a desert", or deserted, "place, and rest a while: for there were many coming and going, and they had no leisure so much as to eat. And they departed into a desert place by ship privately. And the people saw them departing, and many knew him, and ran afoot thither out of all cities, and outwent them, and came together unto him. And Jesus, when he came out, saw much people, and was moved with compassion toward them, because they were as sheep not having a shepherd: and he began to teach them many things. And when the day was now far spent, his disciples came unto him, and said, This is a desert place, and now the time is far passed: Send them away, that they may go into the country round about, and into the villages, and buy themselves bread: for they have nothing to eat. He answered and said unto them, Give ye them to eat. And they say unto him, Shall we go and buy two hundred pennyworth of bread, and give them to eat? He saith unto them, How many loaves have ye? go and see. And when they knew, they say, Five, and two fishes. And he commanded them to make all sit down by companies upon the green grass. And they sat down in ranks, by hundreds, and by fifties. And when he had taken the five loaves and the two fishes, he looked up to heaven, and blessed, and brake the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before them; and the two fishes divided he among them all. And they did all eat, and were filled. And they took up twelve baskets full of the fragments, and of the fishes. And they that did eat of the loaves were about five thousand men" - and we'll end our reading there at verse 44.

Now, as I said to you last week, this incident takes place around the beginning of the third year of the ministry of our Lord. This miracle in particular is recorded in all four Gospels. Now that, right away, would tell us that it is of great importance. I think a series could be taken on this parable on its own, and yet we've only got this morning. It was spring time, we know that because the grass is green only at spring time in Palestine, and it was getting late - almost dark - and around that time of the year the sun sets about 6 p.m. So because it was nearing dark, it was probably between 4 and 6 in the afternoon. The crowd that had followed Him - we read about that in verses 30 to 34 - is the crowd on which He had compassion and taught, even though He was going for a rest with His disciples, He interrupted that rest to teach them. Now that same crowd that He had compassion on and taught, are hungry.
The apostles, I imagine, must have been even hungrier than they - because, as you look at verse 31, you will see that the reason why they took a retreat to that particular place was because with 'many coming and going', at the end of verse 31, 'they had no leisure so much as to eat'. So the likelihood is they were the hungriest of them all. Now I don't know what happens to you when you get tired and hungry, but the tendency is that we become irritable - at least my wife does...no, I shouldn't say that! We all do, don't we? The same crowd that drew compassion out of the Lord Jesus brought indignation from the disciples, isn't that interesting? They annoyed them. They were tired, hungry, they just wanted a break - it wasn't that they didn't want to serve the Lord, and they didn't want to serve the people, but too much of a good thing - well, they were having it, and they needed time out.

Now at times we can be like that, as we saw last week, people at times can be viewed by us as an intrusion on us - and we need to learn to have compassion like our Lord Jesus. Perhaps we have not yet learned, and I myself have not yet learned to look with the Lord's eyes upon the people who are as sheep without a shepherd. But the disciples viewed them as a bit of a problem, an annoyance, and we must never view people in the world like that - it's so easy to do it, but we must learn to be like our Lord.

There's a lovely story concerning D.L. Moody, the great evangelist, who ministered of course in Moody Memorial in Chicago. He set up a great Sunday School in that city, and children came to it from everywhere, and they often passed by other churches to get to his Sunday School. When asked why he walked so far to attend Moody's, one boy replied: 'Because they love a fellow over there'. Children can tell the difference, can't they? The unsaved can tell the difference with Christians who say they love the lost, and Christians who really do love the lost. Well, one of the greatest miracles that was ever performed would not have happened if the disciples had stuck to their plan to rest. Think about that.

Now I want you to note, please, the dialogue between the disciples and the Lord, because it really is very informative and there are so many lessons that we're going to be able to take from it just now. Look at verse 36, we see the disciples' words to the Lord: 'Send them away', send the crowd away that they may 'buy themselves bread, for they have nothing to eat'. Send them all away to get bread, because they're hungry. Now, if you look down to verse 37 you see the Lord's dialogue with the disciples, the Lord said to them: 'You give them bread to eat'. They say to the Lord: 'Send them all away, because they're hungry'; the Lord says to them: 'You buy them bread to eat'. Now they say again to Him: 'Shall we go and buy two hundred pennyworth', or two hundred denarii, 'of bread, and give them to eat?'. Now I'm only asking a question: was there a tone of sarcasm there? 'Do You think we've got 200 pennies to go and buy a crowd like this all the bread that they need to satisfy their hunger?'.

Now we know from later on in this passage, if you look at verse 52, in the next miracle - that we'll look at, God willing, next week - where the Lord walks upon the water, that when they marvelled at that miracle Mark makes this very informative remark at the end of the verse: 'their hearts were hardened'. Their hearts were hardened when they considered the miracle of the loaves. So the miracle before the walking upon the water is the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000, and the disciples didn't get it because their hearts were hardened! Their hearts were hardened to those who were like sheep without a shepherd, and their hearts were hardened to the spiritual illumination the Lord Jesus was trying to shine upon them. 'Shall we go and buy two hundred pennyworth of bread, and give them to eat? Ridiculous!'..

Then look finally at the Lord's dialogue again with the disciples, He says: 'How many loaves have ye? go and see'. We'll see the implication of that in a moment or two, but what I want
you to see is, first of all: the disciples' problem. This was their problem, now don't forget this: they thought that the crowd had to leave the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ in order to be fed. That was their problem: 'They need to go away to get bread somewhere, because they're not going to get it here'. Now here is the lesson that the Lord Jesus taught them, and He's going to teach us now: He can miraculously provide the need, and with more to spare.

Now let's look at what He taught them, and how He taught them it. Several lessons they were taught in a progression: the first thing He wanted them to face was their own inability to meet the need. I believe that's why the Lord said to them: 'Give ye them bread' - do you see it? 'You do it!' - I don't want to put words in the mouth of our Lord Jesus, but I think the thought is: 'Well, you clever guys who think that people need to go out from my presence to have their needs met, you meet their needs, you devise a plan, you supply their necessity. Can you do it?'. They had to face their own helplessness - now, what a lesson there is there! All of us, whoever you are here today, whether you're a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ or not, both categories of people need to face their own helplessness.

Just say, for instance, that you're not a Christian, you've never trusted Christ, you've never been born again - well, there's a great gospel aspect to this parable, because it's a picture of how the Saviour, the Lord Jesus has given Himself to the world as the Bread of Life. The world is starving spiritually, they need a Saviour, their sin is destroying them - and He is given to the world by God, that His body might be broken that men and women and boys and girls might have eternal life. In fact, the words that are used in this miracle are highly suggestive of the Lord's Supper, which of course commemorates His death. If you look at verse 41, look at the words: He had taken the bread, He blessed, He broke, He gave - very similar, isn't it? Now, in a sense, it hasn't any relation to the Lord's Table, but it certainly alludes to what Christ was doing at the cross.

Now I want to ask you: have you realised your own helplessness? Like Toplady, when he said in his hymn:

'Nothing in my hands I bring,  
Simply to Thy cross I cling;  
Naked, come to Thee for dress;  
Helpless look to Thee for grace;  
Foul, I to the fountain fly;  
Wash me, Saviour, or I die'.

Well, you need to get to that place if you've never been. There's no other place you can go to find eternal life, to be fed, than the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ. But Christians need to face this lesson as well, particularly in their service for the Lord - we are helpless! Now the money that would have been necessary to feed all these people was 200 pennyworth of bread, some people think that's 200 denarii, and some scholars say that 200 denarii - a denarius being a day's wage - would mean 200 days wages. Others believe it actually comprised a year's wage for the average worker. Now think about this - what's an average wage for a year in our country? That's what was going to be needed to feed all these people in relative terms! So you can see how ridiculous it looked to the disciples.

Well, not only that, but they were in a deserted place, there were no markets there and it was too late to go into the villages to find any. So the Lord says to them - that they would realise their helplessness - 'Give ye them', and when they couldn't give, He said: 'Well, how many loaves have you then among this great company?'. Now John chapter 6 tells us that it was
Andrew who found the lad with the five loaves and two fish - huh, it's laughable, isn't it? That was nowhere near what was needed to meet the necessity! Looking at this predicament from a human standpoint, this was an impossible situation - but looking at it through the eyes of faith, this was an opportunity to bring glory to God. Now here's a lesson that we all need to learn: man extremity is always God's opportunity, but man's extremity must be the acknowledgement of our own helplessness.

How do we look at things in our lives that seem to be impossible? Maybe you're in a situation just like that now, maybe you're not saved and you think it's impossible for you to be saved because of all the knots you've put in a tangle in your past, things you have sown and you feel you're going to reap, or just hurdles you have of intellect or faith that you just don't think can be reconciled. Or maybe you're a Christian, and you're serving the Lord, and there seems to be impossible situations for you. Or maybe you're experiencing an impossible situation in health, or with your business, or family or something - I don't know what it is, but like Moses, you feel, standing at the Red Sea, that the armies are coming from behind you, there's no option of going right or left, and forward is in absolute impossibility! Well, those are the situations God loves to manifest Himself in.

Annie Johnson Flint has written many, many beautiful poems. One of her poems goes like this:

'Have you come to the Red Sea place in your life,
Where, in spite of all you can do,
There is no way out, there is no way back,
There is no other way but through?

Then wait on the Lord with a trust serene
Till the night of your fear is gone;
He will send the wind, He will heap the floods,
When He says to your soul, 'Go on'.

He wanted them to face their own inability to meet the need. Secondly, He wanted them to offer up their weaknesses to Him. He took their five loaves and two fish, and He made something out of them - but He took their insufficiency, and He still takes our insufficiencies and weaknesses that He might manifest His strength. It's not enough to say: 'Well, I've just nothing to give, so I'll not give it' - no, He wants us to give our weakness, and to offer up what we have to Him: 'Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men. For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are' - why? Why is this God's economy, to take our weaknesses and to do something with it? Paul tells us: 'That no flesh should glory in his sight'. Again he says: 'We have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us'.

Paul, in his own personal experience, was told: 'My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong'. F. F. Bruce paraphrased that last statement this way: 'My power is
most fully displayed when my people are weak'. My power is most fully displayed when my people are weak. He wanted them to offer up their weaknesses to Him: five loaves. If you're into numerology, five can mean at times 'life', the number of life. Two, for the two fish, often means 'the opposite', or 'another'. So when you put these two together, what you have is five, 'life'; and two, 'the other' to life, which is death. When our resources die the Christ of God has the ability to bring life, even from death itself.

'When we have exhausted our store of endurance,
When our strength has failed ere the day is half done,
When we reach the end of our hoarded resources,
Our Father's full giving is only begun'.

That's the way God works, and they had to learn it. If we will only give to the Lord what we have in our weakness, He can use it for Himself and for His own glory. Think of the book of Judges, all of them had weaknesses - broken men, Ehud, for example, was handicapped as far as the civilisation in his day was concerned, he was left-handed and that was seen to be a handicap. Yet he slew Eglon, and he delivered the people and overcame the Moabites. Gideon was similar - in Judges 7 verse 2: 'The LORD said unto Gideon, The people that are with thee are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hands, lest Israel vaunt themselves against me, saying, Mine own hand hath saved me'. So Gideon had to be disadvantaged, and his troops were taken from 32,000 to 10,000 to 300 - why? So that it would be seen that God had done this great thing! They were armed with nothing but pitchers, lamps and trumpets, and they trounced the Midianites. David stood before the giant, what did he have? Five stones and a sling.

I read this many years ago, and it's wonderful: 'The Lord said to Abel: 'What is in thy hand?', 'Nothing but a wee lamb', and he offered it to God, and a sweet smelling savour came to God's nostrils. 'Moses, what is in thy hand?', said the Lord; 'Nothing but a staff, Lord, to tend my flock'. 'Take it and use it for me', said the Lord - and with that he wrought more things than great Egypt had ever seen. 'Mary, what is in your hand?'. 'Nothing but a pot of sweet smelling ointment', and with it she anointed the Holy One of God, and the fragrance filled the house and the world, for the story is recounted wherever the gospel is preached. 'Poor widow, what is in thy hand?'. 'Only two mites, Lord', but all she had, she gave it - and her story has prompted the humblest soul in giving all that they have. 'What is in thy hand, Dorcas?'. 'Only a needle, Lord'. 'Take it and use it for me', and so she did - warming the poor and the needy of Joppa. 'Little lad, what is in your hand?'. 'Just my lunch, Lord'. 'Give it to me, and I will feed more than 5000 with it, and to spare'.

Would you believe this? That what you give to the Lord He blesses, and no matter how little you give to the Lord and can give to Him, He multiplies and He can even use the hand with nothing in it! Maybe that's you. It was Hudson Taylor, the father of China Inland Mission, when asked why God chose to do a great work through him he said: 'God chose me because I was weak enough'. Are you weak enough? Am I weak enough for the Lord to use? Someone has said: 'The Lord sends no one away empty but those who are full of themselves'. That's often our problem: we're too strong, too confident, we're too self-sufficient, we're too smart for God to use - but as the song puts it, this lesson was teaching the disciples that little is much when God is in it!

He wanted them to face their own inability to meet the need. He wanted them to offer up their weakness to Him. Thirdly, He required them to do His will in His way. In verses 39 and 40 we read this - the Lord had the people sit down in organised groups on the green grass.
Now the multitude have already been described as sheep without a shepherd, and if that's how they were viewed, now we are seeing the Lord as the Shepherd among the sheep - what a depiction of Psalm 23 verse 2! 'The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want. I will lack nothing, I will have no need. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. He leadeth me beside the still waters'. Isaiah 40 is being fulfilled: 'He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young'.

Like the first miracle the Lord performed in His ministry, when Mary said to those who were over the wedding at Cana: 'Whatsoever he saith unto thee, do it', they had to do His will in His way. So they are arranged by 50s and 100s, and what the Lord is teaching is a lesson: God's work must be done in God's way, and God's work done in God's way will never lack God's provision. It was Hudson Taylor who said: 'God pays for what He orders'. In 50s and 100s they were ranked, that is the word used in English, but do you know what the original Greek word really literally means? 'Flower beds', they were put in flower beds of 50 and 100.

Now I'm only surmising, I imagine that this great crowd in all their colourful dress, reclining on the spring green grass in the light of the declining evening sun on the hillside by the still water of the Lake, must have looked like flower beds of beautiful blooms. I just wonder did anyone there remember the words of our Lord Jesus when He said: 'Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed?'. It might have also reminded them of the encampments of Israel in the wilderness, and all the tribes laid out in order - and what happened there? God miraculously fed them every day with the bread from heaven by the power of the Lord, who was in their midst. Do you see it?

He's teaching them that His will must be done His way, but He's teaching them something else. Fourthly, He is teaching them to look to their heavenly Father in prayer for their need. He wants them to realise: 'You're saying send this crowd away that they'll find bread, but you need to know that their supply will not come from earth, it must come from heaven'. It was in the Lord Jesus Christ that the Heavenly Father was revealed to them in all His sufficiency: 'No man hath seen God at any time, the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him'. Go away from His presence to have their needs supplied? No! They were going to leave His presence to provide for the crowd, He's teaching them: Christ reveals the Father to us, and brings us to the Father, and 'your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask him'. Seek first the kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added unto you.

We read that He blessed these loaves, and the blessing He probably used was the traditional one: 'Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the Earth, who brings forth bread from the earth' - and that would have been followed by a 5,000 strong 'Amen'. Now if that bread had remained unblessed and unbroken, it would never have fulfilled its purpose - and so we must be broken in our own helplessness, and we must be blessed as we come to the Lord for His provision. Someone has said the reason we are not more freely given to men is that we are not yet properly broken.

He wanted them to face their own inability to meet the need. He wanted them to offer up their weakness to Him. He required them to do His will His way. He taught them to look to their heavenly Father in prayer for their need. Fifthly, He wanted them to see that the lowly Servant before them was the Christ of the impossible - a miracle was being done, more than 5,000! Note that it only says 5,000 men, excepting women and children - feeding them with five loaves and two fish! He's still doing miracles today! I thought there might have been one
'Amen'.

This lowly Servant standing before them was the Christ of the impossible, and the lesson He's teaching is: 'You don't need to go away from Me, you need to look to Me'. When we look to Jesus in faith, we trust His word and He meets our supply. Didn't the children of Israel say in the desert: 'Can God furnish a table in the wilderness?' - can God? The God of Moses fed them in the wilderness, because of their murmuring He fed them until the food came out of their nostrils, until they were sick of it. The God of Elijah lives today, the God who multiplied the oil and the meal for the widow of Zarephath. The God of Elisha, who increased the pot of oil and fed 100 men with 20 loaves of barley - that God is alive! The Galileans were to realise that before them stood the embodiment of Jehovah God. Psalm 145 was being fulfilled: 'Thou openest thine hand, and satisfiest the desire of every living thing'; Psalm 132:15, 'I will abundantly bless her provision: I will satisfy her poor with bread'. The Lord was in their midst, imagine telling them to go away and find bread, when He was in their midst!

Sixthly, He wanted them to be confident in His power to serve others. Look at verse 41, we see that He didn't distribute the bread Himself, very instructive - He gave the bread to the disciples and they distributed it. His plan is that He should feed the world with the gospel and all sorts of other provision through His own people. Now mark this: going out of His presence to find bread, they were powerless to meet the need; but going from His presence, out from Him, they would have the Spirit's power to serve the sheep. Someone has said: 'Those who minister to the needs of others must fill their hands from the hands of Christ, He alone is the source of supply'.

I wonder, in verse 37, and again I'm only surmising, I wonder when He said to them: 'Give ye them to eat', is that what He was already challenging them to do? They needed to realise first and foremost, as we do, without Him we can do nothing - but now they're starting to be taught: we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us. So He wanted them to be confident in the power to serve others, but finally - number seven - He wanted them to be satisfied in Him, who provides for every need in superabundance. He wanted His servants to be fully satisfied in Him, who could provide their needs in superabundance. Verses 42 to 44, 5,000 men was an immense gathering - now take into account that a village like Capernaum or Bethsaida had only about 2,000 to 3,000 people resident in them, and this is 5,000 men on their own! These verses tell us that they were all fed full, and there were twelve baskets full left over. Twelve in the Bible is the number of perfect administration of power in man - 12 tribes of Israel, 12 disciples - and what the Lord's saying here is: 'Do you see this service you are embarking on for me? I have perfect provision for you to operate and serve in my behalf'. A sufficient Saviour for them all, with power to meet all the need.

Of course John tells us of the sermon that our Lord Jesus then preached after this miracle, where He talked of Himself as the Bread of Life come down from heaven. So He didn't just perform this miracle to meet human needs, but ultimately to reveal Himself. Can I ask you: have you seen Him this morning in this miracle, in these lessons? Miracles are sermons in action, you know. Do you see that He wants you to face your own inability to meet your need? You can't do it. Have you seen that you need to offer up to Him your weaknesses, whatever they are, even if all you've got to offer are your empty hands. Do you see that God requires you to do His will in His way? The end does not justify the means, you've got to do it God's way or no way at all. Do you see that we can look to our Heavenly Father in prayer for any needs that we have? Do you see that your Saviour is the Christ of the impossible? Do you see that He gives you sufficient confidence to serve others, because He gives you His power? Do you be satisfied in Him, He who provides every need in superabundance?
The Lord Jesus was revealing Himself as Jehovah, who had superabundance to meet all the needs of mankind. What a wonderful Saviour! It's no wonder Bernard of Clairvaux wrote:

'We taste of Thee, Thou Living Bread,
And long to feast upon Thee still;
We drink of Thee, the Fountainhead
And Thirst our souls for Thee to fill'.

Oh Father, we thank Thee for such a lesson that Saviour not only taught His early disciples, but we - that we in and of ourselves are hopeless and helpless for salvation or for service. Through our own ingenuity and means we cannot supply the needs that are so great around us. Yet Father, if we would just give You our all, all that we have and all that we are, You could make something of nothing. We believe You will, Lord, if we would just take that step of faith, believe that we don't need to go out of Your presence, but if we go out from Your presence what a blessing we will be to others. Lord, let us see in Christ the One who meets the impossible needs, let us see in our Lord Jesus God Himself the Son feeding the sheep that are starving. Lord, may we look to Him and Him alone, for You have promised our God shall supply all our need according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus. Lord, if there's a soul here this morning who is not satisfied with Christ, make them satisfied to feed on Him now and evermore. Feed them, Bread of Heaven, till they lack no more. Amen.

Transcribed by Andrew Watkins, Preach The Word – February 2008
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Now do turn with me to Mark's gospel chapter 6 please, and hopefully we will finish off this chapter this morning. We looked last week at the feeding of the 5000, under the title 'The Servant's Unlimited Supplies', and we're looking this morning at the miracle - or at least one of the miracles comprised within the verses that we will read - where the Lord walks on the water, and the title is 'The Servant's Security'. Again you can put your apostrophe wherever you like with 'servants': it could speak of the security that the Lord Jesus gives as the Servant of Jehovah, but it could also speak of the security that we enjoy as the servants of the Suffering Servant, the Lord Jesus.

So we begin reading at verse 45, and you will note somewhat of a difference between Mark's account and the other account that you're aware of of this event. Verse 45: "And straightway he constrained his disciples, to get into the ship, and to go to the other side before unto Bethsaida, while he sent away the people. And when he had sent them away, he departed into a mountain to pray. And when even was come, the ship was in the midst of the sea, and he alone on the land. And he saw them toiling in rowing; for the wind was contrary unto them: and about the fourth watch of the night he cometh unto them, walking upon the sea, and would have passed by them. But when they saw him walking upon the sea, they supposed it had been a spirit, and cried out: For they all saw him, and were troubled. And immediately he talked with them, and saith unto them, Be of good cheer: it is I; be not afraid. And he went up unto them into the ship; and the wind ceased: and they were sore amazed in themselves beyond measure, and wondered. For they considered not the miracle of the loaves: for their heart was hardened. And when they had passed over, they came into the land of Gennesaret, and drew to the shore. And when they were come out of the ship, straightway they knew him, And ran through that whole region round about, and began to carry about in beds those that were sick, where they heard he was. And whithersoever he entered, into villages, or cities, or country, they laid the sick in the streets, and besought him that they might touch if it were but the border of his garment: and as many as touched him were made whole".

Now in John's account of the feeding of the 5,000, we are told that the Lord Jesus led His disciples into the boat for the reason that the crowd were, as one has said, dangerously fuelled with messianic fervour. They were going to make the Lord Jesus, there and then, their King - and that might have started a popular uprising. That could not have happened for two reasons, one: because the twelve, the disciples, did not understand the kingdom fully, they had not matured in their understanding of what the kingdom of God was that Christ was bringing on the earth at that time. They still had national and political ideas about it. The second reason why that could not happen now was: it would not have fitted God's eternal plan. God's purpose, as we know very clearly from this gospel and the rest of the scriptures, was that Christ should be a Suffering Servant, as chapter 10 verse 45 tells us so well: 'The Son of man came not to be served, but to serve, and give his life a ransom for many'. God's plan was not that Christ should ascend into Jerusalem to some earthly throne there and then, but He should go by the way of suffering - that is God's way: not the way of force, the way of suffering; the suffering before the glory, the cross before the crown.
That was the reason why the Lord put them in this boat, and yet there are often are parallel purposes in our experiences - I hope you know what I mean. There's not only one reason why things happen to us in life always, there can be several reasons. Often in the divine purposes of God there are many parallel layers of purposes that affect many spheres. Therefore I'm saying to you, really, that although this is the revealed reason in John why the Lord put them in this boat, I don't think for one moment that our Lord was unaware that there was a storm coming their way. So one main reason why He was putting them in this boat was to teach them a lesson, and it was a lesson in the life of faith. These twelve disciples had enrolled in Christ's school, the Servant's school of faith, and little did they know that faith was the next class that they were about to undergo. The lesson that they were about to learn in the midst of the Lake in this boat alone was to prepare them for a day of service that was ahead of them.

Now, incidentally, this is a great theme within Mark's gospel: the idea that the Suffering Servant of the Lord is preparing His own servants for the day that He wouldn't be with them any more, at least bodily. That's exactly what is happening here: He is preparing them for a day that lay ahead when He would be gone. Now, how applicable this message is to us, because we live in such a day: He is gone from us physically, and so there are many valuable lessons that we can learn from this miracle in Mark 6, the last verses.

Here's the first lesson: the Lord directed His servants into the storm. Now you must see that in verse 46, He sent them away, and then He separated Himself from them and went into a mountain to pray. He constrained them to get into that boat. Now storms can come our way because of our disobedience - we do things that are wrong, we sin, we go down wrong paths, we disobey God's revealed will in His word and so on, and storms come our way. But here is a storm that they are facing because they are obeying the Lord - that's interesting, isn't it? Indeed, one writer says: 'Imagine what disobedience could have gotten those men that night. Perhaps a full stomach, a warm bed in someone's home and an opportunity to regale their host with stories about Jesus. It may well have been that disobeying the Lord in this matter could have been more comfortable and easy for them - but they obeyed, and by obeying they faced a storm'.

Now remember where they had come from. A wee while ago you will remember, near the beginning of this chapter, they had experienced the Lord's power in their own ministry - they had a successful mission, healing and teaching and doing mighty works. Then of course they had shared in the miracle of the 5,000, and remember that the Lord gave them the loaves to distribute among the people. So they had experienced in their spiritual pilgrimage a high, a peak, a zenith. Now the Lord, the wise Master knew that they were in a dangerous zone - I wonder do we know that? Do you realise that whenever the Lord is doing things through you, whenever you're experiencing His power, and whenever you reach the mountain peak of spiritual experience that that is a very dangerous place to be? That's why the valleys usually come afterwards.

Someone has said: 'It's good to be on the mountaintop, if you don't get careless and step off a cliff. God's wisdom here is seen in all our experiences: He knows, even if we don't, that blessings must be balanced with burdens and battles and buffetings - so the Lord led His disciples into this boat, into a storm. Now please remember that we have already been in a storm with the disciples in this gospel, and incidentally the Lord led them there as well. It was also following a very exciting day in chapter 4, a day of teaching. Here again, after one of the greatest miracles that our Lord Jesus performed - remember it's the miracle that's in the four
Gospels - they experienced one of the greatest storms that we read of in the whole of Scripture, and that is often the way.

We read in Acts chapter 4 something very similar, and it's interesting to note the parallels. The storm of official persecution from the government began after the disciples had won - how many converts on the day of Pentecost? 5,000 isn't that interesting? 5000 souls saved, 5000 people fed, and then the storm comes! Someone has said: 'Perhaps while they were in confinement', that is the apostles in prison after Pentecost, 'they may have recalled the storm that followed the feeding of the 5,000, and they must have encouraged themselves with assurance that Jesus would come to them and see them through'. You see, that's what it's all about: each new experience of testing is what it is to be in the school of Christ, the school of faith - and each new experience demands of us more faith, and with that more faith we grow to be able to face greater experiences.

Now the first storm that the disciples experienced in Mark's gospel, they had the Lord in the boat with them - and they were afraid then, and yet the Lord was there! But this one is different: He's not there any more, He has launched them away from Himself, and He has ascended a mountain and He is praying for them. He's trying to teach them a harder lesson: that they must now walk by faith, not by sight. He was preparing them for the day when He would have ascended to heaven, and would no longer be bodily with them.

Now let's not try and create some kind of facade here. We all know that tests of faith are not easy, and we more often than not run away from them. The disciples were no different in this case. Now people often reprimand the apostle Peter for sinking, and of course that's not included in Mark's record here - and remember, we believe that Peter was the source of Mark's information, and for one reason or another he didn't want Mark to record this. But you've heard people not only reprimand him for sinking, but praise him for stepping out of the boat - and rightly so. But the interesting thing here is that none of the disciples, it would seem, wanted to even get into the boat - forget about getting out of the boat! Now, how do I know that? Well, there's word here used in verse 46 and it's a strong expression that says the Lord 'sent them away', and it indicates an urgency, a pressure that the Lord was putting on them. Do you remember the situation they're leaving? 5,000 people have been miraculously fed, and they have had a part in it - they don't want to leave, it's like a revival experience! The Lord pushes them, forces them to get into this boat - and it could actually mean, perhaps, that He actually shoved them off from the shore. Kent Hughes says: 'The twelve were reluctant, like children who are having a good time and don't want to get into the car to go home' - that's what it was like! Do you see it? He shoved them into that storm.

Something else, it's found in verses 47 and 48 at the beginning: 'When evening was come, the ship was in the midst of the sea, and he alone on the land. And he saw them toiling in rowing; for the wind was contrary unto them'. Here's the second point: the Lord interceded for His servants from on high. He directed His servants into the storm, He ascended the mountain and interceded for them from on high. Now there's two ideas here: one, prayer; two, priesthood. We see first of all, obviously, the importance of prayer, and we've seen this already in the life of the Servant of Jehovah. After a spiritual high, what does He do? He gets on His knees before God and prays. Now that's often something we do before spiritual highs, when we're asking for them: 'Lord, bless us! Lord, use us!' - and then when He does it, how many times do we actually then get on our knees afterwards to thank God for blessing us, and indeed pray that God will bless us all the more? You see, there is a danger that after the mountaintop experience we somehow transcend the realities of who we are and what we are before God.
I heard a story about a man called George Adam Smith who was an Old Testament scholar. One day Smith climbed the Weisshorn above the Zermatt Valley in Switzerland - some of you may have been there, I have been quite near to it. He went up there with his guide, and they made the ascent on the sheltered side of the mountain. When he got to the top he was so exhilarated with the thought that he had climbed it, and the view, the panoramic wonder before him, that he forgot about the gale. He threw his arms in the air and shouted with exhilaration, and the guide grabbed him, pulled him down, and said: 'On your knees! You're only safe up here when you're on your knees!'.

What a lesson! We are only safe in mountaintop experiences when we are on our knees. The Lord was regularly on His knees. We know from this gospel that His ministry began prayer, that's why we have there in chapter 1 that mention in verse 35 of Him praying - it's at the start of Mark's gospel to emphasise that the secret of the life of service before God is seen in His Son as the Servant, a Man before Him in prayer. But we see that that very full day of ministry in Mark chapter 1 began with prayer, and here we have the conclusion of another very full day of ministry - and what's the Lord doing? He's on His knees again at the end of the day. You might say: 'Did He not deserve a break?'. Well, the fact of the matter is, He probably did deserve a break, but He wasn't thinking about what He deserved because His service was selfless. He's not even praying for Himself! He's up the mountain praying for His disciples whom He has directed into the storm.

You do see how important prayer is, don't you, when we're serving the Lord? Here's the second thought: priesthood. Now in chapter 3 and verse 13 we saw the Lord - at least it's implied, it's certainly recorded in the other Gospels - He's on a mountain again, and it's just before He chooses the twelve disciples. We know from the other gospel records that He spent that whole prior night in prayer. So He was praying on a mountain before He chose the twelve, and now we see Him here in chapter 6 praying up a mountain before He tests the twelve. What a wonderful picture we are given by Mark, think of that: here they are in the low valley of the Lake, a storm is about to envelop them, but here we have Christ up on high praying for His servants who are below struggling. Do you know that 'sea' in the Bible always speaks of separation? He is on the land, they are in the sea - now think of these lovely words in the light of that thought of priesthood, verse 48: 'He saw them toiling in rowing; for the wind was contrary unto them'.

He saw them! Now there is a beautiful picture here of the salvation of our Lord Jesus, and the Servant of the Lord's ministry, in three aspects. Here's the first, verse 41, we've seen it already this very day - in the afternoon He broke bread and fed 5,000 people. I told you last week how John has told us in chapter 6 of his gospel that that is speaking of how the Lord Jesus Christ would be given for the world. Now that is His sacrificial death, is it not? Now, look to verse 46, we move from afternoon to evening, and now He ascends the mountain to pray, and He's praying for His own disciples - and that is the sympathetic priesthood. Hebrews chapter 9 tells us that our Lord Jesus has now entered into heaven itself, now to appear before the presence of God for us.

Come with me again, thirdly we read of the next morning, the early hours - and in verse 48 we read that seeing them toiling in rowing, and the wind contrary: 'about the fourth watch of the night he cometh unto them, walking upon the sea, and would have passed by them'. He is coming again, and He is coming to the troubled sea and darkness of the hour that will prevail in this world at that moment when He comes - and He will take His own people, His own disciples, His own servants to the shore, the heavenly shore of glory.
But I want us to linger at the second aspect of His sympathetic priesthood, because that's what we are experiencing now. He gives us deliverance now. While it's good to look at the second advent as an application of these spiritual truths, I believe that there perhaps is a more pertinent one for us now in the fact that He has arisen and ascended, and He is interceding for us as our sympathetic High Priest. When I thought of that, I thought of John chapter 14. Now of course the second coming is featured in that, He said: 'If I go away, I will come again, and receive you unto myself' - the second coming, but later on in that chapter He speaks of what it will be like in the absence, the bodily absence of the Christ, for His servants the disciples. What does He say to them there? Verse 18 of John 14: 'I will not leave you comfortless', the word is 'orphans', 'I will not leave you like orphans, I will come to you'. Then, greater than that perhaps, in verse 23 of chapter 14 of John, Jesus says: 'If a man love me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him, and we', the Father and the Son, 'will come unto him, and make our abode with him'.

He was preparing His servants for His ascension, and He wants them to have faith to weather the storms - though they would be without His bodily presence, they would not be without His presence. Are you getting it? He was leaving them, and yet He was not leaving them. He was going to send His Spirit to them. It is very similar to what Peter was going to experience when he betrayed the Lord, and the Lord forewarned him of it and said: 'Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat: But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren'. Now this is a bigger picture of that: He has ascended up on high, and Christ our Great High Priest looks down upon us in our storms, He sees us toiling in rowing, He sees all the winds that are contrary to us - it's amazing, isn't it?

I don't know whether you've ever been in a maze or not - a literal maze, not the prison now! There's one - where is it now? - Delamont, or Castlewellan, or somewhere around that area: a maze. It's very easy to get lost in! Do you know the way to know how to get out of a maze? It is to have someone stand on a hill up high, and they have it all worked out - does that help you? He has ascended on high - we are in a storm, everything is contrary to us, but He sees it all, He knows the end from the beginning. I love how Michael Bruce put it in the 18th century in his hymn, it goes like this:

'Where high the heavenly temple stands,
The house of God not made with hands,
A great High Priest our nature wears,
The Guardian of mankind appears.

Though now ascended up on high,
He bends on earth a brother’s eye;
Partaker of the human name,
He knows the frailty of our frame.

Our fellow Sufferer yet retains
A fellow feeling of our pains:
And still remembers in the skies
His tears, His agonies, and cries'.

And you know this verse:
'In every pang that rends the heart,
The Man of Sorrows had a part,
He sympathizes with our grief,
And to the sufferer sends relief'.

And that's exactly what He did there: He led them into the storm, He interceded for His servants on high, but He descended and came to His servants' aid in verse 48. Now here's three things about it: one, He came early, the fourth watch of the night. Now I don't want to impose thoughts in the text that aren't here, but in Roman times there were four watches of the night, and this was the fourth - from 3 a.m. to 6 a.m. Often the Lord meets us in a special way, when we meet Him a great while before day. Now I don't want to push it any more than that, that's where the phrase 'the morning watch' comes from, speaking of the quiet time. Old saints of God used to believe that God watched over you all the watches of the night, and it was prudent of you and respectful to get up at the fourth watch, when the Lord was still watching over you, and meet with Him there. It's a lovely thought - but surely, at least, there's an application here that often we are terrified in the storms of our lives because we don't meet the Lord before the hustle and bustle of the day and everything that it brings.

He came early. Secondly, He came miraculously, He was walking on the sea it says. Now that was a place they never would have expected Him, indeed it was the impossible place! Man's extremity, God's opportunity - and God loves to reveal Himself in our seemingly impossible circumstances and predicaments. He came early, He came miraculously, and thirdly: He came mysteriously. Verses 48 and 50 at the beginning says that the Lord would have passed by them - now that is best understood as meaning, 'He would have passed alongside them'. It actually means not that He was going to miss them, but He was going to draw along beside them - but He couldn't, do you know why? Because of their fear, they were so terrified that He just couldn't approach them at that moment. Their fear and their lack of faith hindered Him helping them! Imagine it: they thought He was literally a 'phantasma', that's the word used, it speaks of 'a water ghost' - that's what they thought He was. These were fishermen, all their superstitions and folklore came to the brim of their minds: 'It's one of those ghosts we've always heard about!'. As Jack was telling us about the moon, in all likelihood this strong windstorm had blown all the clouds away, and it was also the time of Passover - now the time of Passover is the time of the full moon. So there was a Passover moon and no clouds, and they're seeing this eerie figure stepping on the waves. These are experienced fishermen who never saw anything like this, and He's illuminated by this full moon!

How would you have felt? Often the Lord comes mysteriously to us. Often the Lord comes to us in our storms in ways that we don't initially recognize Him. Now maybe that's because, at times, we're not looking for Him. Maybe, like these disciples, we're trying to fight, and row, and face the contrary winds. Maybe it's because we're distracted by other things - but He came to them. Maybe you're in a storm just now, and you think the Lord has forsaken you and He's forgotten you. Maybe you don't realise that mysteriously He is very near, and you haven't seen it yet.

Come with me again: He descended to their aid, but then in verses 50 to 56 we read that the Lord displayed His divine power to His servants. There's three things here: there is revelation, reaction, and rest. The revelation is of the Lord to His disciples, the reaction is of the disciples to their Lord, and the rest is right across the board. Let's look at revelation: He comes to them mysteriously, and He says: 'Be of good cheer: it is I; be not afraid'. Now in the Greek those words 'it is I' literally are these: 'I am'. Now what was He saying? He was identifying Himself, this Jesus whom you follow is the Jehovah of the Old Testament, He is the Creator of
the winds and of the waves and of nature. Only God, Job 9:8 tells us, 'spreadeth out the heavens, and treadeth upon the waves of the sea'. From Matthew's account of this event, we know that at the end of this miracle the disciples came and worshipped Him, and said: 'Of a truth, Thou art the Son of God'. 'Be not afraid, I am'.

Now what would 'Be not afraid', and 'I am', have conjured up in their minds? I'll tell you: those wonderful words of Isaiah 43. Now remember the situation that they are finding themselves in: 'Now saith the LORD that created thee, O Jacob, and he that formed thee, O Israel, Fear not: for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine. When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee'. He revealed Himself as the God of the winds and waves.

Now what was their reaction after that revelation? Their reaction in verses 50 and 52 is that they were amazed beyond measure. Now Mark has used that phrase and expression twice previously. It followed the healing of the sick of the palsy, and then the raising of Jairus' daughter - all the onlookers were amazed, and literally it means that they were out of their minds. Now Mark only gives us the reason why they were amazed: he tells us they were amazed because these disciples had not understood the last miracle, the feeding of the 5,000. Do you see it? In verse 52, they had not considered the miracle of the loaves. Now what's he getting at? The New American Standard Version translates it like this: 'They had not gained insight' from the miracle of the 5,000. Their hearts were hardened, they were unreceptive to the identity of the Lord Jesus Christ as the great 'I Am', the omnipotent Son, the Creator of the universe.

Now here is the lesson from their reaction: if we never learn from our storms, and if we don't learn something about our Lord, and probably learn something about ourselves, our hearts are in danger of becoming hardened for the next storm that comes along; and we'll begin to resent the Lord and harden our hearts against Him. I believe if you think about that, it happens all the time. Here they are: toiling and rowing - what are they doing? They are expending their natural energies in what seems to be an impossible storm, and John tells us in chapter 6 of his gospel that they rowed between three and four miles before the Lord came to them. Do you know how long that is? It's about seven or eight hours rowing! Because of the hardness of their heart, the Lord had to allow them to be exhausted of all their fleshly means - and sometimes He can leave us to ourselves as long as He sees fit, and it can be a long time. But do you know something? His delays are not His denials, for He came to them, and He got into the ship and immediately the storm stilled! Not only that, but John tells us immediately He got into the boat they were at the shore - so there's more than one miracle here. Jesus walked on the water; Matthew tells us Peter walked on the water; the Lord stilled the storm; and the boat arrives instantly, miraculously, as soon as the Lord enters it, right to the shore side.

Now surely, if ever there was a night of wonders, that was it for the disciples - all those miraculous experiences! Now see it please: in the night of their deepest darkness, distress, in the greatest storm they had ever faced, it was also their night of wonders - why? Because they learned to have faith in Christ. They had learned, through the miracle of the 5,000 being fed, the provision of the Shepherd. He provides for His servants. Now they are learning the protection of the Shepherd: 'The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want', later on verse 4 of Psalm 23, 'I will fear no evil'. If they trust they will have the Lord's sufficiency. If they trust they will have the Lord's security, no matter what the situation is.

In verses 54 to 56 we see that when they embarked on the shore, where it says that 'they
knew him', it's not talking about the disciples, it's talking about the people at the shore - the ordinary people knew His power, they understood that it was the power of God, and they hadn't seen Him walking on water! What a scene: the marketplaces become impoverished hospitals, they want to get as close to the Lord, close enough that even to touch the hem of His garment would heal them. All who touched Him were made well, and the simple faith of these ordinary people caused them to bring their needs to the Lord - and what a rebuke that was to the disciples.

Have you got a glimpse this morning of the Servant's security? The Lord directs His servants into storms, He intercedes for His servants from on high, He descends to His servants to give them aid, He displays His divine power to His servants.

'O soul, are you weary and troubled?
No light in the darkness you see?
There's a light for a look at the Saviour,
And life more abundant and free!

Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
Look full in His wonderful face,
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim,
In the light of His glory and grace'.

Do you know those waves that frightened those disciples? They were stepping stones, they were stairs to bring Him near. May you let Him near in your storm, that all might be still.

Father, we thank You for the lessons that the disciples had to go through that we might learn - and yet, our Father, we are well aware that some of us are passing through storms, tests, trials. Father, You have allowed them to come into our lives, and You would that they should strengthen our faith, and they should be stepping stones to bring Christ near even in the waves. Lord, may every one of Your children here today, whatever they are passing through, though it might be mysteriously, may they miraculously know the presence of the Lord Jesus drawing alongside. May His presence come into their boat, may peace be still, may they experience a little bit of that heavenly shore even here and now through the sympathising Priesthood of the Man at Your right hand. We thank You for these rich truths, may they truly feed our souls for good. Amen.

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Studies In Mark - Chapter 35
"The Heart Of The Problem"

We're turning to Mark chapter 7, and we're going to read from verse 1 through to verse 23. The title I have taken for this study is: 'The Heart Of The Problem'.

Verse 1 then of Mark 7: "Then came together unto him the Pharisees, and certain of the scribes, which came from Jerusalem. And when they saw some of his disciples eat bread with defiled, that is to say, with unwashen, hands, they found fault. For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, except they wash their hands oft, eat not, holding the tradition of the elders. And when they come from the market, except they wash, they eat not. And many other things there be, which they have received to hold, as the washing of cups, and pots, brassen vessels, and of tables. Then the Pharisees and scribes asked him, Why walk not thy disciples according to the tradition of the elders, but eat bread with unwashen hands? He answered and said unto them, Well hath Esaias prophesied of you hypocrites, as it is written, This people honoureth me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. Howbeit in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men. For laying aside the commandment of God, ye hold the tradition of men, as the washing of pots and cups: and many other such like things ye do. And he said unto them, Full well ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition. For Moses said, Honour thy father and thy mother; and, Whoso curseth father or mother, let him die the death: But ye say, If a man shall say to his father or mother, It is Corban, that is to say, a gift, by whatsoever thou mightest be profited by me; he shall be free. And ye suffer him no more to do ought for his father or his mother; Making the word of God of none effect through your tradition, which ye have delivered: and many such like things do ye. And when he had called all the people unto him, he said unto them, Hearken unto me every one of you, and understand: There is nothing from without a man, that entereth into him can defile him: but the things which come out of him, those are they that defile the man. If any man have ears to hear, let him hear. And when he was entered into the house from the people, his disciples asked him concerning the parable. And he saith unto them, Are ye so without understanding also? Do ye not perceive, that whatsoever thing from without entereth into the man, it cannot defile him; Because it entereth not into his heart, but into the belly, and goeth out into the draught, purging all meats? And he said, That which cometh out of the man, that defileth the man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, Thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness: All these evil things come from within, and defile the man".

Now throughout Mark's gospel we will have noted, I hope, that Mark's emphasis is primarily on what the Lord did - it's the great gospel concerning the doing of the Servant of the Lord. It was written, of course, to Romans, who were a very active people, and nation, and empire at this time - and so Mark, of course guided by the Holy Spirit, thought that they would themselves be enthused by Christ, looking at His earthly service and ministry. However, this section that we're looking at this morning deals with what the Lord said rather than what He did, and it's a very important teaching at that. It speaks of the heart of the human problem.

Religious, political, social problems we see all around us, and they have plagued the history of
humankind. They are essentially problems that stem from a misdiagnosis of a heart complaint. There is, the Bible teaches us, a spiritual disease of the primary internal organ - not, of course, our literal heart, but as the heart is spoken of in the Bible as the seat of our affections and personality, that is where the problem lies. But religion in particular - and when I speak of religion I speak of man attempting to get to God in his own way, not the true faith of the Bible, which is God by grace coming to man, and man believing in Him by faith - but manmade religion, and indeed all human institutions, diagnose the human problem as an external problem. Therefore they believe that this external problem can be treated without any intrusion into the heart.

Of course, this is a classic case of misdiagnosis - that is, mistaking the symptoms for the cause. So religion, and the institutions of mankind, treat the symptoms of man’s problem rather than curing its primary cause. The heart is the heart of the human problem. A classic example of this is religious malpractice, and we see it here in this chapter - perhaps like no other place in the whole of the scriptures. An official delegation of theological hitmen, if you want to call them that, came from Jerusalem to visit the Lord Jesus to trap Him. We read in verse 2 that 'they saw some of his disciples eat bread with defiled, that is to say, with unwashen, hands, they found fault'. Now all the boys and girls who are still with us in the building this morning, this isn't biblical legislation to not wash your hands before you eat your dinner! The disciples were not indulging in unhygienic practices, what is being spoken of here is an elaborate ritual, religious rite, that was prescribed by the tradition of the Jews - and it has no biblical foundation whatsoever, except to say that in Exodus chapter 30 the priests were required to wash ritually. But for 200 years this was taken from Exodus 30 and practised by all pious Jews.

It eventually became a requirement of ceremonial purity, and so before any meals Jews would pour just a little bit of water on their hands, and they would elevate their hands slightly so that the water would run down to the wrist, and eventually down to their elbows, and then they would rub their hands together. Next they would lower their hands, and rinse them, allowing the water to drop off their fingertips - now that was only for meals. In verse 4 we see that if they were in the marketplace, the inference we believe is that they actually bathed themselves from head to toe ceremonially, when they came from the market, to be clean. Now this extended to more than just the body, as we see at the end of verse 4, that various eating utensils were also washed ceremonially: pots and pans would be dipped - the word, actually, I think, is to 'baptise' - these were ceremonial baptisms that were used in order to make the user of these utensils ceremonially pure.

So these Jews that the Lord Jesus was standing before, they were of the inclination not to eat, rather than to eat with unwashed hands. Indeed, it was reported that around the time of our Lord Jesus, or a little bit after, that there was a rabbi who suffered imprisonment under the Romans, and he nearly died because he used his ration of drinking water to ritually wash up - he did it so often, he had nothing to drink himself! So this was their rule, the Jewish tradition of the elders: unless you washed to your elbows, you were ceremonially defiled. The belief was that you could transfer this ceremonial uncleanness to others, and even to holy things. So these religious Jews asked the Lord Jesus, questioning Him in verse 5: 'Why walk not thy disciples according to the tradition of the elders, but eat bread with unwashed hands?'. They were questioning our Lord not on the grounds of scripture, but on the grounds of their own manmade traditions.

So here we see a collision of two different views on what man’s chief problem is, and a collision of two different approaches towards a solution to man's chief problem. It's still
evident in our world all around us: in religion and in social society, the whole scene of our day, we see this collision. Religionists and social commentators believe you can effect a change on the inside by a change on the outside, whereas our Lord is very clearly saying in this chapter of Mark 7 that we do not effect a change from the outside in, we effect a change from the inside out.

So let us see these two views this morning. The first is conformity without; and the second is anarchy within. Let's take 'conformity without'. Now there are two problems with this. First of all, to have conformity without and the belief that it will change you internally, first of all we need to see that it fosters hypocrisy. The Lord Jesus made this very clear in verse 6. He quoted Isaiah, from Isaiah 29:13, and said that these people were fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy when he said: 'This people honoureth me with their lips, but their heart', it would be good to circle, if you mark your Bible, the word 'heart' in this chapter, 'their heart is far from me'. While their external religious rite and ritual behaviour was clearly changing them in an external way, there was an internal nature that was hidden to the naked eye that remained unaffected by whatever went on the outside.

So the Lord said: 'You're hypocrites', and the word for 'hypocrite', of course, is derived from a Greek word that described an actor wearing a mask while he was on the stage. So really the Lord was saying: 'You are religious play actors. Your conformity without is not changing you within'. So what the Lord was really saying is that there is a deceitfulness with religion, and indeed any other institution of humankind that tries to effect a change on the inside by changing the outside. You are deceiving others, you're making out by your outward conformity that you're something you're not on the inside - but not only are you deceiving those around you, you're deceiving yourself, thinking that you're better than others because of your conformity without.

The first problem with outward conformity is that it fosters hypocrisy. The second thing that our Lord cites is that conformity without necessitates a multitude of man-made rules, which eventually come to supersede God's commands. The Lord Jesus said this in verses 7 to 9: 'Howbeit in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men. For laying aside the commandment of God, ye hold the tradition of men, as the washing of pots and cups: and many other such like things ye do. And he said unto them, Full well ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition'. Their conformity without necessitated a multitude of man-made rules, which eventually - verse 9 says - came to supersede God-given commands. The Jews had this vast system of rigidly enforced traditions, and because they were based in some nebulous way upon the law of God they came to be interwoven with the law, and people no longer could tell the difference. These little rules that were man-made and added on to God's first five books of the Bible were perceived as acquiring equal authority to God's word itself.

These traditions were spoken of as fences that would protect the law of God, and the leaders of Judaism delighted in enforcing these upon the people - and yet, as our Lord Himself said, though they enforced them on others, they couldn't keep these laws themselves, speaking of their hypocrisy. The strange thing is with religion, and any human man-made institution, people often willingly accept rigidity and ritual as a substitute for reality. They can't get reality, so they accept a substitute.

Let me give you an example or two of this. Take the Sabbath for instance: on the Sabbath day it was forbidden by these man-made rules to look into a mirror. Now, I know some of you could toe that line alright - it looks like it anyway! - but this was forbidden. If on a Sabbath
day you saw a grey hair, you weren't allowed to pull it - that was work, you see, to pull a grey hair. Therefore, to guard against the temptation of pulling a grey hair, they made this rule not to look into a mirror. You also weren't allowed to wear false teeth on the Sabbath day - now I'm glad we're not Sabbatarians in the Old Testament sense, because all the grey hairs and empty mouths wouldn't be very nice to look at! But the idea was that if your teeth fell out on the Sabbath day, you'd have to pick them up - and that would be working! You weren't allowed to carry a burden on the Sabbath day, so you weren't even allowed to carry a handkerchief - that would be bad news for me today! What you could do was wear a handkerchief - so if you were at the top of the stairs and you needed a handkerchief, you would tie it around your neck, walk down the stairs, and when you reached the bottom you would untie it and then blow your nose.

These were rules! In fact, on one occasion rabbis debated about a man with a wooden leg - and this is true, it's not a joke! If his home caught fire, could he carry the wooden leg out of the house on the Sabbath? You were allowed to spit on the ground on the Sabbath, but you had to be careful where you spat, because if your spittle landed on dirt and you accidentally scuffed that dirt with the side of your sandal, you would be working because they said you were cultivating soil and thus performing labour. This is the way they thought. In some cases, this is what the Lord Jesus' point was, they had added so many rules to God's law that they were now beginning to go backward, and contradicting Scriptures that weakened God's law.

Now to prove this to them our Lord Jesus invoked the fifth commandment, the law of God. 'You're wanting to obey the law of God, you Pharisees? Well, let's take one of the commandments, commandment number five: honour thy father and thy mother'. In verses 10 to 13 the Lord gave an example, and it's a bit hard to understand, perhaps, in our English version - but, of course, the commandment tells us to honour parents. Now that commandment is not just to be observed when you're children, but it goes right through into the old age of your parents, and you're meant to respect them and even care for them at that stage of their lives. Indeed, if you look at it, you'll see that the death penalty was what was incurred if you spoke even evil of your parents. But a Jewish man-made tradition had evolved to say that if your parents had need in their old age, and you as a son, a Jewish boy or a man, had the ability to meet that need - if you were to say: 'Corban', which means 'That is a gift, the gift of God', that portion of money would be reserved for the temple. You, therefore, would get out of giving it to your parents. Now, in effect what actually happened was: they said 'Corban', and they kept the money for themselves and never gave it to the temple, they used it for their own business.

Do you see what was happening? They were getting out of obeying God's law of honouring father and mother in their old age by actually invoking man-made traditions. Now, history reveals that the Jews eventually came to honour their own traditions above the word of God. Let me give you a few examples: Rabbi Eleaer said, 'He who expounds the scriptures in opposition to the tradition has no share in the world to come' - did you hear that? He who expounds the scriptures in opposition to the tradition has no share in the world to come. The Mishnah, which is a collection of traditions in the Talmud, records these words: 'It is a greater offence to teach anything contrary to the voice of the Rabbi, than to contradict Scripture itself'. Now of course the cults today are doing exactly the same, where the words of their new prophets and their new scriptures actually contradict God's Word in places, but they will take their new revelation to supersede God's infallible truth. You see it in Roman Catholicism: tradition and the pronouncement of the church has taken over the interpretation of the holy word of God; and you even see it in Protestant denominations today, often tradition is equal - if not in confession, certainly in practice - it is equal to the word of God.
But before we start shooting our theological machine guns in rings round us, I want to echo the words of Warren Wiersbe when he said this, listen carefully: 'Before we criticise our Jewish friends, perhaps we should examine what influence the church fathers are having on our own Christian churches. We also can be guilty of replacing God's truth with man's tradition'. Well, these Jews certainly were doing it, and they were so caught up with their little traditions that they had missed the weighty matters of God's law, God's truth: love, justice, and mercy. E. Stanley Jones says: 'Their eyes were big as they came to the Lord Jesus to trap Him, they were open wide to the little and marginal traditions - but those big wide eyes were blind to the truth'. The big things, they couldn't see the big things because their eyes were so open wide to the little things. We need to beware of that.

To highlight this again our Lord delivers a clear principle to them in verses 14 and 15 that all of us need to learn, look at it, He said: 'Hearken unto me every one of you, and understand: There is nothing from without a man, that entering into him can defile him: but the things which come out of him', out of his heart, 'those are they that defile the man'. Now even the disciples didn't understand that! You have to remember that they were equally exposed to this legalism that these Pharisees were practising, and so they were confused. We see it in verse 17, when they entered into the house privately with the Lord Jesus away from the people, His disciples asked him concerning a parable. You've got to remember that these disciples grew up under the teachings of the Old Testament law - weren't allowed to eat pork, and rabbit, and shrimp, those were unclean animals, those would defile them ceremonially. The Lord had to fairly explain to them, verses 18 to 20: 'Do ye not perceive, that whatsoever thing from without entereth into the man, it cannot defile him; Because it entereth not into his heart, but into the belly, and goeth out into the draught, purging all meats? And he said, That which cometh out of the man, that defileth the man'.

Now, in effect, what the Lord Jesus was doing was declaring null and void the entire Mosaic system of clean and unclean. You see, those were pictures to show to the Jews that which was holy and that which was unholy. Now there might have been hygienic and dietary reasons for it in the wilderness and all the rest, but primarily they were spiritual illustrations. What the Lord was saying was that there is a new era now in the gospel, there is a new dispensation - and in effect, as we see from Mark's gospel and the rest of the New Testament, what the Lord was doing was He was opening the way into the Kingdom of God for Gentiles to believe on Jehovah. Now we haven't got time to go into that, and our Lord didn't explain that radical truth at that moment - but we see how dull the apostle's hearts were in understanding it, when we witness that Peter, he didn't grasp this truth until after Pentecost. There on a housetop, a roof in Joppa in Acts chapter 10, the Lord gave him a vision of a sheet with all unclean animals on it, and he told him: 'Don't call anything that I have created 'unclean', kill and eat'. It was at that moment that it dawned on Peter's heart that God wanted to save Gentiles, unclean, ceremonially unclean people.

You see, the Lord Jesus was teaching us what we read in all of the epistles: that the heart of the problem is the problem of the heart. Conformity without cannot tame our hearts, because our hearts are at anarchy within. That's why conformity without doesn't work, because there is anarchy within. He alluded to that in verse 6, look at it: 'This people honoureth me with their lips', conformity without, 'but their heart is far from me', anarchy within. Verses 21 to 23: 'For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, Thefts, covetousness, wickedness', so on and so forth. Let me read it to you in the Amplified Version: 'For within, that is out of the hearts of men, come base and wicked thoughts, sexual immorality, stealing, murder, adultery, coveting (a greedy desire to have
more wealth), dangerous and destructive wickedness, deceit; unrestrained or indecent conduct; an evil eye which is envy, slander which is evil speaking, malicious misrepresentation, abusiveness, pride which is the sin of an uplifted heart against God and man, foolishness which is folly, lack of sense, recklessness, thoughtlessness. All these evil purposes and desires come from within, and they make the man unclean and render him unhallowed'. Do you know what this is? It is the biblical doctrine of depravity: that man is sick at heart.

Now I believe the context of verses 21 to 23, the Lord is implying that these man-made Jewish traditions that distract and detract from God's given law could be added to this list! They come out of a heart that is diseased, that's why they cannot effect a change. You cannot, by conformity without, affect the anarchy within, because it remains - and even that conformity without, which is only external, comes out of such a heart. Now I wonder, as Christians, do we really appreciate the desperate condition of our hearts? I have to say, I don't think we do at times. Even in our most moral moments, and in our most pious practices, we believe - at least we espouse to this belief - that the depth of the evils of our hearts is unfathomable.

Do you believe that? Well, all the scriptures agree on that score - both Old and New Testament. Jeremiah 17:19: 'The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?'. Paul in Romans 3:10-18: 'As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one: There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one. Their throat is an open sepulchre; with their tongues they have used deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips: Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness: Their feet are swift to shed blood: Destruction and misery are in their ways: And the way of peace have they not known: There is no fear of God before their eyes'. Paul, the converted Saul, said in Romans 7:24: 'O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?'. Incidentally, Paul didn't invent this idea of depravity, as some liberal modern theologians would tell us today. The Lord Jesus in Mark chapter 7 said clearly: outward conformity will not work, whether it's religion, whether it's a social humanitarian institutions; because there is an inward anarchy, the sin disease of the heart.

Christians of old have agreed on this. Luther said: 'I am more afraid of my own heart than of the Pope and all his cardinals'. J. C. Ryle, Bishop of Liverpool, 'Sin and the devil will always find helpers in our hearts'. John Calvin: ' The recesses of the heart are so hidden, that no judgement can be formed by any human being'. C.H. Spurgeon: 'There is enough tinder', gunpowder that is, 'in the heart of the best of men in the world to light a fire that shall burn to the lowest hell, unless God should quench the sparks as they fall. There is enough corruption, depravity and wickedness in the heart of the most holy man that is now alive to damn his soul to all eternity, if free and sovereign grace does not prevent it'. He went on to say: 'But I think I hear you saying, O Christian, 'Is thy servant a dog that I should do this thing?' - in other words, 'Am I really as bad as that?'. Spurgeon comments: 'So said Hazacl when the prophet told him that he would slay his master, but he went home and took a wet cloth, and spread it over his master's face, and choked him - and did the next day the sin which he abhorred the day before. Boast not thyself then, O Christian'.

Sometimes I hear Christians say: 'Did you hear that on the news? Wasn't that terrible! I don't understand how people can do these things'. The implication is: 'I could never do those things'. Now I know there are things we think we could never do, but that's only in our thoughts, and our thoughts are not God's thoughts - for God knows our hearts. Jesus knew
what was in man, but I wonder do we really appreciate the depths, the damnable depths that even the heart of a child of God can stoop to? Paul told the Corinthians: 'There is fornication among you that is not even spoken of among the Gentiles'. You see, we need to waken up to this fact that your outward conformity means nothing in the eyes of God. Now I'm not advocating that everybody rolls in a Sunday morning in their pyjamas - but you've got to realise that that suit you have on means nothing to God. I'll tell you this: that headcovering you have on means nothing to God if your heart is sour and sinful. I believe in head covering, 1 Corinthians 11 teaches it, and we need to adhere to it - but there's a lot of people coming in with their head covered, and their hearts are corrupt. That's not right, that's hypocrisy.

You see the Sermon on the Mount, it was so graphic in our Lord detailing that true holiness is a matter of an inward affection and an inward attitude, not just outward actions and outward religious associations. So we need to say this clearly in 21st-century evangelicalism: education, culture, social reform, politics, religion and religious practices are powerless to change the human heart. Do you believe that? Not all those things, in essence, are bad - but they cannot effect the change that is needed to the anarchy within. There's only one answer, and that's regeneration. It was the Lord Jesus who said: 'Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man or a woman, or a boy or a girl, be born again, they cannot see the kingdom of God'. Are you born again? I'm not asking did you grow up in the Iron Hall, or in some evangelical church, and go to Sunday School, and learn the verses - I'm not asking that. I'm asking: are you born again? Have you experienced a supernatural change in your heart?

You see, the Bible says a new heart is necessary, and only God can effect that. It's effected by faith in Christ: 'As many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name', John 1 verse 12. You need a new heart! Ezekiel prophesied - though it was of Israel, we have come into the good of it - that He would give them a heart of flesh in place of their hearts of stone. You sang it at the beginning of our meeting: what is needed is a new creation, 'Therefore if any man be in Christ: old things are passed away; behold, all things are made new'.

Now I want to apply this as I close, very briefly: we as believers in this post-modern, post-Christian age in Western Europe, we need a revived faith in the power of the gospel to change the hearts of men and women. Do you believe that there is nothing else will do it? Do you really? Can we still say: 'I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power', the dynamite, 'of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek', also to the Gentile. This is the message for the masses, this is the message that the world needs, and it's the only thing that will work! But as believers, we personally need to rediscover the power of the Holy Spirit in our own lives as Christians. Sometimes I think people are saved by grace through faith, and they would go to the stake and die for that truth - but they live the rest of their life before God by law and not grace. That's wrong. You see, the law was to show you that you cannot live up to it and acquire the standards of God's holiness.

Paul had to speak to a very specific situation like that in the church in Galatia. These Christians were infiltrated by Judaising teachers, who said: 'Yes, Christ died for your sins, and faith is necessary for salvation, but that's not where it ends: you've got to be circumcised men, and all of you have got to follow the rites and rituals of Moses'. Paul said in Galatians 3:3: 'Are ye so foolish? having begun in the Spirit, are ye now made perfect by the flesh?'. It's a rhetorical question, the answer is: no! You begin in the Spirit, and you live in the Spirit. It's not a striving to live up to God's laws, but what it is is the very nature of God, through the new birth, put in your heart and soul, that is able to live out the law of God and fulfill it to
absolute perfection just as our Lord Jesus Christ did, because it's His Spirit that is dwelling in you.

A lot of Christians don't get that. Paul tried to spell it out to the Romans as well in Romans 8:1-4, he says: 'There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus'. Now the condemnation he's talking about is the condemnation that the law brings, because we're all lawbreakers. Those in Christ 'who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death'. Now do you know what the law of sin and death there is in the context of Romans? It's the law of Moses, you study the book and you will see that. It's the law of sin and death, because it shows us our sin - and its wages, because we break it, is death; but we don't live by that law any more. It doesn't mean we go around breaking it, it's the opposite of that: we have the power to obey it in the Spirit, by the life of Christ in us.

Paul makes that clear, he goes on: 'What the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh', there it is, no argument, 'God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh: That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us', not those who walk after the flesh, but those who walk after the Spirit. Are you struggling as a Christian, simply because you're trying to live up to a list of rules and regulations? That's not what the Christian life is about, it's about the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus that sets you free in the power of Christ to live a life that is beyond rules and regulations, a holier life than mere legalism. It's not a lesser life that's a shame, but it's a righteousness that is above the righteousness of the Scribes and the Pharisees.

Let me leave you with this parting shot from Proverbs 4:23, Solomon said: 'Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life'. Keep your heart, for out of it spring the issues of life. We're going to sing these words now, listen, don't look them up, listen:

'Search all my thoughts, the secret springs,
The motives that control,
The chambers where polluted things
Hold empire o'er the soul.

Search till Thy fiery glance
Has cast holy light through all,
And I, by grace, am brought at last
Before Thy face to fall'.

Transcribed by Andrew Watkins, Preach The Word – March 2008
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Now I want you to turn with me to Mark chapter 7 please, as we continue our studies in this gospel of the Servant of Jehovah. Our title this morning, as we read from verse 24 through to 30, is: 'A Harsh Lesson In Grace' - now, that is what is called an 'anomaly'. Do you know what an anomaly is? It is a deviation from the common rule. 'A Harsh Lesson In Grace' is an anomaly because grace is not usually harsh, grace is accepting, grace is loving, grace is caring - so to describe it as 'harsh' is an anomaly, but it will become clear as we read the story why I have chosen this title, 'A Harsh Lesson In Grace'.

Chapter 7 verse 24 then: "And from thence he", the Lord Jesus, "arose, and went into the borders of Tyre and Sidon, and entered into an house, and would have no man know it: but he could not be hid. For a certain woman, whose young daughter had an unclean spirit, heard of him, and came and fell at his feet: The woman was a Greek, a Syrophenician by nation; and she besought him that he would cast forth the devil out of her daughter. But Jesus said unto her, Let the children first be filled: for it is not meet to take the children's bread, and to cast it unto the dogs. And she answered and said unto him, Yes, Lord: yet the dogs under the table eat of the children's crumbs. And he said unto her, For this saying go thy way; the devil is gone out of thy daughter. And when she was come to her house, she found the devil gone out, and her daughter laid upon the bed".

Now if you can remember two Sunday mornings ago, we looked at chapter 7 verses 1 to 23. We learnt there that as our Lord addressed many of the rules and regulations, man-made I hasten to add, of the Pharisees and Scribes, He was really laying down a line of demarcation that was pronouncing null and void the 'clean and unclean' system of the Mosaic law that we find in the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch, the Torah. What the Lord was doing was, He wasn't just critiquing these extra rules that the Pharisees and Scribes had added to God's law, but He was pronouncing that there was a new age beginning, a new dispensation that would open up God's way of salvation not just to Jews but to Gentiles, in effect the whole world.

At that time our Lord did not explain this radical truth in detail to the crowd, nor to His disciples - and we noted at that study that Peter, who was there in this address in Mark 7, it wasn't until after Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came that he came to terms with the issue of the fact that Gentiles could be saved as well as Jews. We read of that in Acts chapter 10, where the Lord gave him a vision on that housetop of all unclean animals that the law of God in the Old Testament pronounced to be unclean and prohibited to the Jew; and the Lord was saying to him: 'What God has called clean, do not call unclean'. He wasn't speaking primarily of the animals, though that is part of the application, He was speaking of how the Gentiles would now be received - because that is what the lesson was the law was trying to teach the Jews: that they weren't to follow the Gentile ways, they weren't to follow the Gentile gods or lifestyles, they were to follow the Lord and His law. But now the Lord was saying that the Saviour would be the Saviour to the whole world.

Of course that lesson was taught to them in the midst of this issue where the Lord was telling
them that the heart of the problem was the problem of the heart. That's why rules and regulations, conformity without in a religious ritualistic sense, could not affect the anarchy that was within - because it was out of the heart that all these sinful problems came, and therefore cosmetically doctoring the flesh was no good, something needed to be done in the heart. That was the case for the Jew, and that was the case for the Gentiles - the case for all humanity. It's the case for you, if you're here this morning and you're not saved: religion will do you no good - in fact, it will do you bad if your heart is not changed.

Now what we have here this morning in verses 24 to 30 is the Lord practically demonstrating that the way to God had been opened to the Gentiles. The next three miracles - four including this one - that we see in these next verses of Mark are performed in Gentile regions. The Lord is now going out of His usual remit of ministry geographically, and going into Gentile places and dealing with Gentile people. Therefore, when it says in verse 26 that the woman who is meeting the Lord now 'was a Greek, a Syrophenician by nation', it's not a superfluous detail - this woman was a Gentile. She was a Greek, a Syrophenician, which spoke of the fact that she was a Canaanite. Remember that the Canaanites were the people who were driven out of the land in the Old Testament, to give the land to the people of God, the Jews. Now the Lord is dealing with a woman like this, and so there is what we would call a dispensational aspect to this story - now don't let that confuse you, I'll explain it later on - but it just means that something is changing now in how God is dealing with His creation.

Now I have never ceased to be amazed, as I've studied this book, at some of the opening verses of each of the incidents that we have met, because they're wonderful - and very easily we can pass by them to get to the nitty-gritty of the story. We find one of these wonderful verses in verse 24, it says that He 'entered into an house, and would have no man know it'. He entered incognito, but He could not be hidden. I think that's wonderful - the Lord Jesus could not be hidden, the Servant of Jehovah could not be hidden. Now, from whom could the Servant of Jehovah not be hid? We find out from whom in verse 25: 'a certain woman, whose young daughter had an unclean spirit, heard of him, and came and fell at his feet'. From whom could the Servant of Jehovah not be hid? From a person in need! We've seen that right throughout this gospel, haven't we? The Servant of the Lord has come to meet the needs of the needy, and the Servant always made Himself reachable to those who were in need.

So, even though we will see an unfamiliar harshness displayed by the Saviour here, at least that is the apparent thing that comes to us initially, here's a clue to the secret of understanding this incident: the Servant of the Lord always made Himself reachable to those who were in need. I think that will help you. She was 'a certain woman', Mark says. Now, being a woman, that went against her right away - simply because in those days men, obviously, were favoured to the women in how they were looked upon in society. In those days there was actually a sect of Pharisees called 'the bruised and bleeding Pharisees' - that's an interesting denominational name if we were to coin it today, 'the bruised and bleeding Baptists', 'the bruised and bleeding Presbyterians'. Imagine it, 'the bruised and bleeding Pharisees'! Now, why were they called that? Well, whenever they saw a woman in the street or in the marketplace, they would cover their eyes - so they bumped into everything that was around them when they covered their eyes. This is true! They actually took pride in their bruises and bumps as a sign of their sexual ethic. It's remarkable, isn't it?

So this was a woman, and really it wasn't the done thing for a rabbi to be seen talking or fraternising with a member of the opposite sex. But that wasn't her only problem, her sex; she had a daughter, and her daughter had an unclean spirit. Now imagine this, please, some of you who have daughters or sons, or children, any of you could enter into what it must have
been like, in measure at least, to have a child, a little girl, tormented by the power of the devil. Try and conceive in your mind what it would be like to be the mother of such a child, and to look helplessly while your child's body is being pulled apart by the power of Satan. Not only was she oppressed, but verse 26 says she was possessed - because when the Lord healed her, He cast forth the devil out of little girl. So here is a child who was demon-possessed.

So there were a lot of things going against this woman. She was a woman speaking to a man, a rabbi as far as everybody was concerned; and she had a child who was oppressed and possessed by the devil. Now, I don't want to push this application too much, but I do feel that women - even in our society today - are often left to bear the greatest burdens. Whether they be the burdens of family life, the upbringing of children, or when husbands walk out on them - there are various things we could go into - but there are similar circumstances that prevail today in our own society. She was a woman with this child that was destroyed by the devil, but add to this that the disciples were against this woman as well! She was following them and the Lord Jesus, and wanting the Lord to help her, and the disciples were saying: 'Look, Lord, sort her out!', in effect, 'Deal with her because she is getting on our nerves, she follows us everywhere shouting after us! Deal with her so that we can have peace!'.

If that wasn't enough, it seemed that the Lord Jesus Christ Himself was against this woman. Yet what I do want you to see, that is another wonderful aspect of these opening verses of this incident, is that it says in verse 25 that when she had heard of Him, she came and fell at His feet. Now that's vital, and you remember this because it will help you in the rest of this exposition this morning: when she had heard of Him - she had heard about His reputation. What was His reputation? He was a Saviour who said: 'Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest', 'Him that comes unto me I will in no wise cast out'. So she had heard about this miracle Man who was healing and teaching, and the common people were hearing Him, and coming and approaching to Him for help, and getting it! When she heard of this in her predicament, with everything against her, she came and fell at His feet. That's beautiful, isn't it? When I thought of that, it came to me - the words of a hymn Joseph Hart wrote, we don't hear it sung too often today:

'I will arise and go to Jesus,
He will embrace me in His arms;
In the arms of my dear Saviour,
O there are ten thousand charms.

Come, ye sinners, poor and needy,
Weak and wounded, sick and sore;
Jesus ready stands to save you,
Full of pity love and power.

Let not conscience make you linger' - what a verse!
'Let not conscience make you linger,
Nor of fitness fondly dream;
All the fitness He requireth
Is to feel your need of Him'.

She felt her need of Him. She wasn't fit, she wasn't even a Jew - and yet she came, and that was her qualification: her great need drove her to Jesus. Now some of you might have some hurdles to faith in your mind and in your heart, but I would say to you this morning - I believe
it's a word from the Lord to you - that if you feel your need of Christ, forget about all those things and just come to Him. Just come to Him!

She heard that this Man was in the country of Tyre and Sidon. Now she probably had tried many other salves to help her problem: quack doctors, exorcists - I don't know what they might have been - but now she had come to the Lord Jesus, as far as she was concerned He was her only hope. Now up to this point we're very familiar with this type of scene: someone in need coming to Jesus, someone in need coming to get help...

'What a friend we have in Jesus,
All our sins and griefs to bear'.

But now we encounter something that is very unfamiliar to us: the Lord Jesus, God, has instructed us to pour out our hearts before Him; and this little woman comes before this Man who she has heard so much about, and she pours her heart out to Him - and what else could she have felt, what would you have felt, except disappointment? She doesn't even receive a word, initially, from the Lord Jesus. Now for that we need to look at Matthew 15: 'He answered her not a word', Matthew says, 'And his disciples came and besought him, saying, Send her away; for she crieth after us'. All she received from this mighty miracle Man, who was full of compassion supposedly, was a silence - a praying mother, and a silent Jesus. Now imagine this please: here was One who, at least, had the reputation of being able to help; and yet at first, at least, for her it seemed that the One who was able to help her need didn't want to. It's staggering, isn't it?

The disciples wanted the Lord to help - now, I know they wanted the Lord to help her to get rid of her, but even they wanted to help her in a strange sort of way! They were anxious to get rid of her because she kept calling after them. But what does it matter if men, even holy men of God, are for us, if Christ is against us and is silent to us - it doesn't matter. The One who was able to help, it seemed, refused to help. If that was only insinuated in His silence, it seemed to become very clear when He spoke. Now we have to go to Matthew to fill in the gaps here, in Matthew 15:24 He said to the woman: 'I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel'. So after the disciples said: 'Look, help her so that we can get rid of her', the Lord Jesus said 'I'm not sent to you Gentile people, but to the lost sheep of the house of Israel'.

Now what was she going to do now? Well, let me ask you: what would you do? I think most of us, myself included, would probably say: 'Well, it's obviously not God's will for my daughter to be healed', and you would go home and give up. In fact, you would even have grounds to say, would you not: 'The Lord has told me, the Lord has refused me, I heard it with my own ears from His own lips' - but did she give up? No! We read that she continued to implore Him, because true need cannot be repressed - because when you're in a predicament like this woman was, there's nowhere else you can go but to the Lord. So if you ever hear anyone say: 'Well, I've prayed about a situation enough already, and so I've decided to stop praying, nothing's happened', the only thing that that indicates, to me at least, is that the burden of their need isn't strong enough to keep them praying. For if you have a need like this woman had, you can't do anything but keep going to the Lord - those with a true need cannot stop! Like this woman, you would rather die at the feet of Christ than stop praying.

So what did she do? Well, she kept praying, in a roundabout way, speaking to the Lord Jesus - but she did a little bit more than that. Verse 25, now in Mark's account, shows us that she came and fell at His feet. Now I know that speaks of worship, but practically what she was
doing was stopping the Lord Jesus in His tracks. I hope you can see that. She was becoming a physical obstacle to Him. Now I don't know whether you have ever come to the position in your prayer life where you just don't know what to say any more, you don't know how to pray any more, you become exhausted even for words, and you just cry out. Matthew tells us that as she fell before the Lord as a bundle at His feet, she cried out - Matthew 15:25 - 'Lord, help me!'. Some of you are there right now: you don't know what else to pray, what else to say, other than to cry 'Lord, help me!'.

Now you would imagine we could conclude the story now - how could the Lord refuse such a supplication from such a woman? Well, one writer put it like this: 'We would expect that the greater than Joseph' - remember Joseph, who couldn't control himself when he saw his brothers and he was incognito - 'We would imagine that a greater than Joseph could not control Himself any longer, and must reveal Himself to her. Could He who wept at Lazarus' grave, and who was moved with inner compassion over the multitude, refuse this woman any longer?'. But do you know what happened for her? Verse 27: the more she implored, the more she begged, the more she prayed, the worse it got! In verse 27: 'Jesus said unto her, Let the children first be filled: for it is not meet', it's not fitting, 'to take the children's bread, and to cast it unto the dogs'.

Have you ever experienced that? You're praying about something and the more you pray, maybe even fast, things seem to get worse rather than better - and you think: 'What's the point? I'd be better not praying'. In effect, what the Lord Jesus was saying to this woman was: 'My healing power, it's for others, but it's not for you'. Just imagine it! This isn't 'gentle Jesus, meek and mild', that we are used to from the children's storybooks and the hymns, it's very strange to us. She could have pleaded her rights, but the fact of the matter is: she didn't have any. She was outside God's people, as far as being an Israelite was concerned. She hadn't the covenants of God, she wasn't related to God the way the Jews were. So she had nothing to plead before Him, so what did she do? Did she say: 'Well, some Saviour you are!', and turn on her heels? Do you know what she did? Verse 28 says she agreed with the Lord! He said: 'It's not right to give the bread for the children to the dogs', and in verse 28 she says 'Yes, Lord'. Matthew's account says she said: 'Truth, Lord'. She didn't become bitter, she didn't let pride rise its head in her breast, she didn't say: 'Look, I'm no worse than any of the rest of the people that You've been healing', she agreed with Christ! Do you know what that is? That is the attitude of prayer: humbly agreeing with the Lord regarding our own disposition, our own sinfulness, our own unworthiness - and agreeing with Christ as far as everything that God's word says. That is the place God wants His people to be: where they will speak well of God and much to God, even when everything seems a loss to them, even God Himself.

So, if you're in that position, that's where God wants us. That's where Job got to when he said: 'Though he slay me, yet will I trust him'. That's exactly what she did. It seemed that Christ was slaying her, kicking her while she was down, but she held on, she agreed with Him. Now what did she do next? Well, look with me, she didn't give up - what a woman! She held on - now what did she have to hold on to? It would seem very little at an initial glance, but the Lord said: 'It's not meet, it's not fitting, to give the children's bread to dogs' - so she held onto one of those crumbs that, per chance, would have fallen off from the children's table and fallen into the dog's mouth. She hoped that that would be hers. 'Yes, Lord', verse 28, 'yet the dogs under the table eat of the children's crumbs'.

Now what had this woman done? She had caught the Lord Jesus Christ by what He said to her! Now we're getting close to the secret of this story. Let me put it in more understandable
words: she took hold of Christ in His own words. She never mentioned bread, she never mentioned table, she never mentioned anything related to that - it was He who mentioned it first. He mentioned the dogs under the table, and she grabbed hold of it. Now before I expound that, let me ask the question that should be glaringly obvious to you: is this a different Lord Jesus Christ here in Mark 7 than we find throughout the whole of the gospel records? He certainly seems a bit different, but is He different? Is He different to the Lord Jesus who said to the man, who you remember was sick 38 years lying by the pool of Bethesda - a man, by the way, who never sought for healing, never asked for healing - and this Lord Jesus said: 'Wilt thou be made whole? What do you want? Do you want to be made whole?'. Here it might appear that He just ignores this poor woman, and even refuses her. When He does hear what she's saying, He looks to be reluctant, to be begrudging in His grace and healing toward her.

Now here's the key in understanding this passage, it's understanding what I said at the very beginning of this message: there is a dispensational significance to this event. God is now starting to do something different, not just towards the Jews but the whole world. He's using this woman to teach that very lesson - a new chapter in His ministry is opening up. Up until this point He's been dealing with Israel primarily, now He's going to these Gentile regions. He has been rejected in Capernaum, He has had a delegation - we read of it in chapter 7, the first 23 verses - a delegation of religious hit men coming down from Jerusalem to try and trap Him in how He and His disciples adhered to the law. Now He has drawn a line as far as the Jews are concerned, and He's going out to reach out to the Gentiles.

Many people read this portion and think the Lord is reluctant towards this wee woman. Now that's how it seems initially - and incidentally, that's often how it seems to us, does it not, in our prayers. That's how the disciples read the situation, I guarantee it; that's how this woman, initially I'm sure, read the situation - but the word that is coming to us is:

'Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,  
But trust Him for His grace;  
Behind a frowning providence  
There hides a smiling face'.

In fact, I think the opposite was the case - do you know what the Lord was actually doing here? Well, two things you need to know: first of all, see this woman's desire. She desired to invoke the grace of our Lord Jesus to help her in her predicament - so don't miss that. She had a great desire, in her need, to know the grace of God. But verse 27 gives us a glimpse into the Lord's heart, the Lord pointed out: 'I've been sent to the Jews first' - that's right, salvation is of the Jews, the Messiah came from the Jews, all promises of Messiah were from the Jews. He speaks of dogs, and the Jews understood the Gentiles to be dogs - that's how they saw them: unclean, outside the camp of religious ritual cleanliness and acceptance with God. But please don't read in any tone to these verses that is not there! I believe the tone of our Lord Jesus was not harsh, it was not cruel. Here's the way I think He said these words: in an inquisitive manner. What I mean by that is: when He says, 'Let the children first be filled', he's not saying 'Let the children first be filled: for it is not meet to take the children's bread, and to cast it unto the dogs!' - I think He said it like this: 'Let the children first be filled: for it is not meet to take the children's bread, and to cast it unto the dogs, is it? Is it not?' - it's almost posed, not literally, but with inference as a question to open up these people's minds. All these religious Jews round about, and this little Gentile woman - now you might say: 'You're reading a lot into this'. Well, the word for 'dog' is the word in Greek for 'pet dog', it's not the word used for the 'scavenger', the unclean dog - it's the word used for a little dog that
sits under the table, or that lies at the bottom of the bed. It's the word for a dog who has been accepted in the house!

Do you know what the Lord is doing here? He is wanting to evoke, indeed provoke in the minds and hearts of these Jews and even this woman, that God is now reaching out in grace to the Gentiles. That's what He's doing. So rather than shutting the door to this woman, the Lord is leaving the door ajar. He wants them to see that this accepted wisdom that they had taken as an inference of the law of Moses was not the way God was working now. He wanted this woman, by faith, to walk through this open door that He now was opening. It's wonderful, isn't it?

So this story is not about the reluctance of the Lord, it's in fact the antithesis: it's about His willingness. It's misunderstood, isn't it? It's misunderstood like Luke 18:1-8, you know the parable where the Lord was teaching His disciples to pray always and not to faint, and He tells them about an unjust judge and a widow who knocks the door and gets him up, and is continually, importunately, trying to get him to avenge her adversaries - and he says: 'Look, I'm going to get rid of this woman', a bit like the disciples, 'I'm going to silence her, I'm fed up with her, and give her what she's asking'. Then the Lord applies the parable, and we have often this vision of God that He's like that, He's like that unjust judge - that's not what the Lord was meaning. He's meaning that God is the opposite of that. If the unjust judge gave that woman what she was asking for because he was fed up with her, how much more shall your heavenly Father avenge the cries of His own elect, which cry unto Him day and night without ceasing? He is the opposite of all that, He wants to give us our need!

So many misunderstand this event as well. Now you've heard the expression 'Playing the devil's advocate', haven't you? You know what it means: it means to pretend against an idea, to take on a role that you don't really believe in, but to make a point. You understand what it means? Well, here the Lord Jesus is playing the law's advocate, that's what He's doing. He's playing the law's advocate, He's standing in the place of what these religious, self-righteous Pharisees would say, and how they would behave. He wants to show the exclusiveness of the law in order to display the wonderful glory of His grace, as a contrast to it - that He was going to do something new. Ironically, through what seemed to be initially great harshness, the Lord Jesus was inviting this ostracised woman through the open door of His grace.

Now I can't go on any further - I have a lot to say, and I'll say it, don't you worry - but I can't go on any further without saying: have you gone through that door? Have you? It's open for you today. You might have a load of hurdles in your mind and heart that you feel you've got to get over, those aren't in God's mind or heart - as far as He is concerned, the door is open wide. The Lord Jesus was going to Calvary as the Servant of the Lord to lay down His life, to shed His blood for your sins - there's nothing more for you to do, for Jesus did it all. Just come through the door. It would be wonderful if someone here this morning came through that door.

Two things we need to notice from this incident: one, the desire of this woman to receive His grace. You've got to have a desire to receive God's grace - but two, hallelujah, the willingness! That's what the story is all about, not reluctance, the willingness of the Lord Jesus to administer God's grace to all men. The lesson is: God's grace is available to all the Gentiles, all the people who want it! I thought of the words of the hymn:

'From age to age the theme is telling:
Grace is free, grace is free.
That's the main point of this story: God's grace has been made free! The Lord had to behave in this seemingly harsh way to illustrate it in a shocking manner, that all men everywhere, if they repent and believe, will be saved. Now: what made her hold on in spite of the apparent unwillingness of Christ? This is very important - I wouldn't have held on, I'll be honest with you, I would have given up. I'm sure many of you, if not all of you, would have been the same. Well, here, I believe, is the answer to this question: the secret of her holding on was that she had got a glimpse of Christ's heart. You remember that she had heard about Him before, and she had understood the heart of this Man who received sinful men and women, and the outcasts all over Palestine. So she was interpreting His words, even His harsh words, in the light of what she already knew about Him. In other words, she had seen His grace displayed and heard about it before, and so she knew that no matter how harsh these words sounded, there had to be a gracious loophole in them somewhere. There had to be! If this was the same Lord Jesus there wouldn't be no grace for her.

Now there is a secondary point, and it relates to prayer. If we're going to know God's grace in our lives, can I say this: we've got to get to know the Lord's heart. It's alright knowing His word, and a lot of you folk know His word well - and that's wonderful, that's not to be despised - but that's not where it ends: 'Beyond the sacred page, I seek Thee, Lord'. Gary Culberson said: 'One of the reasons people find it hard to be obedient to the commands of Christ is that they are uncomfortable taking orders from a stranger'. We've got to get to know Him.

So there are many lessons on prayer, and let me leave them with you very briefly. In prayer we come to a throne of grace, don't we? It has been opened up to us by the new and living way of the Saviour. So in this story the Lord was allowing Himself to be caught in His words by this woman, and the Lord still does this. He let us first of all see our impossibility from our side, and then He shows us the possibility from His side. It's not that He's reluctant, He wants us to get to that place where our self-sufficiency is gone, so that we are completely dependent upon Him. As Philip Brooks, the Puritan, said: 'Prayer is not overcoming God's reluctance, but laying hold of His willingness' - not overcoming His reluctance, but laying hold on His willingness. So the lesson for us in prayer in this incident is: God's delays are not His denials. Do you know what they are? God's delays are His encouragements to increase our faith - that's why God is delaying in answering your prayers. He wants to increase your faith. We see that in Matthew 15, in his record of this story: 'Jesus answered and said unto her, O woman, great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt. And her daughter was made whole from that very hour'.

Now let me say this, two points: it's significant, first of all, that the two and only two times our Lord Jesus speaks of 'great faith' in the Gospels, it was of Gentiles - the other one was the Roman Centurion. It is also significant that on both those occasions the Lord Jesus healed those that were in need from a distance, speaking of the distance that was between the Jew and Gentile, and the Lord was now going into that space and bringing the Gentiles to God. The Lord is teaching that faith in Him, faith in His word, can span any distance. But often the
Lord has to delay, and it might seem that He denies, to increase our faith, to cause us to grow in our faith. You see, the Lord's delays are His way of training us in persevering prayer - so that we get to the point where we can be sure to obtain the answer of the Lord.

Do you know something? For many of our needs, only persevering faith expressed in prayer will avail and bring us the answer - that's why we don't often see as many answers to prayer as we would like, because we're not prepared to importunately persist, and prevail, and persevere in faith. You see, generally speaking, we are a generation of quitters today - there is a generational aspect to that. Things were harder years ago in an everyday sense, people had to strive for their bread, and work with the sweat of their brow for everything they had. Things come a lot easier today, and so this has really become part of our makeup. That striving spirit that was even a human thing years ago isn't the same, and it is identical in the spiritual realm: there are very few people who strive in prayer. Do you know something? Satan trembles when he sees a striving saint upon their knees. I think he has a way of resisting our ordinary prayers at times, we see that in the book of Daniel. He can resist our prayers, but Daniel's victory came because he persevered, and he prevailed! Satan seems to lose his power, like he lost his power in this wee girl in this story, when we hold onto God and won't let go until He blesses.

George Mueller knew all about that. There are many instances in his life we could recite. At one point he said: 'The great point in prayer is never to give up until the answer comes'. He gives an anecdote from his own experience. He says: 'I've been praying 63 years and 8 months for one man's conversion' - 63 years, this is George Mueller, a great man of faith, 63 years and 8 months - 'He is not saved yet, but he will be. How can it be otherwise? I am praying!'. The day came when Mueller's friend did receive the Lord Jesus, but it didn't come until Mueller's coffin was being lowered into the ground - yet it came. Beside that open grave that man, prayed for 63 years and 8 months, trusted Christ at the grave of the man who was praying for him all those years. Persevering prayer won the battle. Mueller's prayer saw success just for four simple words: he did not quit.

What is the Lord teaching? He's teaching the willingness to give His grace. What is He teaching? He's teaching the need for us to desire enough to surrender ourselves before God in importunate, persevering, prevailing prayer - to realise that any delays to answer our prayers, and seeming refusals, are often tests of our faith for us to grow stronger, and pray harder, and see greater wonders done for Almighty God's glory.

It almost seems too good to be true, doesn't it? But the saints of God of old have testified to it, I'll leave you with one quote of the great missionary Adoniram Judson - listen to these words, these are profound: 'I never prayed sincerely and earnestly for anything, but it came at some time'. Now there's qualification there: sincerely and earnestly - and, of course, he was praying according to the will of God, not against it. 'No matter at how distant a day, somehow', he goes on, 'in some shape, probably the last I would have devised it, it came'. Grace receives us, and we must continue to receive that grace even in the midst of seemingly answered prayers that we think are God's refusals.

There's a hymn I introduced the folk to here on a Thursday night, and we're going to sing it. It goes like this, just listen to it:

'Unanswered yet? The prayer your lips have pleaded
In agony of heart these many years?
Does faith begin to fail, is hope departing,
And think you all in vain those falling tears?
Say not the Father hath not heard your prayer;
You shall have your desire, sometime, somewhere'.

Let me just say: I feel I have to qualify what I have said this morning. There are certain circumstances where, in God’s sovereignty, He doesn’t give us what we are asking, because it’s not according to His will. There is often a mystery in that, we cannot understand why He doesn't. So there are things like that in our lives, I’m not suggesting that those can be necessarily overcome by our prevailing - but what I will say is this: those, I think, according to Scripture, are the exception rather than the rule. When Paul came and said: 'Lord, take this thorn away from my flesh', three times he said it, he prevailed; the Lord said, 'No, my grace is sufficient for thee' - that is the exception, the rule is 'Ask, and it shall be given unto thee; seek, and ye shall find'. So there are many circumstances, perhaps, we have surrendered to, and said: 'That's the will of God' - but what we need to do is prevail more, and pray more.

Father, say to folk what You are saying, and unjumble any confusion that might be in folk's minds from what is a very difficult passage of Scripture that confronts us with things we're not used to seeing in our Saviour - and yet, He brings to us in such a graphic way things that we need to hear this morning. People who are here without Christ, the door is open and they can enter in now by a simple act of faith. Yet all of us, Lord, have a new and living way to come to, to find grace and help in time of our need. May we all enter in, may we hold onto God until we hear the answer, whatever that answer may be - the answer may be 'No', the answer may be 'Wait', the answer may be 'Yes' - but Lord, let us hold on until we hear Your voice. Lord, thank You for Your word, and may it rest in every heart now. We say: 'Lord, increase our faith, and teach us to pray'. Amen.

Transcribed by Andrew Watkins, Preach The Word – March 2008
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Mark chapter 7, beginning to read at verse 31, and we have reached this point now in Mark’s gospel, and we take up verse 31 to the end of chapter: "And again, departing from the coasts of Tyre and Sidon, he", that is, our Lord Jesus Christ, "came unto the sea of Galilee, through the midst of the coasts of Decapolis. And they bring unto him one that was deaf, and had an impediment in his speech; and they beseech him to put his hand upon him. And he took him aside from the multitude, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat, and touched his tongue: And looking up to heaven, he sighed, and saith unto him, Ephphatha, that is, Be opened. And straightway his ears were opened, and the string of his tongue was loosed, and he spake plain. And he charged them that they should tell no man: but the more he charged them, so much the more a great deal they published it; And were beyond measure astonished, saying, He hath done all things well: he maketh both the deaf to hear, and the dumb to speak". Amen, and we end our reading there at the end of chapter 7.

We're going to look at chapter 7, these last verses, 31 to 37, under the title 'The Signs Of The Servant'. We know this is the gospel of the Servant, and a lot of my titles in this gospel have been a bit ambiguous - they could have had several meanings, and each of the meanings would have been correct. You will see, hopefully, as we pass through this morning's study, that it's the same with this one: 'The Signs Of The Servant'. They are the signs of how the Lord Jesus operated in this particular miracle. They are the signs of how people knew He was indeed the Servant of the Lord, the Messiah - but they are also signs to identify us as we serve the Lord in this present age. So I want you to see all those particular aspects to it.

Now, if I was to ask you the question: which is worse, deafness or blindness? What would your answer be? What would your answer be? Blindness, some say blindness, any for deafness? A few - well, most people do say blindness. The idea of losing your hearing doesn't seem to be nearly as debilitating as losing your sight. However medical authorities, and deaf people themselves communicate that it is far worse to be deaf. Listen to one quotation: 'Terrible as blindness is, the blind do not suffer the social pain and stigma experienced by the deaf: gawking, impatient stares of those who are not aware of one's condition. There is also the humiliation of being thought stupid because one cannot understand or speak'. Now I know some may disagree with that, but many would concur with the fact that deafness is at times worse than blindness.

But here is a man in Mark 7 who was deaf and dumb, he couldn't hear, he couldn't speak. So this poor man couldn't ask any questions - imagine it. Let alone asking questions, he couldn't hear any answers or explanations to a question. Undoubtedly, he probably could not read because of his debilitating disability of lack of speech and hearing. So in a spiritual sense as well, this man couldn't read the Scriptures, he couldn't understand, perhaps, or grasp the truths that we are so privileged to learn ourselves. Now I'm sure that in the society the Lord Jesus lived in, many would have seen this as more than just a physical disability of the senses, they would have seen this man as demon possessed - that the devil somehow had afflicted him for some reason, whether it was his parent's sins or his own sins. However we describe this man, or understand him, one thing is absolutely certain: he had a miserable,
hopeless existence in this society.

Now I don't think it is jumping into conjecture to see that what we are given here by the Holy Spirit of God is a very graphic picture of what a sinner is. We know that the miracles often are parables in action. When you think about it: sinners are just like this man, cut off. The Bible tells us that sinners are dead in their trespasses and in their transgressions. We are cut off from God, we are cut off also in the sense that we cannot communicate with the Lord the way we were created to do. Psalm 66 tells us that if we regard iniquity in our hearts, the Lord will not hear us. So we cannot communicate to the Lord the way we ought to. Now I'm not saying that God doesn't ever hear the prayers of an unsaved person, or a person who has sin in their life - I believe He does at times - but there's no guarantee or no promise that God should hear our prayers, and in fact the majority of occasions I think that He doesn't. The heavens are as brass to us. We are cut off from God, and that involves communication, it also involves connection - we cannot connect to God, and we cannot connect to God's people. Isaiah 59 tells us: 'Your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear'.

Now here we see this man, deaf and dumb, and what an illustration of what it is to be a sinner: cut off from the life of God, cut off from dialogue with God, cut off from any connection with God. A pitiful sight! But the message of this particular miracle is that there is good news, and the good news is the compassion of the Saviour who came to this man where he was and made him whole again. So we're going to see both of those things this morning, and we need to see them: we need to see sinners as they really are. If you're a sinner here this morning, you need to see yourself as you really are: cut off from the life of God, cut off from communication with God, cut off from connection with God and God's people. But we also need to see the wonderful compassionate Saviour who came to where this man was, and comes to where sinners are to meet their need.

Not only did the Saviour love this man, but others loved this man, others brought this man to the Lord Jesus Christ. Now we don't know how this happened: the venue where it took place was a place called Decapolis, which was geographically a place of ten cities. Now you may have heard of Decapolis before, we certainly met it before in this particular book. In chapter 5 we read that the demoniac went back to Decapolis to preach the great things the Lord had done for him, the Lord had had compassion on him. It may well be that the friends of this deaf and dumb man had heard about the miraculous deeds of the Lord Jesus toward the demoniac, with perhaps 6000 or more demons possessing him. Maybe they got a bit of encouragement and hope, enthusiasm that this miracle Man from Galilee could perhaps meet their friend's need.

So they had heard of the power of the Lord to change and transform lives, and this man's friend's brought him to Jesus. I wonder is there someone here this morning, and your friends, your loved ones are seeking to do the same. They know the power, the wonderful change in their life that has been wrought through Jesus coming into their heart, and they are wanting to bring you to Christ. Like these friends in verse 32, they are also praying for you to bring you to Christ. Now I know that this was direct dialogue with the Lord Jesus Christ - they besought Him to put His hand upon him, upon this man - but prayer is exactly the same thing today, that's what we're doing: we're coming to God through the Lord Jesus and asking Him to save people, transform their lives, revolutionise them, regenerate them through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Maybe that's what's happening to you - but certainly, believers in our meeting this morning,
that's what we've got to be doing for our unbelieving friends: we have got to be seeking to bring them to the Lord Jesus; we have got to be beseeching, imploring the throne of grace that the Lord might reach out and touch them, and change and transform their lives. So this story has a twofold application: it applies to those in our meeting now who find themselves in a similar predicament to this deaf and dumb man, cut off from God, cut off from communication with God, connection with God and God's people. But it also applies to us as believers, that we need to touch people in the pagan world, and it tells us how we can touch them, how we can serve them, how we can win them for the Master.

So let's look at it, four headings: the first, we need to see the Servant's touch, verse 33. He took this man aside from the multitude, and put His fingers into his ears, and He spit, and touched his tongue. Now that's a strange and elaborate behaviour, isn't it? In fact, it's unique, you don't find the Lord Jesus doing anything like that in any of the other gospel records - but we shouldn't be surprised that it was strange and elaborate, because, as the hymn says, God moves in mysterious ways His wonders to perform. You see, the Lord Jesus has His own methods, and if we pray that the Lord should work in our lives and the lives of those whom we love - as his friends did in verse 32 - when we pray we've got to be open to the Lord answering prayer in His own way, in His way.

Now there's only one way to be saved, and that's the way of the cross, but there are many different paths or ways that leads to the one way that is the cross. God brings us often by all different and varied means to get to Calvary, and to bow in humility and admit our sin, and receive the Saviour. Is there someone here this morning and God is moving in a mysterious way in your life just now? It seems elaborate, unnecessary perhaps, pointless, a strange thing is happening to you. You're like this man who the Lord is operating on in a very strange manner. Well, don't question what God is doing in your life at present, don't fight against Him. What you need to do is do exactly what this man did: submit to Him, surrender to Him, and let Him have His way in your life.

Now, please note, as I've already said, you'll never find another account like this of how the Lord dealt with this deaf and dumb man. He deals with this man differently than anyone else, and only Mark records this incident. Now what does that tell us? It tells us that God deals with us individually. May I say, believers, that's the way we need to deal with unbelievers, people in a pagan world need to be dealt with by us individually. We need to use different tools for different problems, but the Lord does this in our own lives when He's working with us: He brings different circumstances to bear on different people in order to bring them close to Himself. Have you experienced the Servant of the Lord's touch on your life? Maybe for good or for bad: the Lord has brought blessing into your experience, has the goodness of God led you to repentance? It ought to. Maybe He has brought bad experiences into your life: well, have those things caused you to look up to God?

Do you recognize the Servant's touch in your experience? Now you might say: 'Well, how do I know if Christ is touching my life at present?', or, 'If we're trying to win people for the Lord, how do we know when the Lord is touching their lives?'. Well, here's two ways to note: the first is found in verse 33, the Lord Jesus 'took him aside from the multitude'. Now I think this is profound: the Lord separates people from the crowd when He begins to work in their lives. He separates them from the crowd. Now, in a literal sense, this man's lot in life was one of embarrassment - and perhaps the Lord didn't want to embarrass him any more, and so He separated him from the crowd. But there is a spiritual application here for us all, because when the Holy Spirit begins to work in our lives and moves in conviction of sin, He separates us from the crowd. What do I mean? The things we used to take pleasure in, the things of sin
that would have given us a buzz in the past, no longer do it.

He begins to take us away from our love of sin, from the rest of the crowd, because He is preparing us to fall in love with the Lord Jesus. So maybe you find yourself in a position now: things of sin that you used to love, and appealed to you, no longer appeal. The things that you used to balk at and cringe at, are the things that you're being drawn towards, and your attraction is now magnetically being pulled to. Well, that is a sure sign that the Lord is beginning to touch you, if He's separating you from the crowd. You're beginning to feel different than the crowd, you're beginning to feel different than your friends, you're beginning to feel different than your nearest and dearest - God is making you different! God is doing it.

Now can I say, believers, that's what we need to pray for. It's alright jumping off the deep end and praying for people to be saved, but I think that's running ahead of ourselves at times. We need to first pray that the Holy Spirit will work in conviction. That's what the Lord Jesus promised in the gospel of John, that this One who would come after Him would convince the world of sin, of righteousness, and of judgement to come. So we need to start seeing sinners as they are, we need to bring them to Jesus, we need to pray for the Lord to work in their lives - specifically by bringing conviction of sin to them, separating them from the crowd.

Here's a second sign of knowing if the Servant's touch is on your life: verse 33, the second part of it, the Lord Jesus, having brought him aside, put His fingers into his ears, and spat and touched his tongue. Now that is very strange! Here's the second point: not only does the Lord Jesus separate us from the crowd when He's working in our life, but He begins to communicate to us in a way that we understand. Did you get that? He starts to communicate in a way that we understand. Now why did the Lord thrust His fingers in this man's ears? Because that was the man's handicap, he was deaf, he couldn't hear anything the Lord was saying - so the Lord was letting him feel it and sense it. It was, literally, sign language. This was the sign of the Servant of the Lord to this man: 'I am going to make you hear', by putting His fingers in his ears.

Now why did He spit and touch his tongue? Well, He's telling the man what He can't do through dialogue: 'I am going to make you speak'. So the message was being communicated to this man by the Lord's touch in a way that this man could understand. Everybody else was aghast, their chin had dropped: 'What is this miracle Man doing now?'. They didn't understand, and maybe no one understands what's going on in your life - but you know God is communicating to you! This is what the Lord Jesus did in His life, He touched people in a way that they understood that no one else could appreciate. You remember the leper in chapter 1 and verse 41, you remember that they weren't allowed to touch lepers - it would make them unclean, the person that touched them would be unclean. Yet we see the Lord Jesus touching a leper and healing him, and the Greek word actually means 'embracing him', 'grabbing him', He took hold of him! A man who hadn't known the touch, perhaps, of his wife or his children! He had been banished from the community, from the society, and from the congregation of Israel - and now the Lord Jesus grabs hold of him! What a communication: 'I love you!'.

I wonder is the Lord grabbing hold of you? Believers, do you know that we need to communicate to unbelievers today in a way that they understand? The way that they understand - I'm not talking about puppet shows now, I'm not talking about dressing up as clowns, I'm not talking about bringing the world into the church, that's a fatal mistake - but this is the way people understand: it is through the touch of compassion, that's it. The touch of compassion! Amazing love! The Lord Jesus could have just willed for this man to be healed,
the Lord Jesus could have spoken the word whether the man heard it or not, and he would have been healed right away - but He chose to touch the untouchable, He chose to love the unlovely, and He chose to do it in the full gaze of everyone in society, because He was saying to this man: 'I understand what you've gone through all your life, I know what it feels like to be you, and I want to make it right'. It's wonderful, isn't it? The Servant's touch.

Sinner, are you beginning to discern the Lord speaking to you, separating you from the crowd, communicating in a way that you really understand it is God? Maybe it's through your conscience; maybe it's through your circumstances; maybe it's through other Christians in your workplace, or in your family, among your friends or neighbours; maybe it's just through the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, through reading His word, through engaging His character and His claims - that's the Servant's touch on your life.

Observe a second sign of the Servant - not only His touch, but His look. Verse 34: 'Looking up to heaven, he sighed'. Now, why did the Lord Jesus look up to heaven? Remember, this man couldn't hear, and He was signing to the man where His help would come from - Psalm 121: 'I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help. My help cometh from the LORD, which made heaven and earth'. In Exodus 4 we read: 'Who hath made man's mouth? or who maketh the dumb, or deaf, or the seeing, or the blind? have not I the LORD?'. The Lord Jesus was showing where the source of power for this miracle would come from. Is there an unsaved person in our gathering this morning: where are you looking for deliverance? Where are you looking for salvation? To whom are you looking to be saved? Some people are too proud to look to another man, to look outside of themselves; they're looking for the hero inside of themselves, or they're looking for some saint that will come out of themselves by following an ethic or some kind of religious code - but what we see clearly is that our help must come from the Lord, He must save us.

Even Bishop G. Bromley of Oxnam, who was the president of the World Council of Churches, on one occasion said: 'I would rather go to hell than go to heaven on the back of another man'. Well, to hell he will go, for the Lord Jesus said: 'Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God'. Some people are just too proud to accept salvation as a gift, they want to contribute something to it - but incidentally, believers, we also need to be clear in our heads where salvation will come from. It comes from heaven! Therefore that necessitates all the more that we go to heaven for the power, and we come in prayer - and I think we have underestimated, perhaps more than any society, perhaps because of all the means and education and technology we have, we have underestimated the need that there is for prayer in evangelism. If we don't pray, we might as well not bother, because our power comes from heaven, and people's salvation will come from heaven - and so we are meant to point them to heaven.

But you see, there is something else here: if we're going to win people like the Lord Jesus won this deaf and dumb man, we don't just need to touch them with the Servant's touch, we need to look at them with the Servant's look. I want to ask you believers here this morning: how do you look at unbelievers? How do you look at them? I, on occasions, have been with folk outside the church, and they see a drunk person, and they 'Tut, tut' and walk along the other side of the street. Is that the way you look at them? Or a person comes into the meeting, whether saved or unsaved, and they're wearing certain clothes - they are looked up and down, and 'Tut, tut'. Is that the way you look at them? I'm telling you: that's not going to win them to Christ. There's no way on this earth that will win them to Christ. It's a look of compassion that will win them to the Lord Jesus. How do we look at them? Do we frown at them? Do we disdain them? Do we express our indignation? There's a hymn that is so close to
my heart, and it goes like this:

'I ask as I pass down the busy street,
Is it only a crowd I see?

Do I lift my eyes with a careless gaze,
That pierces no deep-down woe?
Have I naught to give to the teeming throng,
Of the wealth of the love I know?

Let me look at the crowd', the chorus says, 'as my Saviour did,
Till my eyes with tears grow dim,
Let me look and pity the wandering sheep,
And love them for love of Him'.

Is that how we look at them? It's not! You need to point to heaven, but there's no good pointing to heaven and not looking with a look of love. Are you coming with me? If we're going to have the signs of the Servant, we're going to have to see the unsaved as they are; we've got to bring them to the Lord Jesus; we've got to pray for the Lord to work in their lives by praying for conviction to separate them from the crowd, we've got to pray that they will be communicated to in a way that they understand and will respond to; we need to point them to heaven to show our power is from heaven, let them see that their salvation is from heaven - but we must look upon them with a look of love, because they can tell the difference! They can!

The Servant's touch, the Servant's look, thirdly: the Servant's sigh - verse 34: 'He looked to heaven and he sighed'. Now this was inaudible, in a sense, to the man, because he couldn't hear - but visually there was something being communicated. The sense of the word 'sigh' speaks of a heaving of Christ's breast. The Lord Jesus, as He breathed, His breast expanded - and as He exhaled to heaven, this man could see that the Lord was moved because of his pitiful condition. He was communicating in His sigh: 'Man, I care about you'. Does Jesus care? Oh yes He cares, I know He cares. Was He not called 'the Man of Sorrows'? Surely He was despised and rejected of men, acquainted with grief. Oh, the Lord Jesus cares for you, soul - no matter who doesn't care for you. Oh, the compassion that the Lord Jesus showed toward men. This man saw His sigh of compassion. Mary and Martha, at the grave of their brother Lazarus in John 11, that short verse, 'Jesus wept' - they saw His cry of compassion. The verse here in verse 33 speaks of a groaning in the spirit, a troubled groan, and it actually comes from an ancient Greek that describes - and I don't mean this irreverently, but it graphically communicates what we're seeing here, or should see - the snorting of a horse. It's as if there was an involuntary gasp, a trembling where the Lord Jesus just breaks down in a sigh because of this man's awful condition.

The sigh of compassion, the cry of compassion, and one day the whole world would see the Servant of the Lord die in compassion. 'Surely he hath borne our grieves, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted', all our sorrows laid upon Him, all our griefs laid upon Christ. Then again, on Golgotha's hill, on that Roman cross His chest would heave once more with breathless spurts as He hangs, nailed to the tree. You see, Christ's compassion didn't just bring this man to His feet, it brought, potentially, the whole world to His feet. Has it brought you to His feet yet? Have you come to Him yet? Do you not see His sigh over you? Do you not see Him cry over you? Do you not see Him die over the head of you?
Well, the same word, incidentally, is used in Romans chapter 8 and verse 26 - just listen:
'Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings', that's the word, 'groanings which cannot be uttered'. So it's speaking now that there is a sigh that we can experience in prayer, where we don't have the words with which to pray any longer, it's just our heart breaking and our soul being poured out to the Lord. Do we experience that in prayer? That's what's needed if we're going to see people touched, that's what's needed if we're going to see a pagan world transformed. This man was a Gentile in a Gentile region, cut off from God's people; and the Lord had to come in a different way, touch him, look upon him, sigh over him. In Galatians 4:19, Paul could say: 'My little children, of whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you' - we're going to have to have birth pangs in the spiritual realm to see people born again! That'll take us away from the TV, it will take us away from the shops, it will take us away from our social gatherings at times, it will take us away from sleep, it will take us away from food - is it worth the hassle? That's what it's going to take.

The Lord sighed. So we're adding one thing to the list if we're going to have signs that we are servants of the Lord: we're going to need to travail in prayer. Now all these gestures were accommodating this man, remember the Lord was accommodating this man, He was coming down to his level, He was communicating compassion through sign language that he could understand. He took him aside, He looks at him in his inhibitions, his embarrassment, his shame and fear - but the greatest sign that ever communicated God's love was Calvary! Romans 5:8: 'God has demonstrated his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us' - now that is the ultimate sign, and we are to take it to the world. How are we to take it? With a tract? With a gospel message? With a banner? A sign on the back of a bus? Yes, all those things - but here's a way that we're not too familiar with: Paul says in Colossians, we rejoice in sufferings 'and fill up that which is behind', or lacking, 'of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body's sake, which is the church'.

Now let me explain that verse: it speaks of the death of Christ as lacking - you check it, that's what it says. Maybe the commentators will skip over it, but that's what it says: that the death of Christ was lacking. What was it lacking in? Well, it wasn't lacking in any efficacy of an atoning sacrifice for sin, no. It doesn't need to be added to where that's concerned. It's finished once for all, sufficient, but do you know what it means? It happened 2000 years ago, and Paul is saying that 'the suffering I'm experiencing in my flesh out of love and compassion for the lost, to win them to Jesus, is communicating the love of Christ in my body to them'. They can't press rewind, and go back in time and see what Jesus suffered on the cross, but they can see what I'm willing to suffer to bring them to Jesus! That's what he's saying.

Put it into one word, and it's the word 'sacrifice'. Now come with me, the signs of the servants: you need to see sinners - a lot of us don't even see them. You need to seek to bring them to Christ, are you bringing them? You need to pray for them that the Lord would move in their life, to bring conviction, to separate them from the crowd, to communicate to them in a way that they understand. We need to see that their source of help is from heaven. We need to look at them with a look of love. We need to travail in prayer that they may be born again - and we need to sacrifice time, money, tears, sleep!

The Servant's sigh, the Servant's look, the Servant's touch - four: the Servant's word, verse 34, the end of it, 'And he saith unto him, Ephphatha, that is, Be opened'. 'Ephphatha' is an Aramaic word, which means 'be opened', or 'released'. What we see here is the power of the
word of God, the spoken word of God. Now this man, naturally of course, couldn't hear the word, and therefore he couldn't obey - but the power of Christ was in His word, and it was the power of Christ that supernaturally opened the man's ears and loosened his tongue, and creation heard the Creator's voice! 'Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free'.

Some of you may have known the touch of Christ in your life, His look, you've heard His sigh, you know He loves you, you know He died for you, you know He wants to save you. You know the truth, but your problem is: you haven't embraced it yet. Until you embrace it, you will never be set free. Saving power is in God's word. If you hear His voice, if you hear His voice personally to you, I urge you: embrace God's word to you, believe. 'Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God' - accept what God has said and put your all on it, and He will save you. Lydia heard the word of God, and God opened her heart and saved her. Can I say to you believers: that's what we need to give people, we need to give them the word of God. Yes, we need to communicate it in a way that they understand today. We need to, by all means, save some - and that's scriptural means of course, not unscriptural or sinful ones - but we've got to give them God's word, why? Because the power of God unto salvation is in the gospel, God's word, and I fear that we're all starting to doubt that! I really do! I think we're no longer seeing sinners the way they are. We're no longer seeing that they're lost, and they're on their way to hell for ever! We don't see that any more - but we need to see that the only answer is God's word, not thrown at them from 500 yards, not yelled through their open window by a speaker system, but we've got to get where these people are, into their lives. We've got to touch them, we've got to look upon them, we've got to love them, we've got to have compassion upon them, we've got to travail in birth pangs, sacrifice for them to give them the word.

Now friends, don't you think I'm standing up here above contradiction - I'm not doing this, I'm not doing it. None of us, I think, are doing it any longer. We need to start doing it if people are going to be won. How do I know that this man had faith? Well, I don't want to be crude, but would you let someone put their spittle on your tongue if you didn't believe in them, if you didn't trust them? This man was changed, you can be changed: 'Hear Him, ye deaf; His praise, ye dumb, Your loosened tongues employ; Ye blind, behold your Saviour come, And leap, ye lame, for joy'.

Then the Lord told him: 'Don't tell anybody'. Now there's reasons for that: He was in a Gentile part of the world, and He wanted to minister first to the Jews, so He wanted to keep the avenue open to do that. There were other reasons: He didn't want to be flocked there and then with all sorts of people with different ailments. Remember He had gone to this vicinity to have a rest. Yet this man couldn't keep quiet - and we've seen this in chapter 1, chapter 3, chapter 5: people who know the touch of the Lord Jesus, experience the power of His word, their lives are changed, they can't keep it in! It wasn't long before everybody came to see Him. A large crowd gathered bringing their ill, bringing their handicapped, bringing their demon possessed, and the Lord Jesus took time to heal them all. The result was that the Gentiles - these are Gentiles - said, as Matthew 15 tells us, 'They glorified the God of Israel'. These folk said in chapter 7, astonished: 'He hath done all things well'. Now, had they lived this side of Calvary, they would have said it with even deeper conviction and feeling, would they not? He hath done all things well!

'And since our souls have learned His love,
What mercies He has made me prove!
Mercies which all our praise excel
Our Jesus hath done all things well’.

Are you afraid of trusting in Christ this morning? Do you think He's going to mess up your life? Don't be a fool: He will give you life to the full, for my Jesus hath done all things well. He never made a muck up, He never failed, He never botched up anybody's life, and He'll not make that mistake with yours. But believers, we're afraid, aren't we - we're tongue-tied - to offer the Lord Jesus to people? We need to tell them - oh yes, they have to turn from sin, but we've got to tell them that the Lord Jesus Christ will do everything well in their life! He will make the difference! Maybe the problem is - now wait for this - He's not making a big difference in our lives! I think that's it.

Something has happened repetitively in church history down through the years, and that is that people in the church have broken out - I don't mean broken off from the church, but sometimes that had to happen. It happened, historically, when the Church of England lost their way (if they ever had it from the beginning). John Wesley came out, or was pushed out, because he had a heart for the poor, he had a heart to see people won. The church was repulsed by the fact that Wesley would preach outside a pulpit, and preach in the open air - and now we can't get people to preach in the open air, everybody wants to preach in the pulpit. Almost 200 years later General Booth found himself in a similar position and so, because he would go into the pubs and go to the urban poor, places like Spittle Fields and Shoreditch in London, he had to found the Salvation Army. Now, they had a problem being hands-on servants in the church - we need to become those hands-on servants again, we need to. You listen to me: we need to do it. I'll tell you this: do you see if conservative evangelicalism in Ulster doesn't do it? They're finished! They're finished! I don't know how God will continue to do it, but mark you: He will - but that's what's needed, the touch, the look, the sigh, the word.

Francis Schaeffer had a friend that he was trying to convert. This man was a successful architect who dropped out of his career in the sixties through disillusionment. He hadn't yet come to Christ, but he said of Francis Schaeffer - he was a man who tried to live by the basic tenets of the New Testament, particularly the teachings of our Lord Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount - he said: 'I don't know if what Francis Schaeffer is telling me about Christianity is true or not, but I know this: that man loves me'. 'I don't know', is that what people are saying about us outside, 'I don't know' if all that is true, but I know this: they love me'. Later on that architect was brought to Christ because of the servant's touch in Francis Shaeffer's life. Those are the signs of the Servant of the Lord, are those signs in our lives?

O Father, we want to give praise and thanks to God for what You have done for mankind through Your Son, the Lord Jesus. What You did for this man, You have done for sinners far and wide who have believed in the Lord Jesus. You can do it for folk in our meeting this morning - but Lord, help us as Your people to believe that You still have the power to do it, if we would only break out and seek to touch those whom we are not touching now. Lord, we confess we're not touching them, those around us in this district. Thank You for those who are trying, but Lord: we want to break through and make a difference in their lives, for those in our city, those in our land, those in the world who as yet have never heard the name of Christ. O God, forgive us, O forgive us, and launch us out, we pray, to touch them, to look upon them with the love of Christ, to sigh over them, to cry over them, to sacrifice for them, and to give them Your word. Lord, one of old could say: 'Why should people hear the Gospel twice, when some have never heard it once?'. It's a question we would be worthwhile thinking
of, Lord. Lord, give us hearts like our Master, and help us to have the signs of the Servant marking our lives and our service in the gospel. Amen.

Transcribed by Andrew Watkins, Preach The Word – April 2008
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Mark chapter 8 then, beginning to read at verse 1 - the miracle of the feeding of the 4000. Mark 8 and verse 1: "In those days the multitude being very great" - let me just pause there, do remember where we were the last time. Let me remind you: the Lord healed a deaf and dumb man in a rather unusual manner, and yet obviously this had created a bit of a stir, and people were attracted to see who this Man was who performed such a miracle. So this is obviously the reason for this multitude being very great.

So they have gathered, and verse 1 says they have nothing to eat: "Jesus called his disciples unto him, and saith unto them, I have compassion on the multitude". Let me pause there also: this is the only occasion where you find the Lord Jesus saying: 'I have compassion'. The other time is the same record of this event in Matthew chapter 15, but any other time compassion is mentioned concerning our Lord Jesus it is spoken of Him that He had compassion on the multitudes - but here we have the Lord in His own words saying: "I have compassion on the multitude, because they have now been with me three days, and have nothing to eat: And if I send them away fasting to their own houses, they will faint by the way: for divers of them came from far. And his disciples answered him, From whence can a man satisfy these men with bread here in the wilderness? And he asked them, How many loaves have ye? And they said, Seven. And he commanded the people to sit down on the ground: and he took the seven loaves, and gave thanks, and brake, and gave to his disciples to set before them; and they did set them before the people. And they had a few small fishes: and he blessed, and commanded to set them also before them. So they did eat, and were filled: and they took up of the broken meat that was left seven baskets. And they that had eaten were about four thousand: and he sent them away. And straightway he entered into a ship with his disciples, and came into the parts of Dalmanutha" - we end our reading there at verse 10.

Now if you were at the prayer meeting on Thursday evening, you will remember that I gave a rather obscure title to my study this morning, and it was this: 'Rote Learning Of Multiplication'. Maybe you thought you were going to get a maths lesson from the pulpit today, but there is a purpose to that title. Rote learning, some of you will remember, was a very effective means of learning such things as your times tables and even your multiplication tables. The idea, if you look it up in the dictionary anyway, of rote learning is that you learn without understanding initially - just learn off the tables - with the view that when you remember them, understanding will break upon your conscience. So you learn the sums, the tables, you may not understand everything to do with them, but eventually by learning them over and over again, the understanding kicks in. I don't know whether that happened for you, it certainly didn't for me - but that's the point behind rote learning.

Now this particular miracle has been entitled by many as 'the forgotten miracle', the forgotten miracle! You probably can imagine why, because many people have just viewed this as a duplication of the feeding of the 5000 - and maybe Mark and Matthew got their figures a wee bit wrong! Of course, we've already studied in chapter 6 that great miracle of the Lord feeding the 5000 - and this is very, very similar, it has to be said. But I want you to note before we
go on any further why this is a miracle that is separate and distinct from the feeding of the 5000 that we've already seen in chapter 6. It is very similar, but it is very different.

There are about seven - there are probably more reasons why these are different, but I'm just going to give you seven just now. The first is: the feeding of the 5000 is found in all four of the gospels, but the feeding of the 4000 is only found in Matthew's gospel and Mark's here. The second reason is that the multitude in the feeding of the 5000 were said to have been with the Lord Jesus one whole day, but here we can see clearly that this crowd - verse 2 - had been with the Lord Jesus three days, there's a difference. Something else: in the feeding of the 5000 the Lord Jesus uses five loaves and two fish, but here we see it's recorded that in this feeding of the 4000 the Lord Jesus used seven loaves and a few fish - a few being three or more. Some more differences: we see obviously in the feeding of the 5000 that 5000 men were fed, and additional to that was an unknown number of women and children; here it is the same, not from Mark's account, but from Matthew's in chapter 15 we see there were 4000 men, not including women and children. Something more: in the feeding of the 5000 we have it recorded that our Lord Jesus, when He blessed the bread and the fishes, He prayed one prayer; but here in the feeding of the 4000 He prays before he blesses the bread, and then He prays separately before He blesses the fish. Now the blessing of the bread through one prayer was a normal Jewish custom, but it wasn't their custom to pray a second time over the fish. It may well have been that, because the Lord was in a Gentile area here performing this miracle among Gentile people, He was wanting to teach them that they ought to be thankful to God for their daily bread - something that the Jew took for granted, did every time that he ate, these Gentiles needed to learn the lesson.

Out of that we see that there is something else significant in the fact that the Lord Jesus here is ministering, it would seem, to Gentiles. After the feeding of the 5000, who were 5000 Jews, their response to this great miracle - we know from John chapter 6 and verse 15 - was that they wanted to crown the Lord Jesus as the King, they recognized that there was something unique about Him. We don't find such a reaction from the people who saw the miracle of the feeding of the 4000 because they were Gentiles, and they had no messianic hope the way the Jews had. One more difference: the remainder of loaves, the surplus that remained after the feeding of the 5000, was contained, you remember, in 12 baskets - 12 handbaskets the Greek word is 'kophenos' (sp?), it's the little lunchboxes that you would have carried with you on a day's outing. Here we see in the feeding of the 4000 that the surplus filled seven wicker baskets, the Greek word is 'spures' (sp?) which is speaking of big hampers, big enough to hold a man - so here's another difference. In fact, this word is used of the basket that was used to let down Paul the apostle over the wall in Damascus in Acts chapter 9.

One final difference, and this perhaps is the most telling and obvious of all: if you look at our portion this morning, chapter 8 and verses 19 and 20, we have from the mouth of our Lord Jesus Christ how He refers to each of these miracles as distinct and separate. Look at the verses, verse 19 of chapter 8: 'When I brake the five loaves among five thousand, how many baskets full of fragments took ye up? They say unto him, Twelve. And when the seven among four thousand, how many baskets full of fragments took ye up? And they said, Seven. And he said unto them, How is it that ye do not understand?'.

This miracle has been forgotten because many - maybe even you - have confounded this as being some other account of the feeding of the 5000, and obviously it is not. But I would have to say that, equally so, the distinct message of the feeding of the 4000 can be missed because we assume that it must be identical to the message that the Lord Jesus was giving in the feeding of the 5000. Now here's a wee lesson before we go on any further: there is no
insignificant Scripture in this holy book, none! There is no pointless duplication of truth - as Paul taught Timothy: 'All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable'. Now even if you can't understand what the point is behind a particular passage, there is one! The problem is not with the passage, the problem is with your understanding - and maybe what is needed is more patience, persistence, and prayer in the reading and studying of God's holy word.

So we need to probe deeper: what is the meaning that is distinctive in this feeding of the 4000, aside from the feeding of the 5000 and its message. So, as we probe deeper and longer, we must conclude - now bear with me - that the reason for a seeming repetition of a similar miracle is in fact in the repetition of the miracle itself - are you with me? The actual point behind this miracle is in the Lord repeating something similar to what He did before. I've already said that rote learning is a very effective means, it's a tried and tested method of teaching - though we have disposed of it largely today. So it appears that whatever, if anything, that the disciples learned from the feeding of the 5000 - the first miracle - they still had more to learn, that's why the Lord did this miracle of the feeding of the 4000.

Here is another interesting lesson for us all, particularly those who have been on the road longer than the rest of us: no matter how intimate your relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ might seem to be, there is always more for us to learn! I think Mark's point is that he wants us to learn that the Lord desired His disciples to grow, to learn more, to have a greater spiritual understanding - and once they had gotten that, to nurture it, and maintain it to their spiritual good. Now let's not be too hard on them: obviously they missed some of the truths in the feeding of the 5000 - but let's face it, which of us learn all there is to learn from our experiences that the Lord allows us to go through? It's true, isn't it? It may be, as some people think, that they have learned something from the feeding of the 5000 - some people interpret the words of the disciples in verse 4, when they said: 'From whence can a man satisfy these men with bread here in the wilderness?', it didn't seem to be as sceptical as the words in chapter 6 and versed 37 and 38, and some suppose that they had got to the position of realising that no man could provide for this need, human strength and ingenuity could not satisfy this great debt. Therefore they may have been looking to the Lord for some help, and the Lord doesn't seem to rebuke them the way that He rebuked them in the feeding of the 5000. But I'm not sure about that interpretation, because when you read verses 17 to 21 you can see clearly that they had missed some fundamental point even in the feeding of the 5000, as the Lord compares the two miracles there.

Now whilst they may, granted, have come to the point of realising their own inability, they failed this repeat test - that's what it was. It was a resit of an earlier examination, and they came out of it a miserable failure! Now there were two reasons: they failed, one, to recognize the identity of the Lord Jesus; and they failed, two, to recognize the sufficiency of the Lord Jesus for every situation. Now let me pause there and make this very personal to you: are you going through some kind of situation now in your life that you have passed through before? You've been right where you are now before. Now I'm not saying it definitely is the case, that's between you and God, but it could be that the Lord is allowing you to pass through it again because there are lessons that you didn't learn the first time. Could it be that you are failing to recognize the identity of the Lord Jesus in the midst of your experience? Or could it be, probably more so, that you're failing to recognize His sufficiency for your particular predicament?

Let's look at these two aspects that they had failed to see the first time and now, it seems, the second. Let's look first at the identity of the Lord Jesus Christ. Now these were Jews, and
as Jews they - I beg your pardon, the disciples now I'm talking about - these were Jews, they were present at the feeding of the 5000 among Jews, and they are present at the feeding of the 4000 among Gentiles. In their minds, with the biblical knowledge they had, they should have immediately equated what the Lord Jesus was doing there beside Galilee with what God did toward the children of Israel in the wilderness. Let me remind you of a number of verses from Exodus. The children of Israel had been delivered from bondage in Egypt, and God had taken them into the desert - promising them a land that would be Canaan - but they are to be there 40 years, and God has promised that He would feed them and look after them. We read that 'the LORD said unto Moses, Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you; and the people shall go out and gather a certain rate every day, that I may prove them, whether they will walk in my law, or no. And when the children of Israel saw it, they said one to another, It is manna: for they wist not what it was. And Moses said unto them, This is the bread which the LORD hath given you to eat'. Further on: 'And the house of Israel called the name thereof Manna: and it was like coriander seed, white; and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey'.

Now when our Lord performed the miracle of the feeding of the 5000, John in his gospel tells us that He began to teach this great truth, this Old Testament type, to the disciples as to His own identity as the Bread of God come down from heaven. He said: 'I am that bread of life. Your fathers did eat manna in the wilderness, and are dead. This is the bread which cometh down from heaven, that a man may eat thereof, and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world'. Now some Jews didn't understand that, to such an extent that we find in that same passage of John 6 that they thought He was advocating cannibalism. 'The Jews therefore strove among themselves, saying, How can this man give us his flesh to eat?', they didn't understand, as Jesus would later say, that the words He was speaking, they were spiritual words, they were words of spiritual life.

He was teaching them in the feeding of the 5000 that He was the Bread of God sent down from heaven, that which was pictured in the manna in the wilderness among the children of Israel - but the disciples missed it, not just the first time, but the second time! Sure from the very beginning to the end of His ministry, it was obvious that He was the Bread of God came down from heaven. Where was He born? Bethlehem - 'house of bread' - God sent the manna to Bethlehem. Then at the end of His life, what do we find? The night on which He was betrayed, He took bread, and He broke it, and He said: 'This is my body given for you'. So at the beginning and the ending of His life down here on earth, He powerfully underscored this great fact: 'I am the Bread of life come down from heaven' - and clearly the disciples hadn't understood it.

The miraculous multiplication of the 5000 and the 4000 - they missed it! This was a display of His omnipotence: God come down to be among men, God manifest in flesh - and the metaphor of the bread that He is now using to break in the Last Supper and share among His disciples to prove that His suffering, His dying on the cross, would spiritually feed the whole world, like it fed the 5000, like it fed the 4000 - they missed the whole point. One of Jehovah's names in the Old Testament was 'El Shaddai', it means 'God All-Sufficient'. Here the Lord Jesus, in both of these great miracles, was manifesting as the incarnate God that He is abundantly able to meet every need, His supplies are unlimited in salvation, and all we need is faith to draw from it!

I wonder are you saved today? Are you born again? Are your sins forgiven? Are you on your
way to heaven? Do you have a relationship with God day by day? Do you have the assurance of peace with God in your heart, the guilt of sin vanished? This is possible if you feed upon the Bread of God, Jesus Christ - that means put your faith and trust in Him! That's what He wanted folk to do, indeed the Lord Jesus said to the crowd here in the 5000 feeding in John 6: 'This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom God hath sent'. Later on we read in verse 30 of John 6: 'They said unto him, What sign shewest thou then, that we may see, and believe thee? what dost thou work?' - and He had done the sign, one of the signs in John's gospel is the feeding of the 5000, and this was the sign of His identity. He is God's Son come down from heaven to feed men's deepest needs, to save their souls. Have you seen that? It's wonderful, isn't it?

The multitude had gathered, and here the Lord is expressing compassion upon them - from His own lips He speaks it, godlike mercy, but praise God: not only has He the compassion and the mercy, but He has the wherewithal to meet the need, and He still does. Verse 4, look at the words of the disciples: 'How can one satisfy these people with bread?' - here was the One who could do it! No other could do it! This was the same One who furnished the table in the wilderness - 'Can God', the children of Israel asked in their wandering and their doubt, 'Can God furnish a table in the wilderness?' - yes! This is His identity!

Now perhaps their problem was that they just couldn't imagine the Lord duplicating a miracle all over again, but the fact of the matter is: because He is God come in human flesh, He is able to do miracles twice! Hallelujah! You might be being tested twice - He is able to do miracles twice. He won't always do it, but He is able because He is God come down from heaven to meet man's needs.

Second thing, and they missed this one surely: not only did they not see His identity, but they missed His sufficiency for the need. In verses 5 to 7 we see that the procedure of handing out the bread and the fish was the same as the miracle of the 5000 fed. He commanded them to recline on the ground, though they weren't in ranks; He took the loaves, He gave thanks, He broke them, He began to pass them to His disciples first, then His disciples imparted them to the multitude - and the same He did with the few small fishes. He provided, and the disciples dispensed. Now friends, that is a spiritual lesson that ought to be obvious to us: Christ, as we have seen, is the Bread of God come down from heaven; and He is to be given for the world - but that Bread has come to our hands as the disciples of Christ today, and it must be distributed among the nations. You have a responsibility, I have, and it is the challenge that is before us: the Bread of Christ must be passed to the hungry - are we doing it? We're not!

His sufficiency was seen in two ways: first of all, they failed to see His sufficiency to meet the universal need of salvation. Now listen, this is clear here: the Lord wanted these Jews, these disciples, to understand that He would not just be the Bread of God come down from heaven to the Jew, but to the Gentile also. These were 4000 Gentiles, they lived near Decapolis where this miracle is being performed, which was a Gentile area. The fact, as we've said, that the Lord said grace twice indicates that they were Gentiles - they didn't understand that they needed to thank God for their daily bread. What a lesson this was in itself to this Gentile world that Christ was performing the miracle to. He was saying to them: 'Pagans, man shall not live by bread alone!', that's what He's teaching, 'You must be fed from the Bread of God which comes down from heaven'. Do you know something? That is the message that our Gentile world needs to hear today, particularly in the West - intoxicated by materialism and sensuality, they think that all they need to live is bread. They need to realise that there is a food for the soul, and they don't have it if they do not have Christ.
Something else indicates that these were Gentiles, verse 8, they took up seven baskets full after the 4000 were fed. Now, presumably these seven baskets came from each of these seven loaves, original loaves. Now you have to be careful with numerology, the study of numbers, in the Bible - but often they glean much spiritual light if you look at them. The number 12 in the Bible is very similar to the number 7, did you know that? 12 often means completeness and perfection in the same way as 7 does, but with one very subtle difference: 12 is used of administrative completeness, God's government, God's ruling; and seven is used in a more spiritual sense, of spiritual perfection and spiritual completeness. Now there is no doubt about it that when the Lord did this miracle among 5000 Jews, the 12 baskets was indicating that one day on the earth Jesus Christ would supply the needs of the world through the Jewish administration of the people of Israel. Also, of course, there were 12 disciples, and there were 12 tribes of Israel, and so in feeding these 5000 Jews it is clear that the Lord was showing that He was the same Bread of God that came to the Jewish people in the wilderness, and He was coming to the Jewish people now at this new time.

Why the seven then for the Gentiles? Well, seven is the number of spiritual perfection and spiritual blessing - and what He was wanting these Gentile people, who had no claim over the covenants of Israel, no claim over the land, to realise that only in Christ is there a spiritual satisfaction, spiritual fulfilment. It's wonderful, isn't it? Christ is more than sufficient for the whole world, that is the message to the Jew in the feeding of the 5000, to the Gentile in the feeding of the 4000. Remember in chapter 7, by the way, we saw the crumbs of bread falling down from the table of a Gentile woman - she hoped to just eat of the crumbs - but here we're seeing that the gate is open wide, there's a multitude of Gentiles abundantly fed! That Syrophoenician woman just hoped that perhaps a crumb of bread might fall, and now the Lord is indicating that though His own people have rejected Him as the Bread of God come down from heaven, His life is being given for the world, for all nations.

The disciples were missing the point, not only of the identity of the Lord Jesus, but of His sufficiency to meet the universal need of salvation - as Paul said, and he had got it, 'I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and then to the Greek', to the Gentile. Now this is all elementary to a lot of you folk, I know that - but we ought to be challenged in these days: do we really, in our heart of hearts, practically believe that the gospel is the answer for this world? They missed the sufficiency of the Lord to meet the universal need of salvation.

Finally, another aspect to His sufficiency they missed was to meet the individual need of supply. Verse 8, if you look at it, chapter 8 verse 8: 'So they did eat, and were filled'. What was the outcome of this miracle? Everybody ate, and they ate to their full - they were satisfied, for He filleth the hungry with good things. Now the mathematics - and I'm no mathematician as I've already said - the mathematics of this miracle are very interesting, and there is a great lesson in this for all of us, but particularly for those who serve the Lord in a full-time capacity. Now listen carefully: the less the Lord had to work with, the more He accomplished. The feeding of the 5000 - how many loaves? Five, and two fish. The feeding of the 4000 - how many loaves? Seven, and a few fish. But He fed the more at the 5000, didn't He, with less? The less the Lord has, He accomplishes more - and, incidentally, there's more left over! Twelve baskets full - we're not thinking of the quantity, we're thinking of the numbers now - but only seven left over with the feeding of the 4000.

So our Lord fed fewer with the greater provisions, and a larger number with less at hand. The lesson is that the less you have to give to God, the more He'll do for you and through you if you're depending on Him alone. Don't be depending on the loaves and the fishes, depend on
Him! The less you have the more you'll have, and the more you'll do for Him. What the lesson is here concerning the Lord sufficiency to meet the individual need is that with Him the supply always exceeds the demand - have you got it? The supply always exceeds the demand, and further to that please do notice that there's something lurking here in the Greek language that we don't see very clearly. Christ did not, when He fed the 4000, break the bread suddenly and there were huge piles of bread and fish all around - no. The Greek sense is that He kept breaking the bread and handing it out bit by bit, as it was needed. As the people came, He handed out more to the disciples, they handed it out to the people - and the lesson is: if we are to know the sufficiency of Christ to meet individual needs supplied, we need to be constantly bringing our needs to the Lord, and He will constantly break the bread and give us what we need bit by bit.

It's wonderful, isn't it? They failed to see, though they had seen it before - maybe you have seen it before - the identity of the Lord whom you serve and love, He is the God of heaven, He is the Bread of Heaven! Do you see Him as sufficient to meet the universal need of salvation? Do you see Him, personally, as sufficient to meet your individual need of supply, whatever that may be? Oh, see it please this morning, don't miss it like the disciples. These people came to Christ famished, they were so hungry the Lord Jesus thought they might expire and collapse on their way home; but when their power to eat bread and fish was exhausted, Christ's power to feed was not! Whatever the Lord has given us, there's still far more for Him to give us. The wee hymn puts it:

'When we have exhausted our store of endurance,
When our strength has failed ere the day is half done,
When we reach the end of our hoarded resources,
Our Father's full giving is only begun!'

Do you know that your soul is like your stomach? Not big, like some of you, but elastic! Your stomach is elastic - that's why, when you fast or don't eat so much, it shrinks; and then when you go back to eating again, you just don't seem to be able to eat as much. It shrinks when you don't eat, and expands when you do you eat. Your soul is like that: the more you eat, the more it expands; the more you feed upon Christ, the more capacity you have to feed upon Him; and the more your soul expands, the more you are able to feed upon Him, the more you can know of Him. Here's the wonderful lesson of both of these great miracles: none of us have ever eaten as much as we really need of Him, and none of us could ever get to full capacity of our need of Him. None of us, surely, have eaten as much as He wants to give us of Himself. You see, we're meant to hunger, we're meant to thirst after Him. We're meant to want to eat, and eat, and eat - as the Psalmist says: 'My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God'. The Lord Himself said: 'Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled'.

This was rote learning of multiplication. They missed the point of it all the first time, did they get it the second time? Maybe you have missed these lessons in experiences that you have gone through once, twice, more before? You're going through them again: will you learn the lessons and feed upon Christ who is sufficient for every need? It was Bernard of Clairvaux in the 12th century who said:

'We taste Thee, O thou living Bread,
And long to feed upon Thee still;
We drink of thee, the fountainhead,
And thirst our souls from Thee to fill'.
May that be the longing, the cry, and the learning of every heart here this morning today.

‘Our restless spirits yearn for Thee,
Where'er our changeful lot is cast;
Glad, when Thy gracious smile we see,
Blest, when our faith can hold Thee fast.

O Jesus, ever with us stay!
Make all our moments calm and bright!
Chase the dark night of sin away,
Shed o'er the world Thy holy light!

Father help us to see, in the gift of Your Son to us, the Bread of God. Feed us, feed us more and more on Him. Let us find our sufficiency in every aspect of our lives in Him. Thank You for a glimpse of Him today, but may we have more, may we have His life imparted to our souls to an extent that we have never known before, and that gives us an insatiable desire to know Him more. Amen.

Transcribed by Andrew Watkins, Preach The Word – April 2008
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ow let's turn together in the Scriptures for our reading from Mark's Gospel please, chapter 8. Mark chapter 8, and beginning to read at verse 10 - Mark 8 verse 10: "And straightway he entered into a ship with his disciples, and came into the parts of Dalmanutha. And the Pharisees came forth, and began to question with him", that is, the Lord Jesus of course, "seeking of him a sign from heaven, tempting", or testing, "him. And he sighed deeply in his spirit, and saith, Why doth this generation seek after a sign? verily I say unto you, There shall no sign be given unto this generation. And he left them, and entering into the ship again departed to the other side. Now the disciples had forgotten to take bread, neither had they in the ship with them more than one loaf. And he charged them, saying, Take heed, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, and of the leaven of Herod. And they reasoned among themselves, saying, It is because we have no bread. And when Jesus knew it, he saith unto them, Why reason ye, because ye have no bread? perceive ye not yet, neither understand? have ye your heart yet hardened? Having eyes, see ye not? and having ears, hear ye not? and do ye not remember? When I brake the five loaves among five thousand, how many baskets full of fragments took ye up? They say unto him, Twelve. And when the seven among four thousand, how many baskets full of fragments took ye up? And they said, Seven. And he said unto them, How is it that ye do not understand? And he cometh to Bethsaida; and they bring a blind man unto him, and besought him to touch him. And he took the blind man by the hand, and led him out of the town; and when he had spit on his eyes, and put his hands upon him, he asked him if he saw ought. And he looked up, and said, I see men as trees, walking. After that he put his hands again upon his eyes, and made him look up: and he was restored, and saw every man clearly. And he sent him away to his house, saying, Neither go into the town, nor tell it to any in the town".

The title I'm taking for the message this morning is 'Blindness By Degrees'. It will become apparent why I have chosen that title in a few moments. This, I think, is roundabout the fortieth study that we have done in the Gospel of Mark - which is incredible. You will remember that last week we looked at the miracle of the feeding of the 4000, and we spent a bit of time comparing that with the feeding of the 5000. If you want to know the differences between the two, as well as the similarities and the message of both, do get last week's study - recordings are available. But you remember that there was something that the disciples had not learned when the Lord Jesus fed 5000 Jews on a separate occasion to feeding now 4000 Gentiles. They had failed to learn, first of all, the identity of the Lord Jesus as the Bread sent down from God, the Bread from heaven just like the manna of the Old Testament that fed the children of Israel in the wilderness.

Of course, we saw that there was a special identification to the Gentiles of the Lord Jesus Christ as spiritual Bread who could feed their souls. So they had failed to understand the true identity of the One who was with them, and that's why they were thinking: 'How are we going to get bread in the wilderness?' - making the same mistake all over again. The second thing, which leads on from what I've just said, is that they failed to recognize the sufficiency of the Lord Jesus to provide for whatever need they might have. It didn't matter that they were in the wilderness and they had very little bread - this time they had more bread, but still it
wasn’t sufficient to feed 4000 people - and yet the Lord was in their midst, and that’s what
they needed to recognize and they failed to recognize. He could feed as many as needed to be
fed.

Now the verses that we’re coming to have relation to what we studied last week, because the
verses we’re looking at today are all about blindness. First of all we see blind Pharisees in
verses 11 to 13, they’re not literally blind but spiritually blind. But there is blindness by
degrees, there are different types of blindness in this passage, because the next blindness we
find is a blindness among the disciples. They were blind, not to the same extent as the
Pharisees, but they were blind. Then the third blindness is a literal blindness that is found in
this blind man of Bethsaida that our Lord Jesus heals in quite an unusual manner.

Now, the blindness of the Pharisees was the failure to perceive these great truths. One, the
identity of the Lord Jesus as God's Son come in flesh; and two, His sufficiency to supply any
need, including the need of eternal and universal salvation. Now the Pharisees were the most
blind of all: they had a wilful blindness. It’s not that they could not see, they would not see. It
was a blindness that came from a hardness of the heart. The disciples' blindness was a little
different, it was an ignorant blindness. They couldn’t see it. It came not from a hardness of
the heart, necessarily, but more we could say a dullness of the heart. They just couldn’t get it.
They weren’t as blind as the Pharisees, but not enough light of the truth of what Christ was
wanting to reveal to them was getting into their heads and into their hearts.

Now, blindness is a serious condition irrespective of its cause, because in both these cases
this blindness was causing the Pharisees and the disciples to miss the obvious: the identity
and sufficiency of Christ. But blindness doesn't only cause you to miss things: it puts you in
danger of stumbling - and that’s where these folk are just now in this passage. To illustrate
that condition - particularly, I feel, for the disciples - our Lord performed a rather strange, in
fact a unique healing: for initially it was a partial healing, the man was only partially healed.
Then the Lord completely healed this blind man, and it is one of the greatest illustrations in
the whole of the word of God of how even we, so often, are blind: we miss the point, we are
slow to learn what the Lord would have us see clearly.

So let's look at this 'Blindness by Degrees' this morning. First of all the blindness of the
Pharisees in verses 11 to 13. Now the blindness of the Pharisees was exhibited in the fact that
they sought a sign from the Lord Jesus. The Lord is now returning back to a place called
'Dalmanutha' - we’re not exactly sure where it is, it's probably near Magdala where Mary
Magdalene came from. Returning back to the west side of Galilee, the Pharisees are still angry
with the Lord Jesus Christ because of His earlier indictment of their hypocrisy. You maybe
can't remember that, it was chapter 7 - you remember the tirade of our Lord against them:
how they honoured God with their lips, but their heart was far from Him; how they engaged in
an external cleanliness of ritual religion, and yet their hearts were still diseased by sin. So
they are still scathing because of our Lord’s word against them, and so they demand a sign -
and this sign, they say, must come from heaven, a sign from heaven.

Now their blindness is incredible, because they have already seen many many signs from the
Saviour that He performed on earth, these miracles - but they were looking a sign from
heaven. They couldn't deny the signs they had seen on earth, and yet they did. It was
obvious that something was special about this Man, and yet remember - turn back with me to
chapter 3 and verse 22 - they attributed His works by the power of God to be from the power
of the devil. Chapter 3 verse 22: 'The scribes which came down from Jerusalem said, He hath
Beelzebub, and by the prince of the devils casteth he out devils', or demons. So, standing in
front of these religious Pharisees was the greatest sign ever, the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord from heaven, God's Bread from heaven, God's Sign from heaven - and they had no appreciation of Him.

That could be you here this morning: you have no appreciation of Christ, truly. Oh, you recognize there is something special about Him, but it doesn't make any difference to your life. These Pharisees have heard His matchless words, they have seen His wonderful miracles, they encountered an absolutely sinless Man who was God in flesh, and yet their blindness caused them to ask for a sign from heaven! It's incredible, isn't it?

Let me give you a bit of the background to this request for a sign from heaven. One of the teachings of the Pharisees at the time of the Lord Jesus was that the Messiah, when He came, would appear on the pinnacle of the Temple in Jerusalem. Did you know that? There He would appear to all and proclaim deliverance to Israel, and display light from heaven as a sign of His Messiahship. That same thought was evidently in the mind of Satan in the wilderness when he tempted the Lord Jesus Christ, and said that he would take Him up to the pinnacle of the Temple and give Him the kingdoms of the world. But both the Pharisees in their theology, and the devil in his diabolical temptation - you must see this - were trying to get the Lord Jesus to do something spectacular, something stupendous, a sign from heaven. Really what they were asking the Suffering Servant of Jehovah to do was to take an easy route, rather than the route of the cross - death, taking our sins upon Himself at Calvary. This was an easy route, of course it was a false one, but that was what was being set before our Lord by Satan and the Pharisees, who were being inspired by the evil one.

Now it's interesting to note right throughout this portion this morning that our Lord defies everyone's apparent expectations of how He's going to behave - and that's a good lesson to all of us. Some of us think we've got God in a box, whether it's a theological or ecclesiastical box - but He will not be boxed, He will not be labelled, He will not be restricted. You can see this very evidently in the way our Lord behaves. The way He acts, you could never have anticipated.

In verse 12, instead of giving a sign from heaven, He sighs toward heaven. Look at it: 'He sighed deeply in his spirit, and saith, Why doth this generation seek after a sign? verily I say unto you, There shall no sign be given unto this generation'. Now there is an unusual word used here to signify the groaning of the Lord Jesus, it's a sigh deeply in spirit. The actual Greek word means 'a sigh upward from the depths of your being'. So the deepest part of you is sighing to the highest heaven! It's also difficult to translate here in this verse the sense of what the Lord said: 'No sign will be given to this generation'. It's a construction of what was a characteristic Hebrew oath that suggests intense emotion. It's as if He's saying: 'There won't be any more signs to this generation, you have had your chance!'. Do you get the weight of what He's expressing? No wonder He sighed, because if you think about it: no other generation - especially a Jewish generation - had ever had the privileges that these people had: the Lord Jesus ministering in their midst, performing wondrous acts, speaking mighty words - and yet they're still seeking after another sign, because they are so blind.

In verse 13, this is a tragic verse, we read: 'He left them, and entering into the ship again departed to the other side'. He got into the boat and sailed eastward - and what a terrible thing it is to have Christ turn His back on you and sail away! But that is ultimately what He does to those who continually refuse His revelation. You could be one of those people here this morning, and you know who Christ is in a roundabout way, you know and understand a bit about what He has done, and you've maybe felt Him speaking to you or communicating to
you in your own personal life to commit yourself to Him, and He has given your own signs - but there comes a time when you won't heed them, when He will give you no more. No more help and understanding! So be careful if you are a person who is wilfully blind - it's not that you can't see, you won't see! This is what will happen: your heart will harden, and you'll become like these Pharisees. I read a poem many years ago, and I've used it often in gospel preaching, but I still am astounded by the message that it sends forth. Listen to it carefully as I read it all to you, it's by Joseph Addison Alexander - listen in particular if you're one of these people:

'There is a time, we know not when,  
A place, we know not where;  
Which marks the destiny of men  
To glory or despair.

There is a line, by us unseen;  
Which crosses every path,  
Which marks the boundary between  
God's mercy and His wrath.

To pass that limit is to die,  
To die as if by stealth;  
It does not dim the beaming eye,  
Nor pale the glow of health.

The conscience may be still at ease,  
The spirit light and gay  
And that which pleases still may please,  
And care be thrust away.

But on that forehead God hath set  
Indelibly a mark;  
Unseen by man, for man as yet,  
Is blind and in the dark.

O, where is that mysterious line  
That may by men be crossed,  
Beyond which God Himself hath sworn,  
That he who goes is lost.

An answer from the skies repeats,  
'Ye who from God depart,'  
Today, O hear His voice! Repent  
And harden not your heart'.

Is that you? Now, since Mark was writing to Gentiles he did not include the Lord's words as we find in the other gospel records of this event, where the Lord Jesus said that the only sign that would be given to this generation is a sign of Jonah the prophet. What was that sign? That as he was three days and three nights in the belly of the fish, so our Lord Jesus would be three days and three nights in the belly of the earth. He would die on the cross, be buried and rise again - the greatest sign of all: His death and resurrection, proof that He was who He claimed to be. It wasn't very long until these religious Pharisees would witness it, but because
they had hardened their hearts, it didn't make a difference! Yet it is the foundation of apostolic preaching in the book of the Acts: 'Ye men of Israel, hear these words; Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs, which God did by him in the midst of you, as ye yourselves also know: Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain: Whom God hath raised up, having loosed the pains of death: because it was not possible that he should be holden of it'.

His resurrection after death proves - what more sign do you need here? There are some of you here need to hear this message: Christ has died for you, He has risen again for you - what more do you need? Are you going to harden your heart to Calvary love? What blindness! Yet some of you here could be guilty of it this very morning!

The blind Pharisees, and then we meet the blind disciples. We cross over again from Dalmanutha over to the east side of Galilee, and the Lord, while they are journeying, takes an opportunity to teach them something concerning the hardness of the Pharisees and many other Jews. In verse 15: 'He charged them, saying, Take heed, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, and of the leaven of Herod'. Now you've got to understand what leaven was. It was yeast, and during the Passover season in Israel the Jews had to remove all the leaven from their dwellings, Exodus 12 commanded them to do that. Leaven wasn't allowed in any of their offerings, because leaven was a picture of sin, a picture of evil and wickedness - because like leaven or yeast, though it is small and hidden, it can spread very very swiftly and soon affects the whole. It's what Paul said in Galatians: 'A little leaven, leaveneth the whole lump'.

'Beware', the Lord Jesus said, 'of the leaven of the Pharisees' - what was that? It was their hypocrisy - so religious, yet they couldn't see the most basic spiritual truths about the identity and sufficiency of the Lord Jesus Christ. It was their hypocrisy, and it was their legalism - they thought that by keeping all these rules, that was enough; and yet their hearts remained unchanged. What was the leaven of Herod? Well, Herod was a worldly King. All his court was, they followed the way of the Romans - and whether you speak of worldliness in their wealth, their affluence, their lust for fame, their immoral indulgence, their scepticism, their immorality of every kind; that really encapsulates all that that word means: worldliness. 'Beware of the leaven of Herod', but it was also found in the political realm: they had great power. Beware of worldliness, and beware of politics.

Many of the Lord's disciples are still blind because they're affected by these two types of leaven: the leaven of the Pharisees, and the leaven of Herod. Those two things are still able to blind Christ's disciples to spiritual realities. Now the Lord didn't say 'Beware' an awful lot in His ministry, but when He did it behoves us to pay attention to the disastrous effects of what could happen to our lives through the leaven of the Pharisees and the leaven of Herod.

Well, in verses 14 and 16 discussion ensues among the disciples. You see from verse 14 that someone had forgotten to take bread - imagine how many people had been fed with bread, and these guys forget to take some of it for themselves! In verse 16, after the Lord speaks to them about this leaven, 'They reasoned among themselves, saying, It is because we have no bread'. Now I have to be very careful here in what I say, but I can sense in this narrative the holy frustration of the Lord Jesus starting to build up. They're just not understanding, they're not getting it. He's speaking to them about the leaven of the Pharisees, the leaven of Herod, and they think He's still talking about the bread! They're on a completely different level, they're not tuned into the Lord, they're not getting the message, He's not getting through to them! They're thinking about food for their body, when He's wanting to feed their soul!
So many Christians are like that today! I'm like it a lot of the time: on a completely different level, a carnal level, a fleshy level - and the Lord's not getting through! Now remember: He had multiplied bread now on two occasions, He had fed over 10,000 people including women and children - and the disciples are still worried about where they're going to get their lunch from! What blindness! In chapter 6, you remember after the feeding of the 5000 in verse 52, look at it - Mark records for us that after that miracle, 'they considered not the miracle of the loaves: for their heart was hardened', hardened! They didn't understand it! So the implication here is that they still, after the feeding of the 4000, didn't understand the identity and the sufficiency of the Lord Jesus. The message was: you don't need to worry about your lunch when the Lord is in the boat!

Ignorant blindness because of the dullness of their hearts. So the Lord - and I'm careful about my language here, but I'm only going with the passage - He starts to, we would say, drum it into them, the message that they needed to hear, the lessons that they were missing. Now you can see it in the literature here, in verse 17, look at it - He effectively discharges what we could say are nine rounds of explosive questions in an attempt to ignite their mind to understand these lessons. Now look at them: 'When Jesus', verse 17, 'knew it, he saith unto them' - count the questions - 'Why reason ye, because ye have no bread? perceive ye not yet, neither understand? have ye your heart yet hardened? Having eyes, see ye not? and having ears, hear ye not? and do ye not remember? When I brake the five loaves among five thousand, how many baskets full of fragments took ye up?', verse 20, 'And when the seven among four thousand, how many baskets full of fragments took ye up?', verse 21, 'How is it that ye do not understand?'. Nine times - boom, boom, boom, boom - you're not getting it! Each question was knocking it into their heads.

Now, I'm not criticising the disciples here - please don't think I'm doing that, because I'm far worse than they are at getting the Lord's point. It is usually the case that God's people have a tendency to forget His past blessings when they have a present need. That's why the Psalmist says in 103: 'Bless the LORD, O my soul: and all that is within me, bless his holy name. Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits'. Now I don't know about you, but I can count many an occasion when the Lord meets a need for me - often it can be in a wonderfully miraculous way - but then, when the next problem comes along, you have a tendency to forget how the Lord met the previous need, what the Lord did for you in the past and what He can do for you in the present. We become frightened, we can even begin to complain - but here's the lesson that the Lord wanted the disciples to get, and we could go into all the theology and compare Scripture with Scripture, but the main point of it was simply: 'As long as you're with Me, I'll take care of you!'...but they forgot. It would do us all good to pause occasionally in our lives, as we run from circumstance to circumstance, to count our blessings. It will surprise us what the Lord has done. As one hymn writer put it:

'His love in time past
Forbids me to think
He'll leave me at last
In trouble to sink;
Each sweet Ebenezer
I have in review
Confirms His good pleasure
To help me right through'.

But they weren't getting it. The blind Pharisees, the blind disciples, and then thirdly: this blind
man - verses 22 to 26. Now already, if you can remember, in this section Mark has recorded a miracle that is not found anywhere else in the gospels. You remember the deaf and the dumb man, and the strange way the Lord healed him: touching his tongue and putting His fingers in the man's ears. Now this miracle is the same in the sense that you don't find it anywhere else in the gospel records. The Lord takes this man outside of Bethsaida. Now not only is this miracle similar to the deaf and dumb man who was healed in the fact of the unconventional means that the Lord used - He spits in this man's eyes, and He touched the tongue of the deaf and dumb man with spittle with His hand - but it's similar in the sense that, just as the Lord took the deaf and dumb man out of the crowd, so the Lord takes this man away from the crowd, but He does a bit more: He takes him actually out of the town, right out of Bethsaida. Now why did He do that? Now if there is a hardened heart here this morning, you need to hear this: because Bethsaida's number was up! He had done all the miracles He was going to do there, He had given all the signs - no more evidence for them!

You see if you go back to Matthew chapter 11, He says: 'Woe unto thee, Chorazin! woe unto thee, Bethsaida!', there's the place, 'for if the mighty works, which were done in you, had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I say unto you, It shall be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon at the day of judgment, than for you'. You see, they had already been judged for the hardness of their hearts, their wilful unbelief - imagine it! No more signs would be given to them. Verse 26, that is why at the end of this miracle the Lord tells this man: 'Don't go into the town, or tell any in the town'. What would we be saying? 'Oh, you've got to go and witness to these folk. They can't be too hard for God' - now we don't know who is hard and who is not, that's why we've to go to everybody and preach to every creature, but the fact of the matter is: the Lord had drawn a line under these men and women of Bethsaida, and He could draw the line under you if He hasn't done already. Terrifying, isn't it?

But this miracle is unique for another reason: it's the only healing in the whole of the Bible that took place in stages - in the New Testament anyway - that took place in stages. Now the question begs: why? Many commentators and Bible teachers conjecture the reasons why, but before giving my view to this may I just make a side point on this one? It is simply that the Lord deals uniquely with all of us - whether it's conversion, it's unique to us; whether it's our Christian consecration and experience and pilgrimage, it's unique to us. So don't try and copy or duplicate another's - the Lord is dealing with you, child, and He'll deal with you uniquely. Equally so, the experiences that we go through in life are unique to ourselves - and boy, does the Lord work in some strange ways! As William Cowper put it: 'Our God moves in mysterious ways, His wonders to perform', but he went on to say 'God is His own interpreter, and He will make it plain'.

God doesn't have to answer to us as to how He does things, and it does seem that this is a very strange operation the Lord is performing - but there are some strange things that happen to believers. Peter talked about the strange thing that you think is happening to you, don't count it strange! Yes, the Lord is behind it, but it often does seem strange to us. You see, if you're in God's school - now listen - if you're in God's school, you might not always understand the lesson being taught, but you can always know there is a lesson being taught. He's trying to teach you something, He's working individually with you.

Now, what is the lesson He's trying to teach here in the healing of this man? Well, I ask you - before giving you what the whole point of it is - is it not obvious? Verse 18, did He not say to these disciples as He was crossing over in the boat: 'Having eyes, see ye not? and having ears, hear ye not?' - that's like a combination of the two miracles we've been talking about:
the deaf and the dumb man, and this man who is blind. You see what He's doing, don't you? It's not the Lord having an energy shortage or something like that, as if He couldn't muster up the divine strength to do this miracle completely - what nonsense! In fact, if that was the case, do you think the disciples would have recorded it? They recorded this because He is who He said He was, His identity and sufficiency are clear - but there's a point He is making here in this partial healing. He's teaching these dull disciples that their knowledge of Him, His identity and His sufficiency, was only partial! They weren't getting it!

Child of God is it not the case for all of us that our knowledge of His identity and His sufficiency in our lives is only partial? It's true, isn't it? Unless there're some perfect people walking about! Paul said he hadn't apprehended, he hadn't it made, but his great desire was - you remember - 'That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death'. His desire was that he would have a better understanding to his partial understanding. Do you have that desire?

In verse 24 the man looked up and said: 'I see men as trees, walking'. This man in this partial healing of our Lord could only dimly see, the way you sort of see through water I suppose. He could see the figure of the Lord Jesus and His disciples, and his own friends that had brought him to Christ - but they were just like walking trees. Now this portion doesn't say anything about the man's faith, it doesn't say that the man came himself, it says his friends brought him - so this man mightn't have had any faith, but the Lord is performing this and all of a sudden the man's faith increases. Maybe that's another lesson the Lord was teaching: that as he could see his sight partially come back, his faith increased - yet he was still immature, there was a lot more he had to see. We're all like that. You might have faith in Christ, but all of us lack the final touch, don't we? In verse 25 this man gets it - the Lord Jesus puts His hands again upon his eyes, and made him look up, and he was restored and saw every man clearly. That last phrase is wonderful: he saw everything clearly. It uses a very rare word which means 'to see clearly from afar' - do you know what that means? 2020 vision, a perfect healing!

Now the Lord who did that on the second attempt could have done it on the first attempt, but there was a lesson being taught. You see, the disciples were only dimly grasping the true purpose of Christ's mission. It was an enigma to them when He talked about going to the cross, and dying, and three days later rising again. We're going to see this next week: when Peter confesses that He is the Christ, the Son of the living God, and then the Lord talks about going to the cross and Peter says, 'Be it far from thee, Lord'. They didn't grasp that He had to die for their sins and rise again - and remember, it wasn't until after His resurrection that the penny dropped! You remember the two on the road to Emmaus - He opened their understanding that they might understand the scriptures, 'And said unto them, Thus it is written, and thus it behoved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day', and He charged them that their hearts were so slow to believe all that the Scriptures had taught.

None of us have a complete knowledge of what the Lord is doing in our lives. Whatever circumstances you're going through, no one has a complete interpretation of it all - but there is a sense in which this healing could point us to the fact of what Paul said: 'Now we see through a glass darkly, but then face-to-face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known'. We're not going to find everything out, and the answer to all our questions, until we see the Lord - and even then we mightn't know all the answers, I don't think we will. However, in Philippians 1 Paul reassures us that if the Lord has started a work in us, though it might be a partial work, he was confident of this very thing: 'that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ'.
In our lives the Lord wants to make our understanding of His identity and His sufficiency clearer. He wants to make our understanding of His sufficiency clearer. Incidentally, think of the man who is writing this book - Mark. He's recording a unique miracle, who's to say it is not an example of his own experience? Though it's not of him literally, it is metaphorically. At first his spiritual vision as a young convert was poor, and his service incomplete - you remember Paul the apostle sent him back, and Barnabas and Paul fell out over it, but later on we read that Paul sends for him: 'Send Mark'. He becomes a companion of the apostles, and more than that: he becomes a biographer of the Servant of the Lord. It's wonderful, isn't it?

Now listen carefully: nothing can be done for blind, hardhearted Pharisees - nothing. If they continue to harden their heart, nothing can be done. But if you are a dull-hearted believer in here today, with only partial understanding - like all of us, in effect - praise God, a miracle can be done in all of our lives as we see Him more clearly, love Him more dearly, and follow Him more nearly day by day.

If the Lord has been speaking to you as a person who is unconverted, not yet saved - all you must do is, just now, confess your need of Christ and believe on Him, ask Him to save you now, and He will. All of us as believers, we continually need to deny ourselves, take up our cross - and so I'm calling upon all of you to search your hearts now, not make an empty decision, but search your heart and if you can meaningfully say it: commit yourself afresh to the Lord to have His way in you.

Father, we acknowledge that we are God's workmanship, we are God's poems, God's masterpieces, we are Your individual works of art and we are in process. Your work with each of us is unique, but Lord - like this blind man and like the disciples - we must submit to Your touch. We can visualise the Saviour spitting on this man's eyes, and pushing His calloused carpenter thumbs into his eye sockets - and sometimes the way you seem to work with us may appear strange, and even course, but Lord we pray that at the end of it all we will be more like the Lord Jesus and more effective for Him as You have Your own way with us, Lord. For Christ's sake we pray, Amen.

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Now I want you to turn with me again to Mark's gospel chapter 8, where we left off last week - therefore beginning at verse 27. Now we're going to read quite a considerable portion of Scripture this morning, right through to chapter 9 verse 13 - so chapter 8, beginning to read at verse 27, right through to chapter 9 verse 13. My title is: 'The Suffering And Then The Glory'.

So verse 27 of chapter 8: "And Jesus went out, and his disciples, into the towns of Caesarea Philippi: and by the way he asked his disciples, saying unto them, Whom do men say that I am? And they answered, John the Baptist: but some say, Elias", or Elijah, "and others, One of the prophets. And he saith unto them, But whom say ye that I am? And Peter answereth and saith unto him, Thou art the Christ. And he charged them that they should tell no man of him. And he began to teach them, that the Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected of the elders, and of the chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. And he spake that saying openly. And Peter took him, and began to rebuke him. But when he had turned about and looked on his disciples, he rebuked Peter, saying, Get thee behind me, Satan: for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but the things that be of men. And when he had called the people unto him with his disciples also, he said unto them, Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel's, the same shall save it. For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul? Whosoever therefore shall be ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation; of him also shall the Son of man be ashamed, when he cometh in the glory of his Father with the holy angels".

"And he said unto them, Verily I say unto you, That there be some of them that stand here, which shall not taste of death, till they have seen the kingdom of God come with power. And after six days Jesus taketh with him Peter, and James, and John, and leadeth them up into an high mountain apart by themselves: and he was transfigured before them. And his raiment became shining, exceeding white as snow; so as no fuller on earth can white them. And there appeared unto them Elijah with Moses: and they were talking with Jesus. And Peter answered and said to Jesus, Master, it is good for us to be here: and let us make three tabernacles; one for thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah. For he wist not what to say; for they were sore afraid. And there was a cloud that overshadowed them: and a voice came out of the cloud, saying, This is my beloved Son: hear him. And suddenly, when they had looked round about, they saw no man any more, save Jesus only with themselves. And as they came down from the mountain, he charged them that they should tell no man what things they had seen, till the Son of man were risen from the dead. And they kept that saying with themselves, questioning one with another what the rising from the dead should mean. And they asked him, saying, Why say the scribes that Elijah must first come? And he answered and told them, Elijah verily cometh first, and restoreth all things; and how it is written of the Son of man, that he must suffer many things, and be set at nought. But I say unto you, That Elijah is indeed come, and they have done unto him whatsoever they listed, as it is written of him".
Now let me just remind you where we have come from in recent days to reach this point at chapter 8 and verse 27. The Lord Jesus fed 5000 people with five loaves and two fish, and then we saw a similar miracle that our Lord performed, the feeding of the 4000 with seven loaves and a few fish. We saw that the message of the feeding of the 4000 was that they didn't get the message of the feeding of the 5000! We see from this chapter that our Lord - and we looked at it last week - said to them very directly in verses 18 to 20: 'Having eyes, see ye not? and having ears, hear ye not? and do ye not remember? When I brake the five loaves among five thousand, how many baskets full of fragments took ye up? They say unto him, Twelve. And when the seven among four thousand, how many baskets full of fragments took ye up? And they said, Seven. And he said unto them, How is it that ye do not understand?'. We saw that there was a twofold message seen at the feeding of the 5000 and the 4000, that the disciples hadn't got: one, the identity of the Lord Jesus, that He was God's Manna come down from heaven to feed the whole world; and therefore the second lesson was, His sufficiency - not only to feed the whole world in salvation, but also His sufficiency in our everyday lives to meet our need right where we have it in our own everyday experience.

So we saw last week that the passage we were looking at had to do with blindness. The Pharisees were blind concerning the identity of our Lord Jesus and His sufficiency. But there was blindness in different degrees: the Pharisees were the most blind because they had a wilful blindness that derived from the hardness of their hearts, but the disciples were also blind. They didn't understand it, but their blindness was an ignorant blindness because of the dullness of their heart. They weren't as blind as the Pharisees, but there wasn't enough light getting into their minds. This blindness, particularly of the disciples, was illustrated in the miracle that our Lord performed, this partial miracle of a blind man. We don't have time to look at it, you need to read these verses - verse 22 through to verse 26 - and Lord partially healed this man, and then He completely healed him - the only time that ever happened in a miracle. He used this to illustrate how often the disciples were blind to learn what the Lord would have them see clearly - and we saw the application for ourselves, that we too are found in this illustration of a miracle only completed in part. We too are so slow to learn, often, what the Lord is trying to teach us. We are blind to things He wants us to see clearly.

Now here in our reading, verses 27 right through I suppose to verse 29, is Peter's great confession 'Thou art the Christ' - it appears that the light is starting to get in. They are understanding a bit more of the identity of our Lord Jesus Christ. Now of course we know that Peter's confession here, 'Thou art the Christ', came via a revelation from the Father. Matthew tells us in his account about that: 'Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven'. Now that being said, this revelation was not given apart from Peter's understanding - it was given to his mind and to his heart. We might gasp an 'At last! Wonderfull! They're beginning to see the true identity of our Lord Jesus Christ' - but hold on a moment: this is still only a partial understanding of our Lord's identity.

Whilst they may have now found this great truth: 'Thou art the Christ' - Christ being 'Christos', 'Anointed One', 'the Messiah of Israel', and Matthew tells us they also confessed Him to be the Son of God - though they recognized that this was the divine Son come to be their Saviour, Messiah and Deliverer, had they recognized His sufficiency for the whole of mankind? To be the Saviour not just to the Jews, but to the whole world - and not only provide, potentially, universal salvation, but also provide for everyday needs that we face as children of God? Had they seen that? Well, one thing is certain: they hadn't understood the means by which the Lord Jesus Christ would become the sufficient Bread of God to the world.
This Bread from heaven sent by God, if it was going to feed the whole world, had to be given for the world. That's what we see the Lord trying to explain to them in verse 31: 'He began to teach them, that the Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected of the elders, and of the chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again'. Now this is a very detailed explanation, an explicit account of what actually was going to happen. The Lord names the three groups in the Sanhedrin who would later officially examine Him: the elders, chief priests, scribes - they would reject Him, and then three days later He would rise again from the dead. But the blindness was still so strong in the disciples - their mouthpiece being Peter - that Peter openly rebuked the Lord for such a suggestion. In verse 32 he said openly these words, and Peter began to rebuke Him.

Now the word that is used for 'rebuke' there in verse 32 is the same word that Mark uses when he records the account of our Lord rebuking demons in chapter 1 and chapter 3 - a harsh, a strong word. Peter rebuking the Lord! We see very quickly the Lord responded by rebuke of Peter, and He indicts Peter with having been inspired by Satan himself in an attempt to deter Him from the cross. Now Peter was not possessed by the devil here, but certainly his mind was overtaken by the devil - that's interesting, even as we consider as Christians how the influence of the devil can be in our lives. Here we find from our Lord the harshest words ever spoken to one of His devoted followers: 'Get thee behind me, Satan: for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but the things that be of men'.

He began to teach them that we too, not only He, but we too will have to take up our cross and follow Christ. We can't avoid it - little did Peter know that one day he would take up his own cross, literally. Then our Lord begins to teach them that glory - and oh, these disciples were looking glory, as we'll see, if God wills, in a future time when they're all arguing about who will be the greatest among them. The Lord wants them to know that glory can only come from suffering, glory will only come the way of the cross. The suffering and then the glory!

So come with me, and let's analyse what our Lord says to these disciples. First of all, let's look at Christ's cross - verses 27 to 33. Now the Lord selected this private place to be open, to be explicit about His death. Now He's been hinting at it along the way, hasn't He? But they haven't taken the hint, so He chooses Caesarea Philippi to divulge all this information to His disciples. Now that's not Caesarea on the Mediterranean coast, this is Caesarea Philippi about 25 miles north of Bethsaida at the foot of Mount Hermon. It was named after Caesar Augustus and Herod Philip - and if you went there in these days you would have found a marble temple to honour Augustus, and there was also present the famous Temple of the great pagan god 'Pan'. It was a place known for its glory of the Roman Empire and the Roman gods, and it was a place that was filled with idolatry. I had the privilege of going to the ruins of Caesarea Philippi recently, and that was the thing that still strikes you: the remnant of pagan idolatry that is there. It's interesting that our Lord should have chosen such a place, such a context and backdrop, to Peter's great confession in verse 29: 'Thou art the Christ', as Matthew says, 'The Son of the Living God'.

Let's look first of all at Peter's confession: 'Thou art the Christ'. What Peter was saying was: 'You are not to be placed alongside others. You are unique. You are the Christ, the Anointed Messiah to deliver God's people, but You are the Son of God, You are the Saviour of the world'. Of course this answer, this confession was precipitated by the question of our Lord: 'What do you think about Me?'. What you - you - think about Christ is the most important thing about you. Christ divides opinions, He divides nations, He divides homes, He divides religions.
Now, we see that some thought - according to the reply given - that He was John the Baptist come back from the dead. Some thought He was Elijah, others thought He was one of the prophets. Matthew is more specific: some thought He was Jeremiah himself come back from the dead. Now the Lord Jesus was quite different from John the Baptist in looks and temperament, and of course John was more like Elijah than our Lord even was. Now the only similarity between them was that they preached the same message: repentance and the coming of the kingdom of God. Our Lord was, however, quite similar to Jeremiah the prophet - who, you remember, was known as 'Jeremiah, the weeping prophet'. Our Lord Jesus was the Man of sorrows, acquainted with grief, but here is the main point: we have seen going through Mark’s gospel that our Lord had already given ample evidence of who He was, His identity - that He was the Messiah, the Bread of God come down from heaven, the Son of God - yet they are still blind to His identity.

Now the citizens of Caesarea Philippi would have been used to saying: 'Caesar is Lord', and that might have identified them with being a loyal Roman citizen, but it would never have saved their soul. Here in the backdrop of this Roman idolatry and paganism our Lord was encouraging His disciples to confess Him as the only true Son of God, the only true Saviour and Messiah. We must beware today of the crowd's estimation of Christ, because it is only - I repeat - it is only the confession 'Jesus is Lord' that will save a man's soul. Coming from the Spirit of God, 'If thou confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved'.

In verse 30 He charged them that they should tell no man of this, of what He had just said. Now why was this? There are often different reasons why He tells people not to tell something, but here I believe the chief reason is that He was in fear that, now confessing Himself as the Messiah, He would create a political uprising that would prevent Him going to the cross, which was His reason for being here. This is what He is now revealing to them: that the Son of Man must go to the cross. So from this confession comes confusion, and in verse 31 there is all this detailed information as the Lord shares His heart about how He's going to die and rise again, that He must go to Jerusalem to the cross. We see - if you're familiar with Mark's gospel, you know from this point on in the narrative the Lord is journeying toward Jerusalem to die on the cross, and the whole emphasis of Mark's gospel now is on the cross - but these disciples are left nonplussed, completely confused, bamboozled. 'If we have now recognized You as Messiah, and You are Messiah; would Messiah not deliver us from our enemies, not be delivered to His enemies? Would He not establish His kingdom for Israel, not be destroyed by a foreign kingdom of oppressors, Rome?'.

Now please, don't ever doubt that Peter loved the Lord - of course he loved the Lord, maybe with a passion that we don't know as yet - but it was Peter's misguided love for the Lord that took him outside the will of the Lord in his outburst. Now that's interesting, because we can have great love for the Lord but go in the wrong direction, or not discern the Lord's will and be fools. Warren Wiersbe puts it like this: 'One minute Peter was a rock, and the next he was a stumbling block'. Campbell Morgan put it like this: 'The man who loves Jesus but shuns God's method is a stumbling block to Him'. You see, you can love the Lord but not recognize His way of doing things, and you can actually be a stumbling block to His will - and in this particular context it was Peter and the disciples recognized that 'Thou art the Christ', but they didn't recognize His method of saving men was by dying, and three days later rising again.

Now we will see that often Christians miss the fact that suffering must come before the glory. They recognize the Lord Jesus, but they don't want to recognize that method. They don't want a cross, they want the glory! In verse 33 - note please - He looked at the disciples, and then
He rebuked Peter, because the disciples were thinking exactly the same thing as Peter was. None of them had made this connection between suffering and glory, none of them. It was unthinkable that their Messiah should suffer and die. There was so much in the Old Testament prophets about the glory of Messiah and the kingdom of Messiah, why would He die? Now, can I say, and Warren Weirsbe says this and he's right, that the problem of Peter and the disciples here was not so much a theological problem, it was a practical problem. It was not a problem with the Scriptures, it was a problem with them. What am I talking about? Well, these were men, remember, who had left all to follow Christ, and whatever happened to Him might happen to them - do you see it?

Verse 34: 'And when he had called the people unto him with his disciples also, he said unto them', the Lord summons the nearby crowds - many of whom, incidentally, were only following Him because of His miracles - and He taught them: 'No, there is a cost to true discipleship', a cost. So Christ's cross is now leading us to our cross, and so here we have it in verse 34: 'Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me'. Now there the Lord Jesus lays down three conditions for true discipleship: one, surrender - 'let him deny himself', that is passive, negative, 'throw down your arms', self-will, 'and surrender'. Two, 'take up his cross' - that's sacrifice, be willing to pay a price for Christ. Then three, 'follow me' - that's submission. Surrender was passive and negative, giving up to God; submission is positive, active, 'do the will of God'; obedience, 'follow me'.

'Deny himself', now can I just say that denying self is not the same as self-denial. I don't want to be pedantic, but self-denial is giving up something, isn't it? Giving up chocolate or something - but denying self is giving up you, giving up ourselves. Now what is being posed to us today in the 21st-century is: even though you recognize Jesus as the Messiah, and maybe as your Saviour through the cross, do you recognize that you have got a cross? You are to deny yourself, give up yourself - and I believe there is often a point in the Christian experience where you do this, and you do it once for all...but it needs to be repeated every day, the following day, and the day after that, and the day after that. That's why the Lord says we take up our cross daily and follow Him. Now this isn't for our benefit, though it is to our benefit, look what it says: 'this is for my sake and the gospel's'. In other words, we are to surrender, we are to sacrifice, we are to submit for Christ, for others - we're not to live for ourselves!

This is discipleship, and I think it has been lost to a large extent in the Christian church today. It is a matter of profit and losses, profit and losses - verse 35: 'Whosoever will save his life shall lose it', save your life, you lose it, 'but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel's, the same shall save it'. Profit and losses. So it's a question the Lord is asking here: whether we will invest our lives for the kingdom of God, or waste our lives on ourselves - that's what He's asking. Now remember He's speaking to men who have already confessed Him as Lord, He's speaking to men who have already confessed Him as Christ, He's speaking to men who have already been called - He's not telling them how to be saved from hell, He's telling them how to save their lives from waste! The Greek word for 'soul' here is the same word as 'life', 'psyche' - verse 37, 'What shall a man give in exchange for his soul?', the word 'soul' is the word 'life', 'What shall a man give in exchange for his life?'. So losing your soul here - whilst we preach the Gospel so often from this, it's an application, it's not the correct interpretation - what the Lord is saying here is: 'You can, as a Christian, waste your life'. You see, you could have success in men's eyes, but that means nothing in God's eyes. What the Lord's saying here is: 'You could have a soul saved, and a life lost'.

It's serious, isn't it? 'Even', the Lord says, 'if you gain the wealth the whole world' - do you
know what that verse 37 means? After 36, 'What shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?', verse 37, 'What shall a man give in exchange for his soul?' - do you understand what that means? I hear Christians quoting this all the time, and I for years quoted it and never really understood what it means - it means it's not enough, all the whole world if you got that, it is not enough to buy a second chance with your life. You can't buy another life. You can't buy another opportunity to be a disciple and serve the Lord.

I came across a staggering illustration this week of this truth. 180 years after the death of Charlemagne, who was the king of the Franc empire, around the year 1000 AD, the officials of the subsequent Emperor Otto opened the great king's tomb, Charlemagne's tomb - and, apart from the amazing sight of all the wealth and riches that had been buried with him, all his treasure, what they saw as this - now picture this: it was his skeleton, the skeletal remains of the king, and he was seated on his throne! There was a crown still on his skull, but on his lap there was noted a copy of the Gospels - and his bony finger was resting on this verse: 'What shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?'

Now the Lord Jesus says to you: 'You who want to follow me, salvation is by grace through faith alone' - we believe in the Lord Jesus and we're saved...but the Lord doesn't just want converts, He wants disciples. This is not a condition of salvation, but this is a condition of discipleship - and He wants all of us to take up our cross, He has led on from talking about His own, but there's another cross: yours. Are you taking it up? Now, we talk about taking up our cross, and we apply it to trials in our lives, don't we, and problems we're having? We've a bad boss, or a nagging wife, or a wayward son, or some kind of illness or ailment - that's not what the Lord is talking about. We should forget about that language - now that's not to say what you're going through is not purposed by God, of course it is, and it's a trial and a suffering and so on, I'm not demeaning that - but don't call it a cross. What the Lord is saying here is that crosses come as a consequence of walking in Christ's steps. To take up your cross means to deliberately choose a pathway of rejection, of suffering, of loneliness, of betrayal, of denial, of hatred, of insults, of persecution, of mental anguish - even death for Christ's sake, for Christ's and the Gospel's! That's what it means to take up your cross.

We've become so used with the words that we've lost sight of the revolutionary meaning. Listen to what A.W. Tozer says in his book 'Born after Midnight', he says: 'Christ calls men to carry a cross; we call them to have fun in His name. He calls them to forsake the world; we assure them that if they but accept Jesus the world is their oyster. He calls them to suffer; we call them to enjoy all the bourgeois comforts modern civilization affords. He calls them to self-abnegation and death; we call them to spread themselves like green bay trees or perchance even to become stars in a pitiful fifth-rate religious zodiac. He calls them to holiness; we call them to a cheap and tawdry happiness that would have been rejected with scorn by the least of the Stoic philosophers'. What Jesus is saying is that your cross will be proportionate to your willingness to follow Him.

What are you suffering for Christ? You say: 'How are we suffering here for Christ?'. Do you know what I believe? I truly believe, if God's word is true, that all of us, if we are really following Christ, will start to suffer. Maybe it's because we're not following Him the way we think. Is there any point in living like this? It sounds all doom and gloom and pain and anguish - well, yes there is, it's reward: we'll become more like the Lord, and one day will share in His glory. That is the trade-off - remember I said that discipleship was a matter of profits and losses: if you lose life down here as the world values and esteems it, you will win life up there, you will get a reward, and that reward is to share in the glory of Christ. In other words, losers are keepers - 'Finders keepers, losers weepers', we say...no, losers are keepers.
Do you believe that? Do you? Honestly, do you believe it? If you do, you will swim against the tide of our culture - more than that, you'll go against the tide of the church. The Lord is saying: Christ's cross and our cross precedes the glory. So, in this account of the Mount of Transfiguration in chapter 9 verses 1 to 13, we get a confirmation of Peter's confession, 'Thou art the Christ'. He is high and lifted up there, and God transfigures Him to show His divine glory - but it's also a revelation of the glory of the cross. Six days later, after our Lord has spoken of His cross and our cross, He gives proof that the transformation to glory is through suffering - do you see it? It's all connected, the message is clear: first the suffering, first betrayal, first crucifixion; then the glory.

Now, when you go to 1 Peter - the same Peter of course - you discover that Peter learned the lesson well. Would you give me the time to look at it? Turn over to 1 Peter for a moment, we'll go quickly through this. Peter learned this lesson: first the suffering, then the glory. First Peter 1 verse 6 through to verse 8: 'Wherein ye greatly rejoice', speaking to believers who were suffering for their faith now, 'though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold testings: That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ: Whom having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory'. Look at verse 11: 'Searching what, or what manner of time the Spirit of Christ which was in them did signify, when it testified beforehand the suffering of Christ, and the glory that should follow'.

Look again with me at 1 Peter 4 verse 12: 'Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you: But rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy. If ye be reproached for the name of Christ, happy are ye; for the spirit of glory and of God resteth upon you: on their part he is evil spoken of, but on your part he is glorified. But let none of you suffer as a murderer, or as a thief, or as an evildoer, or as a busybody in other men's matters. Yet if any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf'.

Once more, chapter 5 verse 1: 'The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed' - that's the transfiguration he's talking about, he saw that. Verse 10: 'But the God of all grace, who hath called us unto his eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after that ye have suffered a while, make you perfect, stablish, strengthen, settle you'.

Now the Transfiguration was a preview of the second coming of Christ in glory - we know that from verse 1. It's how it will be, and His glory there is going to be shared by believers. Didn't He say in John 17 to God as He prayed: 'The glory which thou gavest me I have given them; that they may be one, even as we are one: I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one; and that the world may know that thou hast sent me, and hast loved them, as thou hast loved me. Father, I will that they also, whom thou hast given me, be with me where I am; that they may behold my glory, which thou hast given me: for thou lovedst me before the foundation of the world'.

Now, according to 2 Corinthians 3:18, we now can share in that glory: 'We now, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord'. So we can have that transformation beginning in us now, that is sanctification - but one day, when the Lord comes, we shall see Him as He is,
and we shall be like Him. When the Lord returns the bodies of dead saints, like Moses, will rise. Living saints, like Elijah, who never died, will rise to be with the Lord - and together, what a glory! The cross will not destroy God's plan for the fulfilment of the kingdom, it will not obstruct it, it will fulfil it!

In verse 7 of chapter 9 of Mark's gospel the Father interrupts Peter's rant about building some kind of booth to honour the Lord, Elijah and Moses; and He focuses all the disciples' attentions not on the vision of the Christ glorified, but on His word: 'Hear Him!'. Hear Him? Hear Him saying what? Generally, of course, saying all that He has taught; but hear Him: 'First the suffering, then the glory!'. What He saying? He's saying: 'The cross and then the crown'. What He's saying? He's saying: 'Satan offers glory without suffering'. Remember he came to the Lord Jesus in His temptation, and took Him up to a high mountain and showed Him all the kings of the world and the glory of them, and says: 'All these will I give You, if You fall down and worship me'. What did the Lord say to him? The exact same phraseology as He said to Peter here: 'Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve'.

You see, Satan was tempting Him at the temptation, and now Satan is tempting him here with Peter, through Peter, to take a path of glory without suffering. Do you see it? You know what happens then? What happens then is you get the suffering, and not glory at all, because that path doesn't bring the glory. Can we echo Paul's testimony in Galatians 6:14 when he said: 'God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world'. Is that you? You're on a cross?

A man was being taken in a jeep, a Christian missionary, to be executed with a number of other Christians - I think they were natives. He was asked a question: 'Are you not afraid to die?'. Do you know what his answer was? 'No, friend, I already died long ago' - I already died long ago. Could that be said of you? Could that be said of me?

O Father, burn those words into our heart, for only he who bears the cross may hope to win the glorious crown. Help us to realise that it is those who suffer with Him who will reign with Him, and help us to choose that path, that narrow path. O Lord, we pray, help us to seek first the kingdom. O Lord, help us to surrender, to sacrifice, and to submit - day by day - until You call us home. Hear our prayer, we pray, and help us to apply these hard sayings, in the name of our Lord Jesus we ask it, Amen.
Now do turn with me to Mark's gospel chapter 9 please, and we take up where we left off. We're going to begin reading at verse 11 of Mark 9, and you remember please what came before: the Transfiguration event - and that's very important, that you realise where we are reading on from.

Verse 11 of Mark 9 then: 'And they asked him, saying', this is probably while descending the mountain, 'Why say the scribes that Elias', or Elijah, 'must first come? And he answered and told them, Elias verily cometh first, and restoreth all things; and how it is written of the Son of man, that he must suffer many things, and be set at nought. But I say unto you, That Elijah is indeed come, and they have done unto him whatsoever they listed, as it is written of him. And when he came to his disciples, he saw a great multitude about them, and the scribes questioning with them. And straightway all the people, when they beheld him, were greatly amazed, and running to him saluted him. And he asked the scribes, What question ye with them?', that is, His own disciples, 'And one of the multitude answered and said, Master, I have brought unto thee my son, which hath a dumb spirit; And wheresoever he taketh him, he teareth him: and he foameth, and gnasheth with his teeth, and pineth away: and I spake to thy disciples that they should cast him out; and they could not. He answereth him, and saith, O faithless generation, how long shall I be with you? how long shall I suffer you? bring him unto me. And they brought him unto him: and when he saw him, straightway the spirit tare him; and he fell on the ground, and wallowed foaming. And he asked his father, How long is it ago since this came unto him? And he said, Of a child. And oftimes it hath cast him into the fire, and into the waters, to destroy him: but if thou canst do any thing, have compassion on us, and help us. Jesus said unto him, If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth. And straightway he cried out, and rent him sore, and came out of him: and he was as one dead; insomuch that many said, He is dead. But Jesus took him by the hand, and lifted him up; and he arose. And when he was come into the house, his disciples asked him privately, Why could not we cast him out? And he said unto them, This kind can come forth by nothing, but by prayer and fasting. And they departed thence, and passed through Galilee; and he would not that any man should know it. For he taught his disciples, and said unto them, The Son of man is delivered into the hands of men, and they shall kill him; and after that he is killed, he shall rise the third day. But they understood not that saying, and were afraid to ask him'.

The title I have taken for the message this morning is: 'Believing Prayer, and Power for Service'. Let me remind you where we were in our last study in chapter 8 and the beginning of chapter 9. You remember in verse 27 of chapter 8 through to verse 33, the Lord Jesus had been very explicit concerning how He had to die on a cross. He was the Servant of God who
had come to suffer, and it was through suffering that salvation would come to mankind. Of course, we have within that account Peter's confession: 'Thou art the Christ'; but we also have Peter and the disciples' confusion concerning Christ's cross. Peter rebuked the Lord for such a suggestion, they just didn't understand the message of the cross.

Campbell Morgan, it was, who said - and I told it to you last time - 'The man who loves Jesus, but who shuns God's method, is a stumbling block to the Lord'. These disciples were becoming a stumbling block to the Lord, that's why He had to rebuke Peter and actually called him 'Satan' - 'Get behind me!'. They didn't understand that the way to glory, the way to salvation was through suffering and through the cross. We also saw that their stumbling at the cross was not so much a theological issue but a practical one, because their equation in their mind was: 'If He's going to a cross, in all likelihood - because we have left everything to follow Him - we're going to one too'. The Lord really answered that unspoken question for them by speaking to them of their own cross. He began to talk to them about the true cost of discipleship, and we looked at our cross - verses 34 through to verse 38. The Lord there spoke of the conditions of true discipleship, particularly in verse 34 if you look at it again: 'Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me'. So there was surrender: 'Deny himself', that's different, we saw, from self-denial. It's not just giving up chocolate or some other thing that's bad for us that we like, but it's giving up ourselves entirely to the Lord, surrendering ourselves passively. It's negative, saying: 'I'm giving up being the pilot of my life in control over everything that I am and have, and surrendering to the Lord' – denying yourself. Then secondly there's sacrifice: 'Deny yourself, take up your cross'. We've to sacrifice, there's a cost to be a disciple of Christ, and that sacrifice is daily: take up your cross daily and follow Me. We asked what it's costing us to be Christians in the 21st-century.

The third thing that marked true discipleship was submission. If surrender was the negative and the passive of letting go of your life and giving it over to God, submission was the positive and the active whereby we obey what God has told us in His command: doing God's will, and that was enshrined in that comment 'Deny himself, take up his cross and follow me'. We saw that discipleship was a matter of profit and losses, verse 35: 'Whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel's, the same shall save it. What shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?'. It's a question of whether we waste our lives on ourselves and on this world, or whether we invest our lives in the kingdom of Christ - and that's the only thing that's going to last. Remember I explained verse 37, which is so much misunderstood: 'What shall a man give in exchange for his soul?'. To put it in our language, it's saying: 'No matter how much you have, you cannot buy a second opportunity at your life', so spend the life you have for Jesus.

Then that brought us to what is commonly dealt with as just a separate and distinct section, that is the Transfiguration in chapter 9 verses 1 through to 10 - but we saw how much it relates to what has gone before. Christ's cross, our cross, and now the glory of the cross - and the message is clear: first the suffering, then the glory. The disciples didn't get it, and as we saw from our reading this morning they're still not getting it. You see, we want the glory without the suffering - and the devil would offer us the glory without the suffering, for didn't he do that in the temptation of our Lord? Isn't he tempting the Lord here again through Peter, and that's why the Lord Jesus uses exactly the same language to Peter as He did to the devil in the wilderness: 'Get behind me, begone!'.

The glory of the cross: you cannot have glory without suffering, it will end up suffering
without glory. First the cross, then the crown. If we want God's glory, our lives will be marked by suffering service. That's what we see here in our portion, and it follows on very well from what has gone before because the disciples are not permitted to remain on the mountaintop of glory. We see them descending, and in the valley below there is a groaning sobbing example of mankind, a demon-possessed boy and his father. A world of need lying at the foot of the mountain where they had seen such divine glory!

In the Vatican Gallery in Rome there hangs a work of art by Raphael, his last painting in fact, which many believe was his greatest. It's entitled 'The Transfiguration', his depiction of this event. At the uppermost of the picture there is the transfigured form of the Lord Jesus, and Moses on His left and Elijah on His right. But on the next level down of the painting there are the three disciples who went up the Mount with the Lord - Peter, James and John - and you can see that they have recently been awakened, and they are shielding their eyes from Jesus' blinding brilliance. But then on the bottom level, the ground level, there is this poor demon-possessed boy, and his mouth is gaping hideously as if he's raving and mad. At his side there is the desperate father, and there are the surrounding disciples and scribes who are debating among themselves something - which we'll see possibly what it is in a moment or two - but some of them are pointing to the figure of the transfigured Christ at the top of the painting. In other words, the message that Raphael is getting across is that Christ is the only hope for that boy.

He very masterfully captures the overwhelming contrast between the glorious mountaintop experience of Christ's Transfiguration, and the reality of the troubled world that lay at the bottom of that mountain that the disciples were now travelling towards. Now imagine the experience that these disciples have had on the Mount - the three, Peter, James and John who were there. Surely as they came down the mountain their feet were hardly touching the ground, remember what they had seen: the divine essence of Christ bursting forth from Him, as never seen by them before. They had seen the father of the law, Moses; the father of the prophets, Elijah. They had seen the Shekinah glory, the cloud, the holy cloud coming down and enveloping them. They had heard the voice of God: 'This is my beloved Son, hear Him'.

From that, suddenly, they're brought forcibly down to earth. Now, before we reach the bottom of the mountain, do you see what they were doing on their way down? Verses 9 to 13, they had a theological discussion, they questioned the relationship, prophetically, between Elijah and the Messiah who was to come, and who they believed was now there. They discussed the timing of it all, and the resurrection - but from that theological discussion in the clouds, they're brought down to earth with a bump to face a young man possessed by a devil. Now can I make very obvious application to this just now, because many of us as believers: we want the glory, everybody wants the glory that the Lord has to offer! Often we want the rest that Christ gives us now. Now of course there is a spiritual rest that we all can enjoy, a peace that passes understanding, but we want to rest now like we will rest in eternity. We want to engage in leisurely theological discussion - and we could do with a lot more theological discussion these days - but so often it is leisurely and ignorant of the true realities of the aching heart of this world in which we reside.

Whilst these disciples are walking down the mountain asking very valid questions, they are oblivious to mankind that is perishing while they pontificate on prophetic truth. I think this, perhaps, is one of the great scandals of evangelicalism today. Incidentally, it happened in Paul's day. When he wrote to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 4 he said, comparing himself to some false apostles and those living in Corinth: 'Now you are full, now you are rich, you have reigned as kings without us: and I would to God you did reign, that we also might reign with
you'. Now you know what Paul is saying there: you are living as if the millennial kingdom has already come - you're full, you're rich, you're reigning; and I would that that was the reality, because then we would all be reigning with you! Then he talks of the apostle's own experience, which was so different: 'For I thank God that he has set forth us the apostles last, as it were appointed to death: for we are made a spectacle unto the world, and to angels, and to men. We are fools for Christ's sake, but ye are wise in Christ; we are weak, but ye are strong; ye are honourable, but we are despised'. In other words, he's saying: 'You need to be brought down to earth with a bump too, to realise that the time to be rich, the time to be full, the time to reign, the time to have leisurely discussions at the expense of others is not yet'.

We all need to be brought back to earth with a bump, I think. In one day these disciples had moved from the glories of heaven to the horrors of hell. Now it should be like that for every servant of Christ - do you believe that? We should come out of our closets, having met with God in a pseudo-transfiguration experience, a mountaintop of communion, but we should be travelling down from those mountain peaks to meet the needs of a dying and a perishing world. We want the glories of the heavenly, perhaps, but don't want to get our hands dirty with the earthly. It was C. T. Studd, that great cricketer and inheritor of a mass of wealth, who gave it all up and went to the mission field for the cause of Christ. He said: 'Some want to live within the sound of church and chapel bell, but I want to run a rescue shop within a yard of hell'.

That's what these disciples needed to learn. In verses 14 to 16 they reached the base of the mountain, and a lively debate was going on among the Scribes, the gathered crowd, and the other disciples. The Lord appeared to the people, and they beheld Him, they were greatly amazed it says - that may be that His face still shone - but He asks them: 'What are you discussing?'. Now this is supposition, but I believe it's warranted: I believe that the Scribes were questioning the remaining disciples who were at the foot of the mountain because they haven't got the power to cast out the devil from this man, this young boy. In verses 17 and 18 his father is distraught - Matthew, in his account, says his father got on his knees and poured out his heart to the Lord about his son who was possessed with a mute spirit. Luke records him saying in Luke 9:38: 'Master, I beseech', or I beg you, 'look upon my son: for he is mine only child'. His only child is deaf and dumb, he could see what was going on around his pathetic body, but he could not hear or speak'. Like humanity today: filled with pain, but powerless to do anything about it. 'An aquarium-like existence', and this father comes to the disciples for help, and they couldn't help! He says that in verse 18, at the end of it, after he asks the Lord for help he said: 'I asked Your disciples, but they could not'. There was an absence of divine power in their service - there's a thought! An absence of divine power in their service. How often, I know I feel this way, we are faced with people in our world whose lives are wrecked and ruined, ravaged, brutalised by sin and Satan - and often you feel you've no answer. Now I know we always say: 'Christ is the answer to your every need', and all that - but if you sit before these people, whose lives are messed up, sometimes you do wonder. Satan's mission is to destroy the image of God in man, and the question we all need to ask ourselves is - like the disciples were asked by this victim - do
we have an answer? Is that answer a powerful answer?

Now look at the Lord, what He said in verse 19: 'O faithless generation'. Now please notice: Jesus chided the disciples for their unbelief. It's His own He is rebuking. The problem was not a lack of education among them, it was not cultural or social awareness, it was not a lack of being relevant or attractive or contemporary, it was a lack of faith! O faithless generation! So we conclude that an absence of divine power in their service was due to a lack of faith, and that's usually the case. An absence of power in divine service is due to a lack of faith. Had the Lord Jesus not given them the power to cast out devils and demons? If you turn back to chapter 6, you see it very clearly in verse 7 and verse 13 that there the Lord bestowed that upon them. Here He has to say to them: 'O faithless generation', that word 'O' was rarely used in addressing someone directly. It reflected deep emotion, exasperation: 'O unbelieving generation'.

Now think about that statement: 'unbelieving generation' - who was He speaking to? His disciples. Why does He call them 'a generation'? Do you know what He's effectively saying? 'You disciples are no different than the rest of this generation', that's what He's saying! He's lumping them in along with everybody else. Now friends, that is fitting for the church today that is so rich and well-equipped, so knowledgeable and yet so powerless, it would seem, to meet the needs of perishing humanity. How often the Lord Jesus must be grieved with us the way He was with the disciples when He thinks of the resources He has given us, blessed with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ Jesus - and yet we seem so practically powerless to do anything with those who are lost. He said to them: 'How long shall I be with you? how long shall I suffer you?'. Staggering words! 'How long shall I be with you before you tap into the authority that I have given you? How long will it be before your lives of powerlessness and defeat are transformed?'.

Can I ask you today: if the Lord asked you how long, what would your answer be to that question? How long has He been with you? How long have you been saved? How long have you been walking this Christian life, and yet there is a powerlessness in serving the Lord that meets the needs of others. Their problem was unbelief. They believed in the process, they believed in themselves because they had done this before, they had cast out devils before, but they had started to rest on something other than the Lord Himself.

Now we often hear an expression, and it is this: 'Faith is expectation' - faith is expecting something, you've heard that, haven't you? If you don't expect it, it's not faith. Well, let me say that that's false, because these folk expected something to happen. It had happened before and they expected it again, but nothing happened because their faith was not a hoping and trusting assurance in God and His word - that's what faith is: taking God at His word.

Indeed, in Matthew's account of this same incident, it was then that the Lord is recorded as speaking: 'Verily I say unto you, If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible for you'. What is happening here in verses 20 to 23 is that as they brought the child to the Lord Jesus, the demon induced a particularly severe fit, and then the father asked the Lord to do something. Now look at what the father says: 'Do something if You can' - do you see it? 'If thou canst', imagine saying that to the Lord Jesus! Now, what would you do on such an occasion? You would expect, at least, the Lord to turn round and rebuke that man: 'What do you mean 'if'? That's not faith! 'If' - but He doesn't rebuke that man, and don't you be too hard on that man. The Lord doesn't rebuke him because it was the disciples who failed.
'What do you mean?' Well, let me tell you what I mean: the father was desperate and he came to these disciples, and because they were the representatives of Jesus Christ and had empowered to them His power also, they felt that they could do something - but they could do nothing! That's why, in verse 22, he says: 'If thou canst do any thing, have compassion on us, and help us'. Now here is a very sobering thought: our lack of power in serving the Lord reflects on the Lord Jesus Himself. Did you hear that? You mightn't like it, but I don't care, it's reality. The rabbis had a saying, you know: 'The one sent by a man, is as the man himself'. The one sent by a man is as the man himself, in other words the messenger, you take the messenger as if it was the master sending him. That was their culture and their belief, and the Scribes were saying here - this is what the discussion, I believe, was - they were accusing the disciples of being a phoney, because they couldn't cast the demon out of the lad; and if they were phonies, then He was a phoney! It reflected on Him.

Now I know the reality is: we point people to Christ, we don't point people to ourselves - and we say: 'Don't look at us, look at Christ - but the fact of the matter is, the Lord wants people to be able to look at us and see His divine power, and see something different in us. Not powerlessness and a paltry spiritual existence! It was captured well in that little verse:

'You are writing a gospel, a chapter each day,
By the deeds that you do, and the words that you say;
Men read what you write, distorted or true,
Say: what is the gospel according to you?'.

Jesus told this man that it wasn't a question of His ability to heal, but of the father's ability to believe - verse 23, do you see the play on words? The father had said: 'If You can heal, please help', in verse 23 'Jesus said unto him, If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth'. Now that was a rebuke, I believe, to the disciples - they hadn't believed, O faithless generation. Now, let me sound a word of warning in verse 23. This has been an often abused verse, people lift it out of context and say you can almost do anything by believing prayer, claiming a verse like this - that's not so. Now listen carefully: faith must never go further than God's clear promises. God is only obliged to give us what He has promised us. Now that's very important. Faith is only as good as the promises of God.

Now, praise God, I believe Christ can heal today, and He's still healing - but is it always the Lord Jesus' will to heal? Well, if it was, no believer would die. The question that needs to be asked is: do you have a promise from God that He's going to heal you? If you don't have a promise from God that He's going to heal you, you've no grounds to ask Him to heal you. Now God can give that promise through His word, He can give it through other means I believe - and He can, I believe, and does give these promises; not just for healing, but for other things - but we need God's word to claim, in order to be sure that our faith will not be disappointed. Whilst we need to be cautious in this whole realm, we - I believe - in our circles, are on the verge of the other extreme, and that's that we've ceased to believe that God can do anything. Am I wrong?

Verse 24, what a statement, this man said: 'I believe'. Jesus said: 'If you believe, it's not about if I can - I can - but if you believe'. Now he's getting the word from Christ: 'If you believe, all things are possible'. He says: 'I believe, but help thou my unbelief - or as one translation puts it, 'I do believe, help me overcome my unbelief'. What an honest man! Would to God we were a bit more honest! His faith was imperfect, and there is no such a thing as a perfect faith in the life of a sinner. A faith that declares itself publicly, and at the same time recognizes its own weaknesses and pleads for help, is real faith. We can see it, verses 25 to
27, when the Lord Jesus ordered the unclean spirit to leave the child there was another terrible spasm, the little boy relaxed, many people thought he had died, and the Saviour raised him up by the hand - how precious - and He restored him, Luke says, to his father. Luke also records: 'And they were all amazed at the greatness of God'.

In verses 28 and 29 the Lord Jesus goes into a house. Incidentally, when you're going through Mark and the gospel's, note whenever the Lord takes the disciples into a house - there's something important going to be taught. When He's alone with them there, they ask Him privately, here's the question: 'Why couldn't we cast the devil out of the boy?', and He replied that certain service requires prayer and fasting. Now here's what the Lord Jesus was teaching them: He had showed them that there was an absence of divine power in their service, He then taught them that an absence of divine power in service is due to a lack of faith; but now He's teaching them in the house that the faith which brings power is the faith that prays. The faith that brings power is the faith that prays.

Why had the nine disciples remaining on the ground failed? Because they had become careless of their spiritual walk with the Lord Jesus Christ. A very simple answer: they had neglected prayer and fasting, they were operating on their own strength or their past experience. I don't know whether you ever think to yourself: 'Why is it that preachers keep going on about the quiet time? Having time with God, and praying, and reading the scriptures?'. This is why - but it's more than your quiet time, there are some things that need more than a quiet time! The authority that the Lord Jesus had given these disciples would only be exercised if they used it by faith, and cultivated it through spiritual discipline and devotion - and that was manifest in prayer, and fasting and prayer. What do you know about that? I know this much, to my constant condemnation, that the true test of our spiritual walk is our prayer life.

It was Murray M'Cheyne who said: 'What you are on your knees, you are and no more' - what you are on your knees, you are and no more. When I thought about that, all I could think was: my stature on my knees truly brings me down to size. I imagine you're no different. Why is there an absence of divine power so much in our service? It's due to our lack of faith, but it's a faith that must be fed by prayer and fasting. So much defeat, so much frustration in Christian service - is the Lord saying to you, is He saying to me: 'This kind can come forth by nothing but by prayer and fasting'. We're labouring tirelessly, conscientiously, and facing defeat and frustration over and over again - do you know what this is that He's talking about? It is the way of the cross again! Deny yourself, take up your cross, follow me. Pray, fast, suffer, sacrifice, serve!

On His way away from Caesarea in verse 30, what does He talk to them about again? Surprise, surprise: the cross. A further not so big surprise: they didn't get it! In verse 32, look at this, this is marvellous - at the end it says: 'They were afraid to ask him'. They were afraid to ask Him what the cross meant! I imagine that wasn't just because of what it meant for Him, but what it meant for them. The Lord was teaching them: there is no power, there is no power without paying the price.

Let's all bow our heads: I hope that you've got the message. He was Jehovah's Suffering Servant, and we are called upon to be His suffering servants. A very simple message, and yet how difficult to receive it, how hard it is to live it.

O Lord, give us the grace to put into practice what we have learned, for we will be condemned if we do not do what we have read and what we have studied. To whom much is given, much
will be required. Lord, help me, help us to serve with the Saviour's heart. For His sake and glory, and for the salvation of lost souls we ask it, Amen.

Transcribed by Andrew Watkins, Preach The Word – May 2008
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I want you to turn with me to Mark's gospel chapter 9 please, Mark's gospel chapter 9. I want to speak to you today on 'True Greatness', and we are beginning to read in Mark 9 from verse 33:

"And he", that is the Lord Jesus Christ, "came to Capernaum: and being in the house he asked them, What was it that ye disputed among yourselves by the way?". He asks them: 'What was it that you disputed among yourselves by the way?'. "But they held their peace: for by the way they had disputed among themselves, who should be the greatest. And he sat down, and called the twelve, and saith unto them, If any man desire to be first, the same shall be last of all, and servant of all. And he took a child, and set him in the midst of them: and when he had taken him in his arms, he said unto them, Whosoever shall receive one of such children in my name, receiveth me: and whosoever shall receive me, receiveth not me, but him that sent me. And John answered him, saying, Master, we saw one casting out devils in thy name, and he followeth not us: and we forbade him, because he followeth not us. But Jesus said, Forbid him not: for there is no man which shall do a miracle in my name, that can lightly speak evil of me. For he that is not against us is on our part, or 'on our side'. "For whosoever shall give you a cup of water to drink in my name, because ye belong to Christ, verily I say unto you, he shall not lose his reward. And whosoever shall offend one of these little ones that believe in me, it is better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he were cast into the sea", and we'll end our reading there at verse 42.

Let's pray together for just a moment: Father, we thank You for the promise of the Lord Jesus - that where two are gathered together unto Him, to His name, He will be in the midst. We pray that it will be found in all of our hearts, the desire to meet with Christ now. We thank You for these sacred, inspired, infallible words that tell us of His life, His teaching, His great acts. We pray, Lord, that this event that we have just borne record to from Mark's gospel will be used in a mighty way to teach us now what true greatness is. Lord, give me the help I need, and all of us together, as we seek to understand Your word and be receptive to the change that You wish to make in all of our lives by the power of Your Holy Spirit. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, we pray, Amen.

I'm sure most of you are aware of the fact that all the gospel writers have different emphases, and Mark's emphasis is on the servanthood of the Lord Jesus Christ - particularly the Suffering Servant. The key verse, perhaps, in the whole book is found in the next chapter to ours this morning, chapter 10 and verse 45 - and you will be familiar with it: 'For even the Son of man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many'. You may not be aware that the background to that statement in Mark 10:45 is very similar to the context that we find ourselves in in Mark chapter 9, because James and John had come to the Lord Jesus and asked that they would sit either side of the Lord Jesus when His earthly kingdom came upon the earth. You can read all about that from verse 42 of chapter 10 to verse 45.

The Lord was trying to emphasise to them that God's glory comes to us through service,
indeed sacrifice - put the two things together: sacrificial service. But they keep failing to get the lesson. That's what this whole gospel really is about: the suffering Servant who is the Lord Jesus Christ, and that's why Mark concentrates more on the works of the Lord Jesus than the words of the Lord Jesus. There are more miracles in Mark in comparison to the other gospels. What the writer wants us to see is the service of the Lord Jesus that was marked with such suffering that was taking Him to the cross. Now, if you know anything about Mark's gospel, you will surely know that not only does it depict suffering service, but it's all leading us to the cross. He is the one gospel writer that spends more time on the last week of the Lord Jesus than the others - it's the gospel of the cross. The message is: we must suffer if we would reign with Christ, and share the glory of Christ.

Yes, the Lord Jesus Christ had to suffer to save our souls from sin and hell. He must suffer to save. He repeats it over again and again, if you look at chapter 9 verse 31, He tells them again: 'The Son of man is delivered into the hands of men, and they shall kill him; and after that he is killed, he shall rise the third day', verse 32, 'But they understood not that saying, and were afraid to ask him'. In verse 12 of chapter 9 He tells them again that He is going to the cross. In chapter 8 and verse 31 He talks about the exact same thing. In chapter 10 verses 33 to 34 He repeats it - but what we need to remember is that this gospel was written after the Lord Jesus Christ died on the cross, rose again, and ascended to heaven. So there is a message in this gospel for Christians who it was written to. We believe that, specifically, it was written to Christians in Rome - incidentally, who were suffering, or just about to suffer for their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. What a message this would be: 'You're going to have to suffer, your Saviour suffered to serve you, and if you are to be the servants of the Servant of the Lord, you are going to have to suffer as well'. His servants must go the same Calvary Road as their Master. The way to glory is suffering.

Now one great illustration of this that the Lord gives us in His teaching is found in chapter 8, if you would turn back to it with me. Again we see the confusion of the disciples - the Lord Jesus is talking about His cross again, and in verse 31: 'He began to teach them, that the Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected of the elders, and of the chief priests, and be killed, and after three days rise again. And he spake that saying openly. And Peter took him, and began to rebuke him'. Peter was confused about this business about a cross, it didn't fit in with his idea of what a Messiah should be. Surely the Messiah should deliver them from the Roman Imperial power, and bring the millennial kingdom to Earth there and then? It just didn't fit in with his conception.

But can I say to you this morning that this was more than a theological problem that Peter had, it's a practical problem. You've got to remember that Peter, his brother Andrew, and all the disciples had left everything to follow Christ. Now that meant that whatever happened to their Master would happen to them - that's where the cross becomes personal. It was Campbell Morgan, the great preacher, who said: 'The man who loves Jesus, but shuns God's method, is a stumbling block to Him', that is profound. The man or woman who loves Jesus, but doesn't accept God's method, is a stumbling block to God. We see it in Peter here. The Lord had to rebuke him, and say: 'Get behind me Satan, for you are not desiring the things that are of God, but of men'. God's method for Christ was the cross - but do you know that God's method for you is a cross?

They were confused, and I imagine a lot of people, disciples of the Lord Jesus today, are confused. They don't realise that there is a cost to being a disciple of the Lord Jesus. So the Lord had to talk to the disciples about their cross, our cross. In verse 34 chapter 8 to verse 38 we see that - I'll not take time to read it all, just to say in chapter 8 verse 34 that the Lord
Jesus tells us what discipleship is, the second half: 'Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me'. Three conditions for true discipleship - not for becoming a Christian, now, that's by faith alone - but to become a disciple, a true follower and apprentice of Jesus Christ, you've got to surrender, deny yourself; you've got to sacrifice, take up the cross; and you've got to follow Him, that's submission, submit to His will and obey. That is discipleship, and it's a matter of profit or losses. What do I mean by that? Well, if you look down at verse 35: 'Whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel's, shall save it'. It's a question of whether you're going to waste your life down here on earth on yourself - as a Christian you can do that you know - or whether you'll invest your life for Christ. Maybe people around you will think you're wasting your life down here, not living it up and enjoying it all, but you'll find life in the reward that you will get in the glory of heaven.

So the Lord, in chapter 9, takes the disciples to show them the glory of the cross. Now we haven't got time to read chapter 9 verses 1 to 10, but it's all about the Transfiguration. The Lord Jesus took Peter, James and John up the Mount, and He revealed His glory to them. He was transfigured in their presence. Now, what was all that about? Well, connect them all together: He's telling them 'I've got to go to the cross', they don't get it; then He says 'You've got a cross, and you've got to embrace it if you're going to follow Me'; and then He displays the glory of the cross. The message is clear, Christ is teaching: first the suffering, then the glory. First the cross, then the crown - that's God's order.

Now, Satan offers you, and offered the Lord Jesus Christ, glory without suffering. You remember the temptation in Matthew chapter 4. He took Him to a high place, and he showed Him all the kingdoms of the world, and he offered those kingdoms to the Lord if He'd just bow down and worship. The devil offers glory without suffering, but it ends up to be suffering without any glory. The only true glory, the only true greatness comes by the way of the cross. If we, you and I, want true greatness in our lives, they must be marked by service and suffering - sacrifice. We must be the suffering, sacrificial servants of the suffering, sacrificial Servant.

Now, the disciples were dull to hear this message, and they are still hankering after their own glory after hearing all that - we still haven't reached where we are now. But as they are coming down the Mount of Transfiguration, after seeing that the glory comes after the cross, there is a demon-possessed boy - and the disciples, the rest of them that weren't taken up to the Mount, were powerless to deliver this boy from the demon. Their prayer lives were deficient, and the Lord tells them: 'This kind', chapter 9 verse 29, 'only is cast out by prayer and fasting'. But there is the lesson again: if you want to serve the Lord, there has to be sacrifice - prayer and fasting, you've got to sacrifice time and food. It's the way of the cross. Then in verse 31 the Lord, again, as we have read it already, teaches them about the cross - and again they don't get it. They don't get it, they don't understand it.

Now let's take up where we read, verse 33. They arrive, journeying from the bottom of that Mount of Transfiguration, to a place called Capernaum. In verse 34, the Lord - who is all-knowing of course - He asks them what they were talking about, what they were arguing about among themselves as they travelled along the road. In verse 34 we see that they are embarrassed, there is silence - dumbfounded, because they were disputing and arguing about who would be the greatest. Now I don't know what happened, we could surmise that the Transfiguration experience - which of course was pointing to the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ to the earth when He would set up His kingdom in glory - perhaps they thought: 'It's all going to happen now, and we've got to get in our pecking order and decide who is
going to be the top dogs among the disciples!’. Maybe it was Peter, James and John - who had been taken by the Lord, and chosen to go up the Mount - who thought that they were in the first, second and third place in the running stakes. Perhaps it was the others who were left behind, in jealousy that they weren't taken up to see it, who started to smart about it - I don't know. But I know this much: in all of us, preacher included, there is a drive, a sinful, Adamic, old nature drive for greatness that is not of God.

I hope you know what I'm talking about. It's a dominating force not only in individuals, but in all of humanity. I think it hasn't helped that our children are taught Darwinism from as early as possible, which is practically 'survival of the fittest' in nature - and therefore they go out into this big wide world believing it's 'dog eat dog', and that the strongest people who walk over the weakest will be the ones who will prevail. Now God did, of course - as we know from the book of Genesis, the creation account - He intended greatness for mankind. Everything that He made was good, but human greatness as God ordained it was not to be found in self-achievement, self-aggrandisement; but our greatness as human beings, made in the image of God, was to be in reflecting the greatness and the glory of Maker.

Now of course Satan was created for that same purpose, as all creation was. He was, we believe, an angelic being whose chief end it was to glorify God, and reflect God's glory in the very throne room of heaven - but what happened? He desired glory for himself. He said: 'I will ascend, I will be like God'. It was C. S. Lewis who said that pride is the sin that made the devil the devil - it's worth thinking about, isn't it? Of course, Satan infected the first man Adam with this disease. 'You will be as gods', he told them, 'You will be the determinants of your own destiny'.

Now the lesson that we have here from our Lord Jesus Christ is: you can't find true satisfaction or greatness apart from God. Jeremiah was told: 'Seekest thou great things for thyself? Seek them not' - but the tragedy is, and let's be honest, if somebody is good at something there is a great temptation to feel that we're great, that being excellent equates to greatness. You can become intoxicated with a sense of your own importance - and of course not everybody is great at things, and the alternative of that is people who feel that they are not great, and get dejected and even despair and are depressed of life itself, because they don't feel great at all, or great at anything. All of that business is because people, whether they think they're great or think they're not great, don't understand what true greatness is in the sight of God.

Now of course the disciples had the former problem, they thought they all were great, and all were worthy to be top dog in the pecking order - but the heartbreaking thing about this whole story is: it is at the very moment the Lord Jesus is telling them of His impending death, of His service for them and the world, His sacrifice at the cross; it's at that moment that they're arguing among themselves about who is esteemed greatest. They should have been focusing on the crucified Christ, but they're focusing on themselves. What is the point? They never - get it now - they never understood the message of the cross. Three and a half years, almost now, they are with Him, He's telling them about it - and I have to say to you: disciples of Jesus Christ today still do not understand the true message of the cross! There was a cross for Christ, but there's one for you!

It was Carl Henry who said: 'How can anyone be arrogant when he stands beside the cross'. You can't! That's why the old hymn writer said: 'Thus would I hide my blushing face, While His dear cross appears'. As we look at this this morning in the time we have, let us all say: 'Lord, help me to bend that stiffnecked 'I', teach me to bow my head and die, beholding Him
on Calvary who bowed His head for me'.

Now let's look at this: in verse 35 we have a principle that the Lord Jesus taught them. Look at it: He sat down - which incidentally was assuming the posture of Rabbi - He's going to teach them something very important. He said: 'If any man desire to be first, the same shall be last of all, and servant of all' - what a radical statement! It was counter-cultural, because in the Jewish society in which our Lord Jesus was operating, rank and procedure were a cultural preoccupation: who had the chiefest seat at the feasts, who sat in the best seats in the synagogue. Today it's the same - did you ever notice, maybe you're introduced to someone, and after they find out what your name is usually the next question that comes along is: 'What do you do?'. What do you do? Now, it has become second nature for us to start to reason in our mind: 'Well, if that person does that... well then...' - we establish their worth according to what they do. If you're a businessman, or you own a company, your worth in other people's eyes is often seen by how many people you have working for you, isn't it? How many of a staff, or how many outlets.

The Lord Jesus is turning that all on its head, He turned it on its head for their values in their day, and for ours in our day. He's saying: 'It's not how many servants you have, it's how many people you serve!'. Greatness in the kingdom of God is found in how you serve your superiors and your inferiors. It's easy to serve the boss, if you're going to get sacked! What about people that society would esteem as inferior to you? You see it's totally different in God's kingdom.

Many years ago when a religious group began, a Christian group - and I believe they began largely on biblical principles that were revolutionary, and would have brought great blessing if they continued along the lines that they had begun, some have - but there was a little story told of how they would go to Sunday worship, and there was a member of the aristocracy who was a member of that particular congregation. He would be taken in a coach, a horse-drawn coach, to the meeting of worship. Then he would get out of the coach, and the coach driver would get down, and he would open the door for him and let him into the worship gathering. Then when they went into that place, believe it or not, the coach driver was one of the elders, and the member of the aristocracy was just a member. Now that doesn't mean that the member of the aristocracy was less important - elders are no more important in God's eyes, they have a greater responsibility but they're no more important - but what it did mean was that the value system of the world was not the same as God's. That's why we shouldn't put people in responsible positions in the church of Jesus Christ because they're a bank manager, or they're a lawyer, or they're some clever-clogs, or they've got money - that's got nothing to do with it.

God's values, as we can see through the Lord Jesus' teaching here, are different: greatness is not in prominence, but actually in obscurity! Not in pushing yourself forward into the limelight, but stepping back into the shadow and hiding! Not lording over other people, but being a servant - voluntarily taking the lowest place of service and living for other people instead of yourself! Now that is radical! It's the way of the cross:

'Wouldst thou be great, then lowly serve;
Wouldst thou go up, go down;
But go as low as e'er you will,
The Highest, has gone lower still'.

Think about it: what am I talking about? A brilliant illustration of this is the night before our
Lord Jesus went to the cross and died. He came to the Upper Room with His disciples, and again we find them doing what? They're busy arguing who is the greatest among them! So much so that no one would condescend to be the servant and wash everybody's feet, so the Lord removes His outer garment, and then His tunic, next He takes a towel and He wraps it around Himself - now this is the incarnate Son of God! - and slowly, one by one, He goes round each of those disciples and washes their feet. Then hear what He says in John 13: 'If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you. Verily, verily, I say unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord; neither he that is sent greater than he that sent him'. It's the message of the cross: the way to glory, the way to the crown is through the cross and through the shame, the suffering, the agony.

Now turn with me to Philippians chapter 2 please, because we see this again. Philippians chapter 2 verse 3, Paul is reflecting now the same teaching: 'Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others. Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him'. He went so far down, and God raised Him up - but He had to go down.

You know Peter - and you don't need to turn to it - remember he was in the Upper Room? He was the one who objected to the Lord, and said: 'You're not going to wash my feet'. He later, exhorting Christians to humble themselves before each other, says: 'Likewise, you younger, submit yourselves to the older. Yea, all of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility' - and we believe he's thinking of the Lord clothing Himself with the towel, and this is what he says: 'for God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble'.

I wonder did you ever graduate in understanding the cross of Christ? Did they? Do you know when they graduated? I could ask you to guess - it wasn't until the Saviour died, rose again, ascended to heaven, and because He was glorified the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost; it wasn't until they were filled with the Holy Spirit that they truly understood the message of the cross, what it meant for them at least. That's why they were fearless on the day of Pentecost. That's why they turned the world, the known world, upside down for Christ. You see, it's not natural to behave like this - don't think it is - to put others first. It's something supernatural, and you need to be filled with the Holy Spirit of Christ and the Living God if you're going to do it to.

These disciples would eventually be the apostles that became the foundation of the church, and it would be built on them, under Christ of course - but if it was to survive, they had to learn that they were not going to be served, they were not going to lord it, but they would need to be servants of the lowest kind. Paul talked about how they were despised, the basest of things, they were seen as the scum of the earth. I'll tell you something: that's still what we need in the church of Jesus Christ today. We need people, particularly in leadership positions, who don't want to be served, but serve. Not worried about what car they're driving, how many bedrooms their house has, but they're worried about serving the lowliest of people and the lost. We've got to get back to this, we've got to all - all of us - look for opportunities to serve the other, for:

'He humbled Himself to the manger,
And even to Calvary's tree;
But I am so proud and unwilling,
His humble disciple to be'.

Is that the case? Let me give you two illustrations, that the Lord gives us in His word, of this - and I'm almost finished. There is a positive and a negative. There is one given to us by the Lord Himself, and the other is given to us by the apostle John and the rest of the disciples. The first is found in verse - back to Mark 9 - verses 36 and 37: 'He took a child, and set him in the midst of them: and when he had taken him in his arms', embraced him, 'he said unto them, Whosoever shall receive one of such children in my name, receiveth me: and whosoever shall receive me, receiveth not me, but him that sent me'. Now this might have been Peter's house in Capernaum, it might even have been Peter's own child - but to really understand the impact of what the Lord was doing (it was an illustration) we've got to realise that in the Aramaic language - the New Testament is written in Greek, the Old Testament is written in Hebrew, but the Lord Jesus did not speak in either of those languages, He spoke an Aramaic. It was connected to Hebrew in a way, but it was a different language. Now in the Aramaic language the word 'child' and the word 'servant' are the same word. So what the Lord is doing here, He's connecting these two ideas, and He's saying: 'Just as I've received this lowliest of children, embraced him into my arms, we are to embrace the lowliest servants of God and Christ'.

Now many people even today, especially today, think greatness would be holding reception for a monarch or a celebrity - you know, like these wee women in housing estates in England, all of a sudden get a letter that the Queen is going to come and have a cup of tea with them. You've seen it happen on the news, it's wonderful, isn't it? That's greatness - but in Christ's eyes it is to receive the lowliest of servants, not the greatest of dignitaries. Both of these illustrations that we have in our passage show that true greatness - and I want you to think about this, we're not going to go into it - has got to do it not with giving, but receiving. That's very interesting: so great was this greatness that Christ is talking about that if we entertain the lowliest of human beings, and the lowliest servants of Christ, we actually end up entertaining Christ Himself - and more, the One who sent Him, God the Father!

That's what He says, look at it at the end of verse 37: 'Whosoever shall receive the lowliest, receives me: and not just not me, but him who sent me'. Now, what on earth does that mean? Well, what it means is simply this: every child of God and God's family possesses the Holy Spirit residing within them. That means that Christ's presence is in us and with us, the presence of God the Father is in us and with us in a certain way, and the presence of the Holy Spirit is with us. So, when we embrace another child of God, the lowliest servants of Christ, what are we doing? We're embracing God and Christ in them, whatever accomplishments they may have, influence or fame! Of course the apostle James, in his epistle, warned the Christians there of neglecting humble and ordinary people and bringing the fancy, wealthy businessman up to the front seat and leaving the poor beggars at the back - they are all children of Christ, and they're all equal. 'Don't do that', he said, because they have the presence of God in them as much as the rich man!

What he is really saying is: acceptance of all God's people opens us up to the presence of Christ. Now please think about that: the more you embrace other children of God, genuine God's people, the more you do that and have a heart of love and grace and serve the lowliest of them, the more of Christ you will experience. We all want that, don't we? More of Christ? We should! That's one way of getting it, and what greater honour could there be than to hold a reception for God - but how many of us see that in the opportunity of serving the lowest
and meanest of people?

Let me give you a quick illustration. I remember visiting sick folk a lot, and sometimes it wears you down. There was one day I was walking down a corridor in a hospital going to a ward - and I could have seen it far enough, to be quite honest with you, as I was walking down that ward. I felt the Lord saying, not in an audible voice but in my heart: 'You're not visiting so-and-so, you're visiting me'. Isn't that what He said? 'Inasmuch as you have done it unto the least of my brethren, you've done it unto me' - that revolutionises service, doesn't it?

Let me show you the other illustration for a moment please, verses 38 and 41 - John, after seeing this illustration and getting the point, by the way, he says: 'Lord', look at verse 38, 'Master, we saw one casting out devils in thy name, and he doesn't follow us: and we forbid him, because he doesn't follow us'. Now if Peter had said that, I would have taken a different connotation out of it, but I was asking myself during the week: why was it John? John doesn't usually pipe up like this, sure he doesn't? But John is the deep thinker, and John is realising the illustration of the child that he has just seen - they had done something contrary to that in their actions toward this man who was casting out demons in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. What he was really inferring was: they would not receive this man, they would not accept this man because he wasn't one of the twelve. The Lord Jesus Christ said: 'If he's not against me, he is for me. If he's doing this in my name, he is one of mine, and you must receive him, you must not forbid him'.

Now surely you can see how this applies to the evangelical church today? I hope I'm not being overdramatic in saying that I believe that among us, and I speak of the church of Jesus Christ worldwide, jealousy is a great problem. Resentment, pride in evangelicalism in general is at epidemic proportions - because we have it all in our hearts as individuals, I have enough to sink a fleet! When you put that all together - personal pride, professional pride - and you project it into the church - denominational pride, doctrinal pride - you have people who say:

'Believe as I believe, no more, no less;
That I am right (and no one else) confess.
Feel as I feel, think as I think;
Eat as I eat, drink what I drink
Look as I look, do as I do;
Then and only then I'll have fellowship with you'.

Now please don't misunderstand what I'm saying this morning: I of all people believe that doctrine is of supreme importance, it is - but note that this man wasn't teaching false doctrine, and this man wasn't living an immoral life. This wasn't a question of separating from the world or doctrinal error, this was blatant sectarianism - they just wouldn't accept this man because he wasn't one of their number! The Lord nails it: 'It's wrong!' Never compromise on the light God has given you, never throw doctrine out the window to all be one in some kind of pseudo-Christian unity - that's false ecumenism, and it's not of God. But let me say this: never allow your doctrinal position to cause you to look down your nose at another child of God, never! Christ won't allow it.

It's challenging to me, I can tell you, and I'm sure it is to you. Even the least esteemed, we are to embrace them. It doesn't mean we have to agree with everything that they say or do, and we have to say and do it - no, no! But if they are truly born again, look at the criteria in verse 41: 'If you do this to one who belongs to me' - belongs to me! We need to get back to
that! There’s a church in Laodicea in the book of Revelation, who said: 'We have need of nothing' - remember? 'We have need of nothing', pride! Where was Jesus Christ? Outside the door! Couldn't get in!

It's better to embrace even those who reject us. Warren Weirsbe said: 'It never ceases to amaze me how God blesses those I don't agree with!'. You see, it's not a question in God's eyes of whether you belong to this group, that group, or the other group; whether you follow one person's tradition or another - it's whether you belong to Christ! Now all those other things aren't unimportant, but they are not the most important. The ironic thing is: these disciples of Christ forbid this man to do something that they couldn't do themselves! Isn't that right? They couldn't cast the demon out of the young boy, this man was doing it! Was it jealousy? Do you know what can happen? I think it's happening sometimes in our province, across our world. Those that have the truth and haven't used it with the responsibility that they should have, God is moving away from them and blessing some people that don't have as much truth. God can do that you know. Hopefully He'll lead them on to the truth - I'm not talking about salvation here, I'm talking about other issues that are important. So often we can be proud, and become critical of other Christians, become sectarian, denominational to the point that God can bypass.

I haven't got time to go into all this, my time is well up, but this happened in the Old Testament. Joshua came to Moses: 'There are two men prophesying in the camp, shut them up!'. Moses said: 'I would to God that every man was prophesying for God'. Paul said: 'I rejoice if Christ is preached even by people, at times, who aren't preaching Him for the right motive'. John the Baptist's disciples came to him and said: 'There are people leaving you and going to listen to Jesus Christ', and he said, 'I'm only the best man, He's the Bridegroom. I must decrease, He must increase'. It's all about Him, it has to be!

'I don't care what church you belong to,  
Just as long as for Calvary you stand.  
If your sins have been washed in the fountain,  
You're my brother, so give me your hand'.

That's the way it should be! It should be, but it's not, sure it's not? Well, I've finished - there are other things I could say to you, but just to say this: individually and collectively pride is our greatest enemy, and humility is our greatest friend. A Keswick speaker once said: 'There is nothing God cannot do if we keep our hands off the glory'. 'How can I have humility?', you say. That's not the right question to be asking, it's: where can I have humility? There is a place, and it is the foot of the cross. As the great hymn writer said:

'Forbid it, Lord, that I should glory,  
Save in the cross of Christ my God'.

That's where true greatness is found: at the foot of the cross, serving and sacrificing. A modern hymn writer put it like this:

'So let us learn how to serve,  
Each other's need to prefer,  
For it is Christ we're serving'.

Who are you going to give a cold cup of water to today in Jesus' name? You don't need to cast out demons, just a cold cup of water - and that will be your first step on the journey to
greatness and to glory. God bless His word to every heart.
Our next study in Mark's Gospel is found in Mark chapter 9, we're reading from verse 41 through to verse 50 - so Mark chapter 9, verses 41 to 50. The title I have taken for this study is: 'The Stumbling-Blocks To Greatness', our last study was 'True Greatness', what it is and how can be achieved - and I think the Lord's emphasis now in these subsequent verses is the stumbling-blocks that there can be to us achieving true greatness.

So we take up our reading at verse 41, the Lord Jesus speaking again says: "For whosoever shall give you a cup of water to drink in my name, because ye belong to Christ, verily I say unto you, he shall not lose his reward. And whosoever shall offend one of these little ones that believe in me, it is better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he were cast into the sea. And if thy hand offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than having two hands to go into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched: Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched. And if thy foot offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter halt into life, than having two feet to be cast into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched: Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched. And if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out: it is better for thee to enter into the kingdom of God with one eye, than having two eyes to be cast into hell fire: Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched. For every one shall be salted with fire, and every sacrifice shall be salted with salt. Salt is good: but if the salt have lost his saltiness, wherewith will ye season it? Have salt in yourselves, and have peace one with another".

Now we have seen in many studies in past weeks that Mark's gospel is the gospel of the Suffering Servant, and the key verse, of course, to the gospel is found in the next chapter - chapter 10 and verse 45 - where the Lord Jesus says: 'For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto', or served, 'but to minister', serve, 'and to give his life a ransom for many'. Of course the context of that key verse was again the disciples, two of whom were James and John, asking the Lord Jesus Christ who would be greatest, and who would sit at either side of His throne in God's kingdom. You can read that, verse 42 right through to verse 45 of chapter 10 - and the emphasis of this gospel is that the Son of Man, the great Suffering Servant, came not to be served but to serve, and give His life a ransom for many. So the theme of the gospel of Mark is sacrifice and service, that's why Mark concentrates on the works of the Lord Jesus rather than the words of the Lord Jesus: His miracles, His great acts rather than the teachings and parables that we might find more of in other of the Gospels.
This, of course, Mark's gospel, is the gospel of the cross, leading all the way to Calvary where there would be that greatest act of all sacrifice and service for the sins of all mankind, as the Lord Jesus lays down His life as a ransom for many. So the message of Mark's gospel is that the Saviour who God has sent must suffer to save. We know how the Lord has been teaching the disciples this great lesson over again and again. In chapter 9 verse 31 He taught them: 'The Son of man is delivered into the hands of men, and they shall kill him; and after that he is killed, he shall rise the third day'. He taught the same in verse 12 of chapter 9, in chapter 8 verse 31, and we referred already to chapter 10 verses 33 and 34. Now, of course, we've seen that the disciples, they didn't get the message! They didn't understand this Calvary Road, this way of the cross that the Saviour must go.

Of course in this purple passage of Mark chapter 8 we see this manifested, the disciples are told in verse 31: 'He began to teach them, that the Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected of the elders, and of the chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. And he spake that saying openly. And Peter took him, and began to rebuke him' - and he was only a spokesman for the other disciples. They didn't understand the way of the cross - in chapter 9 and verse 32 again it's evidenced, after He spoke about the cross: 'But they understood not that saying, and were afraid to ask him'. So there was a resistance among the twelve to the Lord's proclamation that He must go to the cross and die.

Now, as we have touched on in previous weeks, this resistance was not a theological problem, it was more of a practical problem; because they realised that they had left all to follow the Lord Jesus, and therefore whatever happened to Him would happen to them. If He died on a cross, in all likelihood they would be led to crosses. So the Lord Jesus, of course, was teaching them that there is a cost to discipleship. That's why, in chapter 8, He moved from speaking about His own cross to their cross and our cross. He taught them in chapter 8 that discipleship is a matter of profits and losses. We have to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Christ. It's a matter of not only profits and losses, but choices and crosses: we've got to decide to follow Jesus, draw a line in the sand and say, 'There's no turning back, no turning back'. We've got to face this great question of discipleship: are we going to waste our life on the things of this earth, or are we going to invest our life in eternal realities, and therefore find our lives in a day that is yet to be?

Of course this was tremendously illustrated in the Transfiguration incident in chapter 9. What the Lord was getting to them was that the suffering must come, and then the glory - you can't put those things back to front. Glory cannot, true glory, true greatness, cannot come without suffering. Now, of course, Satan offers glory without suffering, and in the wilderness temptation of our Lord Jesus in Matthew 4 that's exactly what he did. He took Him to a high mountain and showed Him all the kingdoms of the Earth, and offered them to the Lord if He would just fall at His feet and worship him. Of course the Lord was not going to fall down and worship the devil, and the fact of the matter is that the glory that Satan offers us ends up rather to be suffering without glory - because God's ordained order is always the cross and then
the crown, the suffering and then the glory. Mark's great theme is that if we want true greatness, our lives will be marked by service and sacrifice, just as the Suffering Servant's was.

Now the twelve were dull in understanding this - I think probably because they were still hankering after their own glory. I feel this is evidenced in the incident that just comes before our reading today. In verses 38 to 41, you remember there was this one who was casting out devils in the name of the Lord Jesus, and the twelve would not receive this unknown little one who believed in Christ because, they said, 'He does not follow us'. Now we see from our reading today, verse 41, that the Lord Jesus says: 'Whosoever shall give you a cup of water to drink in my name, because ye belong to Christ, verily I say unto you, he shall not lose his reward'. The Lord is emphasising that the issue is not a question of whether one belongs to a particular group, whether it's the twelve disciples or another group, or whether others follow our ways, the great issue - as verse 41 says - is whether we belong to Christ. Do they belong to Christ? That is the tie binding all believers together, it was in the days of our Lord Jesus, the days of the Acts of the Apostles, the early church, the days of the Epistles, the days right to this very day: do we belong to Christ?

Now such a teaching that our Lord gives here in verse 41, it ought deliver us from any partisan, party spirit, any sectarianism, ecclesiastical 'sect' mentality or jealousy - whether corporately or individually - among God's servants and in God's service. As long as men and women belong to Christ, truly belong to Him, we are to embrace them - for that is the tie that binds all in the church of Jesus Christ. Can I say further that others may not extend such grace and acceptance to us, other true Christians at that. Other Christians might shut us out and feel that we are unworthy - but God's grace, and the acknowledgement of this great truth that we are to accept all who belong to Christ, ought to motivate us to embrace them whether they shut us out or not! It's better to embrace all who belong to Christ, even if they don't embrace us. One poet put it like this:

'They drew a circle that shut me out:
Rebel, heretic, a thing to flout.
But love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took them in'.

That's what the Lord Jesus calls us to do: to embrace all who truly belong to Christ. Is that not what John taught in his epistle, 1 John 3:14: 'We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren'. It is a mark of the child of God to show love towards brothers and sisters in Christ. Here in chapter 9 this unknown little one, who didn't belong to the twelve, cast out a demon - what a spectacular act! You remember the twelve had failed in that very thing, regarding the demon-possessed boy - and I wonder, it might be implied here that there was resentment in their heart, there was pride because...they're the twelve! 'We're among the twelve! We're the ones who were chosen and called by the Lord Himself! We're the ones who were ordained and given this great power to do signs and wonders!' - and yet they couldn't do it. Here's a man that wasn't among their number, and he was doing that powerful
thing.

Here is another lesson on service: you don't have to do great works like exorcism to know greatness in God's kingdom. Verse 41 is teaching us that even a cup of water given to one of the least servants will not go unrewarded. The Lord has been teaching this over and over again to them: true greatness is humility and acceptance of others who belong to Christ. You remember in verse 34 of chapter 9, the Lord Jesus heard them again disputing who would be the greatest, in verse 35: 'He sat down, and called the twelve, and saith unto them, If any man desire to be first, the same shall be last of all, and servant of all. And he took a child, and set him in the midst of them: and when he had taken him in his arms, he said unto them, Whosoever shall receive one of such children in my name, receiveth me: and whosoever shall receive me, receiveth not me, but him that sent me'. Now of course I think we saw in previous studies that the word for 'child' here is the same Aramaic word for 'servant', and I think the Lord is playing on these words, that though we are to accept little children He's emphasising this truth that we are to accept all of His children. Even when we entertain a simple servant of Christ, it is to entertain Christ Himself! Indeed, it is to embrace God Himself - what a truth! In the mystery of the body of Christ, when we receive other children of God, even the least of them, we receive God Himself! Acceptance of all God's people opens us up to a deeper knowledge and experience of Jesus Christ personally, and God Almighty. Oh, could there be a greater motivation for embracing all of God's true children than that? To know Christ deeper, to know God more fully?

So we see here that true greatness is seen in the blessing received by the least of the servants in the least of service. If you give a cup of water in Christ's name, you'll not lose your reward. Now that's the positive aspect of true greatness: a blessing received by the least of servants in the least of service. But there is a negative aspect to true greatness seen in verse 42, there is a curse pronounced on any who harm or hinder one of Christ's little ones - a curse pronounced on any who harm or hinder them. Again, true greatness in both these aspects, right throughout Mark's gospel, comes not by force, not by power, but by servanthood, humility, sacrifice - and our Lord Jesus pronounces: 'Woe to any who offend one of these little ones of mine'.

So let's look at how these little ones, these servants of Christ, can be offended. The word 'offend' simply means 'to stumble', literally 'to cause to fall', we could use the word 'stumbling-block'. There are three areas, stumbling-blocks to true greatness, that I want you to see today. First of all: the Lord points out that we ought not to be a stumbling-block to our brother or sister in Christ. Then secondly: we ought not to be a stumbling-block to ourselves in our walk of faith with God. And thirdly: we ought not to be a stumbling-block to the world, those around us who are looking on, seeing our conduct and manner of life - we could be a stumbling-block to them trusting Christ.

Let's deal with the first one: don't be a stumbling-block to your brother. This, of course, is seen in verse 42: 'Whosoever shall offend one of these little ones that believe in me, it is better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he were cast into the sea'. To offend, it's to stumble, or to entice, or even entrap - and it
is being spoken of here of a fellow believer in Christ, if we take these 'little ones' to be the least of the servants of the Saviour. What is envisaged here is that it is possible for us as children of God to cause lifelong spiritual damage to our brothers and sisters in Christ, if we become a stumbling-block to them. Indeed, the Lord shows the import of this issue when He says: 'It would be better to be drowned with a millstone around one's neck, than to cause a little one to stray from the path of holiness and truth'.

Now you've got to understand something about what this 'millstone' is. A large upper millstone was so heavy that a donkey had to turn it in order to grind the wheat and the grain, but the Gentiles took these upper millstones and adapted them in a form of execution - and of course that became repugnant to the Jews. Everything that the Gentiles, particularly the Romans, did was repugnant to them. Yet the Lord Jesus is taking this very graphic method of execution that was so abhorrent to the Jew, and He says: 'It's more desirable to die like that, than to lead another Christian into sin'. It shows you how serious it is, doesn't it?

Now these twelve disciples would have known exactly what the Lord Jesus was talking about, because this had been the fate - dying with a millstone around your neck - for many insurgents, terrorists of the day. Indeed, the leaders of an insurrection under the early zealot leader, Judas the Galilean, who Gamaliel mentions in Acts chapter 5:37, the Romans took him and drowned him in a lake by this very method. One biblical commentator says: 'In their imaginations the twelve could see the drowned bodies of the victims tethered to great millstones, as they swayed to and fro with the currents. There is something particularly horrifying about this image, being dropped down, down into the darkness, struggling, and then hanging motionless in the darkness, hidden from life and the world'. The Lord is using the most graphic terms to make this point, that we ought to never be a stumbling-block to brothers and sisters - it would be better to suffer this fate than ever to be an enticement or an entrapment to another brother in Christ!

In verse 42 the Lord's servant, Jesus says, must consider what effects his words and his actions will have on others. You know, we live in a very individualistic age, where 'me, I, mine; me, myself and I' is the motto really of our daily existence and motivation for life. 'Number one', 'I trouble' if you like to call it that. Very few, even in the church of Jesus Christ, are motivated to live for others, to live to help others, to live to make sure that they're not a hindrance to others. Yet this is the life of the servant, to be motivated not by 'me, my, myself and I', but rather others!

'Others, Lord, yes others,
Let this my motto be:
Let me live for others,
That I may live like Thee'.

It's possible to live for others, and it's oh so terribly possible to offend others. Let me give you two ways that we can offend others that I think are particularly in context here. First of all: we can offend others by our sectarianism, we see this spirit in the disciples. This unknown little one casting out demons was not one of their number,
though he belonged to Christ. Just because someone is not one of our number, he's not in our denomination, he's not in our church, he's not of our persuasion - whatever that may be, whether theological or ecclesiastical. It might be pride, pride, as far as we're concerned, in what we are, what we have, or what we believe, or the stand we take. It might be envy of another man or woman's gift, spiritual success in ministry. It might be personal strife, problems that we have individually with other believers - but these things can be a stumbling-block to many! To see saints bickering among themselves over foolish things, and quarrelling over lesser things, at the expense of the greatest things - that's where we are now today! We are in trouble as the church, because we are fighting amongst ourselves and the great issues of the faith are being neglected!

Indeed, wasn't this the mistake the Pharisees made? The Lord Himself indicted them regarding it in Matthew 23:23: 'Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone'. So He's saying there: 'I don't expect you to sacrifice doctrine on the altar of love', but what we are to be is - as Ephesians 4:15 says - 'speaking the truth in love', those two have to be together: love and truth. We ought to love one another, for that is the mark that we are Christ's disciples.

Sectarianism, pride, envy, strife - those can be a stumbling-block to so many in the faith. But here is a second application of this: we can be a stumbling-block to our brothers and sisters by using our liberty, or letting our liberty be an enticement or entrapment to others by flaunting our liberty, by displaying the freedom that we have in Christ from law. Praise God, we don't operate under law but under grace, and it's the law of the Spirit that we live by - but so many can go overboard into an extreme, that they actually go into the realms of the flesh and transgression and sin. They pride themselves in this as their Christian liberty! Now Paul very strongly forbade this type of behaviour, primarily because of the effect it has on the weaker brother in Christ. Particularly over the issue of meat sacrificed to idols, Paul said in 1 Corinthians 6:12: 'All things are lawful unto me, but all things are not expedient', they're not beneficial, they're not helpful, 'all things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any'. First Corinthians 8:13: 'Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend'. Romans 14:21: 'It is good neither to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor any thing whereby thy brother stumbleth, or is offended, or is made weak'. In other words, if there's something that I am doing, or I am engaging in that is a stumbling-block to my brother or sister, it is better that I do not do it at all as cause them to fall! So we need to ask ourselves: does my life help or hinder other people as Christians? Don't be a stumbling-block to your brother, verse 42 is teaching.

Then secondly, the Lord Jesus says: don't be a stumbling-block to yourself. This is, I think, what He's getting across in verses 43 to 48. He says it would be better to sacrifice the use of these organs, and He refers to the hand, the foot, and the eye; it would be better to sacrifice those than to allow them to drag us into hell - and He uses the word 'Gehenna' for hell, which is that very strong word that speaks of an
eternal hell that is mentioned as the Lake of Fire in the book of Revelation, and it was so illustrated by that place, the Valley of Gehenna, the Hinnon Valley that was the rubbish tip where the fire never went out, where they burned all their rubbish constantly outside Jerusalem, and dead bodies were thrown there and the worms ate them. You see, by our abuse of our hands, our feet, and our eyes, the Lord Jesus is teaching that we can actually bring judgement upon ourselves.

Now, please be careful here, because the Lord is not advocating something akin to Islamic law, cutting off limbs because of sin, or to prevent sin - because we know from what the Lord has already told us here, and right through the Scriptures, that self-mutilation cannot deal with sin. Sin is the issue of the heart, and in this very gospel our Lord Jesus, in chapter 7 of Mark and verses 20 through to 23, says: 'That which cometh out of the man, that defileth the man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, Thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness: All these evil things come from within, and defile the man'. So the actions of the hand, the foot, and the eye that the Lord is speaking of here only express what is in the heart. The argument of the Lord, I think, is quite plain: it is better to enter into life, and into God's kingdom, without earthly things that would hinder, than to remain in unbelief and finally be cast into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched. But the heart must be changed first! Let's not externalise this problem: if we could get right with God by just tying up our hands, or covering our eyes, or binding up our feet - well, that would be wonderful, wouldn't it? Then we would go into legalistic religion - but the heart of the problem is the problem of the heart, and it must be solved first. But the Lord is teaching here that once it is solved, we must beware of stumbling ourselves in these external areas: the hand, the foot, and the eye.

He's not advocating physical mutilation, but spiritual mortification. He's using figurative language that He often does, He's saying drastic action is needed here! You need to prioritise if you're going to be a disciple! Those who set out on the true path of discipleship must constantly battle with natural desires that are often executed through the hand, through the foot and the eye - appetites of the old nature - and if we cater to those things, that will spell ruin to our discipleship; but if we can control these aspects of the hand, the foot, the eye it will ensure spiritual victory. Again, what is the principle here? It is gain out of loss. We see it again and again through Mark's gospel and through the teaching of our Lord on discipleship: gain out of loss. If you pamper sin in your life, you will lose your salty Christ-like character, you will lose your ability to affect others for Christ. So, how do you make sure that doesn't happen? You've got to be ruthless, you've got to have self-discipline, you've got to mortify the flesh.

Now, let me say this categorically, and this is so important that you grasp this: Christ is not advocating that we do this in the power of the flesh, it cannot be done in the power of the flesh! You cannot control your sinful appetites and natural desires through the power of the flesh, it must be done through the Spirit: mortify these things through the Spirit! Realise that Christ has put these things to death for you on
the cross of Calvary, and by faith and faith alone say: 'I cannot do anything, it's impossible for me to control my hands, my feet, and my eyes - but the power is in the blood of the cross, and the glorious resurrection of Christ, and I believe in that! I self-discipline ruthlessly, drastically, with sin - as a surgeon does with a cancerous tumour, taking a scalpel to it - not by the power of the flesh, but in the power of the Spirit'. That is how you gain by losing! Don't be a stumbling-block to yourself.

Is that the way we deal with the external manifestations of the fleshy appetites in our life, with the things that our hands do, and the places our feet go, and the things that our eyes look upon? Billy Sunday, the great evangelist, said: 'One reason why sin flourishes is that it is treated like a cream puff instead of a rattlesnake'. Do we realise the sinfulness of sin, the deadliness of sin in our Christian walk? The Kingdom of God is so great, the Lord Jesus is teaching, that no sacrifice is too great to make for it!

Now come to verses 49 and 50, they have been called the most difficult verses in the New Testament, many explanations are made of it - let's read it together: 'For every one shall be salted with fire, and every sacrifice shall be salted with salt. Salt is good: but if the salt have lost his saltiness, wherewith will ye season it? Have salt in yourselves, and have peace one with another'. Now whatever we don't understand about these verses, I think it's certain that sacrifice is pictured here, because salt and fire were ingredients to the Old Testament sacrifices. Now we know that the Lord Jesus is speaking of a living sacrifice here, sacrificing hands and feet and eyes, but of course that is in keeping with what Paul later says in Romans 12: 'I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service' - it's expected of you.

So the picture is one of sacrifice, living sacrifice, and I think what the Lord is saying here is: 'Would you rather endure the fires of hell as a lost sinner, or the purifying fires of God as a sacrifice given to Him for His glory?'. You see, salt also speaks of preservation. He, perhaps, is asking: 'Would you be preserved in hell for judgement, or preserved as a sacrifice for God's glory?'. Of course, fire doesn't just speak of sacrifice, fire speaks of suffering, fire speaks of trials and persecutions. If we are yielded to Him, then sacrificial suffering will be our lot - but the whole message of this gospel is that the sacrifice will lead to the glory. Peter, wasn't he the one that had the most problems grasping this great issue of the Way of the Cross, the Calvary Road, the suffering before the glory, the cross before the crown - and yet we find out that he learnt this hard lesson so well, for we read in his epistle, 1 Peter 5 and verses 10 through to 11: 'The God of all grace, who hath called us unto his eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after that ye have suffered a while, make you perfect, stablish, strengthen, settle you. To him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen'.

He has called us to eternal glory, Peter says, 'after ye have suffered a little while'. Now this was the experience, or going to be the experience, of the church that Mark was writing to - the persecution of Nero and other emperors that the church would face in the years to come. The great temptation would be to sell out, and not suffer, and not serve, and Satan would promise them glory now if they denied Christ, but the
pain would come later! That's what the Lord is teaching them: but if they suffer now, then the glory will be enjoyed by them for all eternity. I think that's what these verses are teaching, and it's interesting to note as well that the meal offering in Leviticus 2:13 was also seasoned with salt. We know that the meal offering is a type of the perfect character of our Lord Jesus that was sinless and accepted by God, and that's the life we are to live as we are filled by the Spirit of God, manifesting the character and fruits of Christ. The lifestyle of the believer should be full of grace, yet - as Colossians says - seasoned with salt, Christ-like.

Is your life Christ-like, believer? First of all we need to ask: have we had the heart of the matter dealt with, which is the problem of the heart? Are we born again? We cannot, by the flesh, cease from doing sins and the deeds of the flesh, it is hopeless! We are helpless, we need to come to the foot of the cross and say: 'Lord, I cannot, but You can and Christ has'. It is finished, it is done - it's not 'do', it is done! But you know, we've got to stay at that cross if we want to move on with God, and continually we need to get down there before the cross of Christ and make this sacrifice of self daily. Is that what we're doing? Or are we a stumbling-block to ourselves? Oh yes, our hearts are regenerated - but we're letting our hands, and our feet, and our eyes do things, and other members, that are feeding our sinful fleshly nature and not making us more like Christ - and because of that we're losing our saltiness. We are to be condemned, and we're not that glorious, holy, acceptable sacrifice to God, which is our expected worship.

What a teaching! Don't be a stumbling-block to your brother, don't be a stumbling-block to yourself - but then thirdly and finally: don't be a stumbling-block to the world. You see, the disciples had been taught already by the Lord Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5 that they were the salt of the earth, they were God's salt in this world - but they are in danger of losing their flavour, they're in danger of becoming worthless. If the salt has lost its saltiness, wherewith will it season? You see, now salt today that we buy in the supermarket, it's different than the salt spoken of here in the Bible. Our salt today is purified, and it doesn't lose its taste, but salt in our Lord's day contained impurities - that meant it could lose its flavour. What the Lord is saying here is: if we lose our servanthood character, our Christ-like character, our humility, our love, our mercy, our justice and grace, we lose our savour, we lose our saltiness - and that means we lose our attractiveness to unbelievers of this world!

Basically what the Lord is saying is: we are useless, we're useless! That's what salt is that has lost its savour: it's useless! We are useless if we lose our Christ-likeness! Don't be a stumbling-block to the world by losing your Christ-likeness. Now, you will know, if you have ever ate a lot of salt, that it makes you want to drink, it makes you thirsty. If we are salty in our character, we will make people in this world thirst after God, we will make them thirsty after Christ, we will make them long for Him because He will be attractive as He is manifested, His life manifested in our life! Now is that the case today in the world? Of course it's not! We are a stumbling-block to people who are unconverted, people on their way to hell - we are getting in their way coming to Christ! Rather than causing people to thirst after God, and be attracted to God, people are repelled by the behaviour of the children of God!
Now I think we need to face this, and I think it's something that is being avoided by many in the church of Jesus Christ - particularly in our land here in Ireland. We are one of the greatest stumbling-blocks! So many non-Christians I ask: 'What is the reason why you have never trusted Christ?', time and time again they tell me, 'Oh, I have a brother, a sister, a father, a mother, I have a child, I have a work colleague, a business affiliate, and they have betrayed me! They have let me down! They have done the dirty on me! They have stabbed me in the back! They have two-faced me!'. They are the reason - now they may not be the ultimate reason, nor the primary reason, but they're one reason - and they are a reason that shouldn't be a reason, because the Lord teaches us: do not be stumbling-blocks to the world. Don't lose your saltiness, for you become useless.

Mahatma Gandhi is a very interesting character, that great Indian leader. He was a Hindu, of course, by religion - but he did admire the Lord Jesus, and in fact he often quoted from the Sermon on the Mount on several occasions. Once the Christian missionary, E. Stanley Jones, met with Gandhi and he asked him this question: 'Mr Gandhi, though you quote the words of Christ often, why is it that you appear to so adamantly reject becoming His follower?'. Gandhi replied: 'Oh, I don't reject your Christ, I love your Christ - it's just that so many of you Christians are so unlike your Christ'. Listen to that! 'I don't reject your Christ, I love your Christ - it's just that so many of you Christians are so unlike your Christ'. There's the problem, there's the problem.

Apparently, I am led to believe, Gandhi's rejection of Christianity grew out of an incident that happened when he was a young man practising law in South Africa. He had become attracted to the Christian faith, and he had studied the Bible and teachings of Jesus, and was seriously exploring the possibility of becoming a Christian. So he decided one day to attend a church service and, as he came up the steps of the large church where he intended to go, a white South African elder of the church barred his way at the door: 'Where do you think you're going kaffir?' - that's an offensive term. The man asked Gandhi in a very belligerent tone: 'Where do you think you're going kaffir?', and Gandhi replied, 'Well, I'd like to attend worship here'. The church elder snarled at him: 'There's no room for kaffirs in this church. Get out of here, or I'll have my assistants throw you down the steps!'. From that moment Gandhi said, apparently, that he decided to adopt what good he found in Christianity, but would never again consider becoming a Christian if it meant being part of the church.

Now often - we've got to face this, believers - the way we treat other people, whether it's our brothers and sisters in Christ, whether it's how we treat ourselves and deport ourselves in our everyday life, or whether it's how we treat people in the world, it tells more about what we believe than anything we say, or anything we intellectually or doctrinally aspire to. It says more about what being a disciple of the Lord Jesus means than anything else in the world - how we treat others!

Let's come back to the disciples for a moment: instead of rebuking others, like this unknown little one who cast out the demon, they should have been examining their
own selves, their own hearts - that's what we need to do. We're so busy looking at others and condemning others, and criticising and critiquing others. The Jews had a maxim regarding salt: 'The world cannot survive without salt', they said. The world cannot survive without salt, without salty Christians! It needs them! God intended that it should have them, and Christ ordained them and sent them into the world - and He says in verse 50: 'Have salt in yourselves'. In other words, be a power for God in this world, and be intolerant of anything in your life that might lessen your effectiveness for Him, and have peace with one another - have peace with one another. Never underestimate that.

Basically what the Lord is saying here is: we are being watched. We are being watched by the world. We are being watched by other brothers and sisters in Christ, some weaker than us, looking up to us, following our example. Oh, but most importantly: we are being watched by the Lord, whose judgement matters most. The Lord teaches, and Mark articulates it: servanthood, servanthood and sacrificial humility are the only paths to true Christian greatness in His eyes. True greatness, we've explained that - but are there stumbling-blocks in your life to true greatness? Are you a stumbling-block to your brother? Are you a stumbling-block to yourself? Are you a stumbling-block to the world?

Let us pray: Father, those of us listening to these words today just fall before Your throne now. Oh God, we ask for Your grace, and for Your help to realise, Lord, the great weight of truth that is enshrined within these words that we have read. Oh God, we long for true greatness, and yet we don't want to pay the price of the suffering and the sacrifice that is necessary to attain it. Lord, what we are talking about, we thank You, has nothing to do with forgiveness of sins - it has been attained, that work is finished - but Lord, if we're going to follow Christ, and if we're going to do great exploits for Christ, we've got to go down this Calvary Road. Lord, let nothing be a stumbling-block on that road for us, or that we - God forbid - should put in front of others on that road. Let us not be a stumbling-block to our brothers and sisters, forgive us when we have been. Forgive us, Lord, when we have flaunted our liberty, made an excuse for sin and fleshliness. Lord, forgive us when we have led ourselves into temptation and sin at times by our hands, by our feet, by our eyes. Lord, forgive us when we're a stumbling-block to the world. Oh that we would hear, like M'Cheyne, the tramp, tramp, tramp of Christ-less feet going into a lost eternity. Lord, we pray that we will do something to stop them going there, rather than be an obstacle to them coming to Christ. Oh God, forgive us, we repent, and we pray for the grace to live this life of the Spirit to the glory of God, and to be salt that others may thirst through looking at us and our example, that others may be drawn to the Lord Jesus - for the world will die and perish without salt. Hear us we pray, for the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ alone, Amen.
For our next study in Mark, we're turning to chapter 10 of the gospel, and beginning to read at verse 1 - and I've entitled my message today: 'The Sanctity of Marriage and The Security of Children'.

So verse 1, then, of Mark chapter 10, and we're reading through to verse 16: "And he", that is, the Lord Jesus Christ, "arose from thence, and cometh into the coasts of Judæa by the farther side of Jordan: and the people resort unto him again; and, as he was wont", or accustomed, "he taught them again. And the Pharisees came to him, and asked him, Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife? tempting", or testing, "him. And he answered and said unto them, What did Moses command you? And they said, Moses suffered to write a bill of divorcement, and to put her away. And Jesus answered and said unto them, For the hardness of your heart he wrote you this precept. But from the beginning of the creation God made them male and female. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and cleave to his wife; And they twain shall be one flesh: so then they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder. And in the house his disciples asked him again of the same matter. And he saith unto them, Whosoever shall put away his wife, and marry another, committeth adultery against her. And if a woman shall put away her husband, and be married to another, she committeth adultery against her. And if a woman shall put away her husband, and be married to another, she committeth adultery."

"And they brought young children to him, that he should touch them: and his disciples rebuked those that brought them. But when Jesus saw it, he was much displeased, and said unto them, Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God. Verily I say unto you, Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein. And he took them up in his arms, put his hands upon them, and blessed them".

Now at this point, in verse 1 of chapter 10, we see that the Lord Jesus has completed His ministry in Galilee. He has left Capernaum and come to the area which is called Transjordan, Perea is another name for it, on the East side of Jordan - and He is still on His way to Jerusalem, we see that from verse 32 of this chapter. Now, it is important to note that this district that the Lord Jesus is now in is ruled by Herod Antipas, which may explain why Pharisees here in this passage try to trap the Lord Jesus by asking Him a question on divorce - because, you remember in Mark chapter 6, John the Baptist had been murdered because he preached against Herod's adulterous marriage.

But this issue of divorce and remarriage was more than a political one, it was an extremely controversial subject among the Jewish Rabbis - and the Lord Jesus would have been aware, as were they and the whole of the listening gathering, that whatever answer He would have given, it would have displeased some school of thought regarding the subject. I believe it was in the intent and the heart of the Pharisees that the possibility may be that they would trap
the Lord Jesus to such an extent that there would be an opportunity for the authorities to arrest Him. Indeed, I think that's indicated in the verbs, 'the Pharisees', it says, 'kept asking Him', kept asking Him over and over, to provoke Him into saying something that might incriminate Him.

Now the reason why this was such a controversial subject was, there were two particular schools of thought regarding a portion of Scripture in the Old Testament, and that was Deuteronomy 24 and verses 1 and 2. Let's read that together for a moment, Deuteronomy 24 verses 1 and 2, Moses wrote: 'When a man hath taken a wife, and married her, and it come to pass that she find no favour in his eyes, because he hath found some uncleanness in her: then let him write her a bill of divorcement, and give it in her hand, and send her out of his house. And when she is departed out of his house, she may go and be another man's wife'.

The two views over divorce really revolved around the interpretation of this phrase 'some uncleanness' - what does that mean? Incidentally, it is significant that Deuteronomy 24 is the only Old Testament portion that states grounds or procedures for divorce - and that's why these two schools in particular homed in to this portion of Scripture.

Now followers of a Rabbi named Hillel were lenient in their interpretation of 'some uncleanness', and they said that you could divorce, a man could divorce his wife for any reason - and that's indicated in Matthew 19 and verse 3. Any reason really meant any reason, even the burning of food, a wife walking around with her hair down, or speaking to other men on the street, or perhaps speaking disrespectfully of her husband's parents in her husband's presence - imagine that ladies! A wrong word about your mother-in-law could find you thrown out of your home and on the street! Rabbi Akiba, who was of Hillel's school, went even further - he believed the phrase here in Deuteronomy 24, 'find no favour in his eyes', meant that a man could divorce his wife if he found another woman more beautiful - imagine it!

That was Rabbi Hillel, a lenient interpretation of 'some uncleanness'. But then there was the other school, Rabbi Shammai, and he was more strict in his interpretation of 'some uncleanness'. He believed it referred to some premarital sin, or something indecent in sexual conduct. Now let me say regarding this that neither Shammai, nor Hillel, nor any Rabbi believed that Moses meant 'adultery' when he said 'some uncleanness'. Now that's important, because the law of Moses was clear that adultery was to be punished by stoning. Now the death penalty, of course, couldn't be enforced under the Roman legal system in the days of the Lord Jesus, and so it appears that in Jewish practice that death as a penalty for adultery had been substituted by divorce.

Now, then the Lord Jesus, to answer these two schools, and this question intended to trap Him, seeks Himself - with His divine authority - to explain Deuteronomy 24. He begins in verse 5 here of Mark chapter 10: 'Jesus answered and said unto them, For the hardness of your heart he wrote you this precept'. The Lord is saying that Moses gave divorce, this law, he allowed it because of the sinfulness of the human heart. As we look at the Deuteronomy 24 passage, we see clearly that this was permitted to protect the wife from being discarded like a piece of useless furniture at her husband's whim. This was to allow the woman to have a genuine divorce in order to be able to marry again. You see, no man would want to marry her if she was just a castaway; and she would be left, in the society of the day, defenceless and destitute, a social outcast, and even treated like a harlot. This was allowed, in Deuteronomy 24, to protect wives - but the Lord Jesus was wanting to emphasise that this was permitted because of the hardness of your heart, this was not God's highest thought regarding marriage.
So our Lord begins to expound God's highest thoughts regarding the marriage institution in verse 6 right down to verse 13: 'But from the beginning of the creation God made them male and female. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and cleave to his wife; And they twain shall be one flesh: so then they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder'. This is God's plan and purpose for the marriage institution, whatever man has turned it into.

Now some of you may be thinking: 'Why address such a thorny subject?'. There are a number of reasons why we must address this subject, controversial though it is. The first reason is simply that the Bible address is that, and if we ever get to the stage when we feel we can pick and choose at whim the truths we want to consider, well, we are in real trouble. Also the expository approach to preaching the word of God doesn't permit me to skip over uncomfortable and difficult portions of Scripture, that's why it's a good practice to preach God's word from verse to verse and chapter to chapter.

So the Bible addresses this subject, we should address it - but secondly: our Lord addressed this subject and, as we see, it was equally as thorny an issue in His day, if not arguably more of an issue. Not only does the Bible address it and our Lord addresses it, but it is necessary that we address it, I believe, for the benefit of society and the church of Jesus Christ. Society and the church desperately need to hear a certain sound, they need clear guidance in this area of marriage and divorce. Presently, as far as I can see in society and in the church, this whole subject is fraught with confusion and unnecessary complexity.

Consider first of all the impact that divorce and remarriage has had on society. The preamble to the marriage vows that I give from time to time when engaging in that wonderful occasion, one of them goes like this: 'It was ordained', marriage, 'for the welfare of human society, which can be strong and happy only where the marriage bond is held in honour'. How true those words are! Because God's order is being rejected in our present contemporary society, we are beginning to see society crumble on every hand. So we need to address this for the sake of society, which has rejected the institution God gave in marriage - and because of that, the welfare of human society is threatened. It can only be strong and happy where the marriage bond is held in honour.

But something else, turning to the church now: if we have a lax view of marriage, its sanctity, and the cause of divorce and remarriage, there is an impact on the witness of the church of Jesus Christ. Now this is staggering to consider: that statistics from every source tell us that Christians are more or less clones of our present-day secular culture. In some cases, believe it or not, Christians are even worse in their lifestyles. I was staggered to find out that, according to George Barna's research, born again Christians are now slightly more likely to divorce than the general population - that may well be a survey of America, but nevertheless it is true that 27% of Christians are more likely to divorce than 23% for the general population. Now, is that not a disturbing revelation? As society has grown more comfortable with divorce, so have a great number of Christians - and, if it proves nothing else, surely it betrays at least a serious misunderstanding in the minds of God's people regarding the sanctity of marriage?

We need to address the subject for the sake of society and the church, but also for the reason that divorce has such a serious impact on children's lives. There's a new survey of Britain's under tens that shows that if children ruled the world, the first thing they would do is ban divorce! This was in the public media recently. There was a poll conducted by Luton First for the UK's fourth National Kid's Day. The survey was of 1600 children and it has been running annually for the past four years, but this is the first time that divorce featured at the top of
the list of things that children wanted to ban. Divorce is pushing out, therefore, a ban on knives and guns - which had the top spot for the past two years running - and the only conclusion we can take from that is that divorce is increasingly affecting the well-being of children in society.

The Christian Institute reflected on this survey, and also added the fact that the survey reveals that 80% of these children said that they would probably marry - it's interesting when you consider their aversion to divorce - and, when they grow up, two thirds said that they wanted to have children. So the problem in the child's mind is not the concept, which is God-given, of marriage and procreation; but this human invasion, because of the hardness of mankind's heart, to divorce and the carnage it has caused in children's minds and hearts because of it. Earlier last year results from the National Child Development Study were released showing that changing attitudes toward divorce have in no way diminished its impact on children's lives. That particular study tracked 1700 people born in the same week in 1958, and compares their lives with those born earlier and those born later. A researcher involved with the study, Kathleen Kiernan, said, and I'm quoting: 'It might be expected that as divorce has become more commonplace, its effects might have reduced. Yet a comparison with children born in 1970 shows that this is not the case'. The report continued that: 'Divorce has', I quote, 'repercussions that reverberate through childhood and into adulthood. Children from disrupted families tend to do less well in school and subsequent careers than their peers. They are also more likely to experience the break-up of their own partnerships'. Now it doesn't naturally follow on that these things should happen, but the potential is increased because of divorce.

Now a separate report was released in April 2008 by the 'Good Childhood Inquiry', and it warned that family breakdown was a major cause of harm to children's mental health. One of the authors of the report warned that it's not just the event of family breakdown itself, but the life that has to be lived afterwards that causes harm. Stephen Scott, Professor of Child Health and Behaviour at the Institute of Psychiatry in King's College, London, described how family breakdown can harm children's mental health, and he said, again I quote: 'It is as much about the problems arising from family breakdown as the event itself. Young people don't like being in different homes on different days of the week and get upset by strife between their parents'.

Now, isn't it interesting that by divine design and inspiration these two issues - the sanctity of marriage and the security of children - are put together in Mark chapter 10 verses 1 to 16? They are certainly connected, and we need to address it - though it's a thorny subject - because the Bible does, because our Lord did, because society and the church need to hear about it because of the impact on society, the impact on the witness of the church, and the impact on children's lives.

Let's address for a moment: why then is it such a hot potato if so much is at stake? Well, one of the reasons why Christians and preachers avoid this subject is, incidentally, similar to why it was controversial in the days of the Lord Jesus. What I mean is: there are so many different schools of thought regarding it, and so many godly Christians and exceptional Bible scholars differ in interpretation concerning divorce and remarriage - and therefore they just avoid it. It has to be also said that treatments of this subject, whether in written or spoken form, mostly revolve around this great question of: 'When is it OK to divorce or remarry?'. Now that is certainly an issue, and I've dealt with it before, but my great fear is that when we get taken up with the issue of 'When is it OK to divorce or marry?', we're in danger of missing the whole point of what Christ was teaching! Indeed, we can actually fall into the pit of the Pharisees
that they found themselves constantly in.

Tom Hovestol, in his book 'Extreme Righteousness', a study of the Pharisees, commenting on the Lord's warning against oath-taking in the Sermon on the Mount, I believe really gets the nub of this problem of divorce. He says: 'We live in a culture in which promises and commitments, even solemnly made ones, are routinely broken. Our wedding ceremonies, baptism rituals, infant dedications, and church membership covenants, to varying degrees, include pious oaths which we cavalierly break. Every divorce', he says, 'is a major violation of the promise 'Till death us do part'. However, we spend most of our theological energy debating when it is OK to break our promises'. He says: 'We are like the Pharisees, seeking loopholes. We are masters at the art of evasion' - and I agree with that! Whatever your opinion of divorce and remarriage might be, we are asking the question, 'How far can I go?'. Yet the question we ought to be asking as Christians and members of the kingdom of God is, 'How like Christ can I be?'. Does this highlight a moral and spiritual duplicity in our Christian lives?

Now, let me make a number of comments which are essentially practical, and I hope compassionate, caveats that must be acknowledged before we comment on this thorny subject. The first is this: divorce in our modern age, certainly in our nation, can be foisted on a person against their will. Therefore everyone cannot be held accountable for the breakup of their marriage through divorce. Secondly, it has to also be said that I am not, and do not want to be perceived as, condemning those who have been divorced and remarried. They are not outcasts, they have not committed the unpardonable sin, nor is divorce an act that puts them beyond the support of the local church. Now, I don't claim to have all the answers to the practical questions that divorce and remarriage raise in this modern age for the church, but one thing I am sure of is that the grace of God in Christ is able to cover all our sin - hallelujah! 'Every sin and blasphemy may be forgiven of men', the Lord Jesus said - therefore we must never judge others with a self-righteous attitude, because we're all effectively adulterers in our hearts. We must always endeavour to minister to the wounded - and that includes the divorced - and not call unclean that which God has called clean.

But a third acknowledgement which I feel must be made is that there are problems in knowing how to apply biblical principles to some modern day scenarios. That is a reality that, if you've ever been involved in pastoral experience, you will know too well. Yet, those things being said, we must always set forth the biblical ideal. You see, this is what can happen: we are so afraid of offending someone that we keep quiet when the ideal of how God made marriage, what He ordained it for in His plan and purpose, is missed - hence such a high divorce rate among Christian people.

'Well', you say, 'what is that ideal then?'. Well, let's try and keep to Mark chapter 10, because you will know that this is the gospel of the cross, this is the gospel of the Suffering Servant, and so the context of this teaching on marriage and divorce is the context of the cost of the kingdom of God, which is so great! You know He's been telling us about that so much, the Lord Jesus, and the disciples, He has been revealing to them about His cross, and they couldn't get that into their heads, that He should die. The problem was that they couldn't understand how they should also die on the cross. He not only spoke of His cross, but their cross, and how they had to deny themselves, take up the cross, and follow Him every day of their lives. The cost of the kingdom, the cost of discipleship - but what the Lord is doing here in Mark 10 is showing us that there is a great cost even in the area of our closest human relationships.
So the Lord says: 'Well, Moses may have allowed divorce because of the human hardness of your heart' - i.e. the failure to understand God's purpose in marriage - 'But I'm making it clear', the Lord Jesus is saying, 'I'm making it plain that the kingdom of God, that is now near to you in Me, demands lifelong faithfulness to one partner'. He's saying that that is God's original plan of creation, and that's where He goes back to creation - and the fall didn't undo that original purpose. He says in verse 5, effectively, that Moses only permitted divorce, he didn't command it as the Pharisees asserted. Now, I know the phrase 'command' is used there, and I think it has got more to do with the legislation all revolving around this bill of divorcement - but what the Lord is saying is that this was a concession because of your sinfulness, your hardness of heart, and it was chiefly to protect the women that you would have been so cruel to.

Now, of course, in our modern age in the church there is a great debate over the so-called 'exception clause' - in Matthew 5:32 it is found - that some would say is the legitimate reason why a divorce can be given. 'But I say unto you', the Lord Jesus said, 'That whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication', except for the cause of fornication, 'causeth her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery'. The same is found in Matthew 19 and verse 9. Of course, some believe that this is not adultery after marriage, this was premarital uncleanness during the betrothal period, and I have spoken on that myself in relation to Matthew's gospel to the Jews. But there are others who believe it is adultery, or some think it's not just one case of unfaithfulness, but a persistent lifestyle of unfaithfulness. But the point I'm making is: there's such a divergence of opinion over what this exception clause might be - but can I say to you that even if it does mean 'sexual unfaithfulness' as a grounds for divorce and remarriage, it is not a command, and it cannot be interpreted as a command. It is only permitted - either way, whatever view you take - divorce is never mandatory. I think this is what we are losing, the wood for the trees. The ideal of the kingdom for a broken marriage, a broken relationship, is not divorce but sacrificial reconciliation in the spirit of forgiveness! 'Oh!', you say, 'That's a high standard for trust that has been lost and unfaithfulness that has occurred in the most intimate relationships!'. Well, that is true, it is a high cost, but this kingdom that you are now part of asks a high cost of you.

I'm concerned about how quickly Christians run to the divorce courts these days. I don't underestimate the pain and the tragedy, and I'm not condoning some who are living in abusive relationships - there is a way out of that, I acknowledge that, and there should be a way out of that. But other Christians, even with differing views of divorce, are saying - Kent Hughes, for instance - 'Too often men and women eagerly pounce on the infidelity of their mate as the opportunity to get out of a relationship they haven't liked anyway. It's so easy to look for a way out instead of working through the problem'. Are you beginning to feel, as we go through this passage, the cost of the kingdom to our personal relationships? It's so great and, in fact, according to Matthew 19 verse 10, the disciples concluded after hearing this teaching of the Lord Jesus that it would be better to remain unmarried than to face marriage which, what they were perceiving at that moment, was a death sentence - you couldn't get out of it.

The seriousness of the issue is highlighted in the fact that, both here in Mark 10 and in Matthew, the Lord Jesus called remarriage after divorce - whether by a husband or by a wife - plain adultery from the point of view of God's kingdom. Verse 11 here says: 'Whosoever shall put away his wife, and marry another, committeth adultery against her'. Herod is the illustration, is he not, of this? So applicable where the Lord is at this very moment in the region where He is ruling. In verse 12 He turns it round to the female side, and He says: 'If a
woman shall put away her husband, and be married to another, she committeth adultery'. Now that's interesting, because women in Judaism were not allowed to divorce their husbands, and so this seems to be for the benefit of the Roman readers of Mark's gospel.

Now you can imagine how, if this was radical to the twelve disciples, and it was, how radical this would have sounded in the lax atmosphere - morally speaking - of Rome! It's no surprise, therefore, how radical it sounds to people today in our permissive society, when old moral conventions are breaking down all around us! Now, it is true that in Matthew there seems to be an exception clause in the case of fornication - whatever that is, and we'll leave that for another time perhaps - but Mark gives the saying in its starkest form, Mark does not give an exception clause, and this is to Gentiles! Perhaps that was what the Gentile church needed with so much promiscuity, so much immorality, so much looseness and laxness - they needed a certain sound. Now, is that not what the church needs today? Not a whole debate ranging around 'When is it OK to get a divorce and a remarriage?', but to hear the certain sound of what God requires of us when we promise to a partner and promise to Him, giving our word that we will be faithful - what it means to break that, what the requirements are upon the child of God in the kingdom of Christ.

You see the radical nature of the teaching of the Lord Jesus, because you know, in effect, what He was doing was: He was closing the legal loopholes that the rabbis had found in the law of Moses. Even the fall, the Lord Jesus is indicating, did not change this creative ideal. You were permitted to divorce by Moses because of the hardness of your heart, but it did not change God's desires. The first arrangement was for it to be an indissoluble union, verses 8 and 9: 'They twain shall be one flesh: so then they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder'. Divorce may be legal according to the laws of our land, and yet not right in the eyes of the God of heaven. The Lord is saying that in His kingdom He expects married people to practise commitment to each other - verse 7: 'For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and cleave to his wife' - commitment and remaining true to each other. Too many Christians now view divorce as a way out, and even go into marriage thinking: 'Well, if it doesn't work there is a backdoor, there's a fire escape' - and they don't, therefore, take their vows seriously as they commit to each other and enter into a covenant, not just with each other, but with the Lord Himself.

Sadly, like the world, many Christians, many of us - for us, self-fulfilment has become the rule of thumb: what we want, what we desire. We grow tired of a person or a situation, and selfishly we just want to move on. Now, of course, don't misunderstand me: God wants us to have life to the full, He promised us that in the Lord Jesus - but that is accomplished not through self-fulfilment, but through death to ourselves and surrender to Christ. It is the way of the cross, it is the way of this gospel, it is the way of the kingdom! The great challenge to us today is: how does the cross affect my marriage? How does the cross affect my marriage problems?

But it would be wrong of us to stop there, as it would be wrong of any married couple to stop there, thinking of their relationship and ignoring that often there are other parties involved in a divorce and remarriage, and that is the children. Think of the children! I'm not saying this is directly related in the mind of our Lord to what He now goes on to speak of, but it may well have been - and it certainly is practically relevant to our contemporary situation. Oh, He would say to us believers, and nonbelievers who are contemplating divorce: 'Think of the children!'.

Now, it's wonderful to see what the Lord Jesus has to say about children. There are those who
say: 'Ach, little children are too young to be brought to Christ, to be converted. They don't understand enough' - and yet here we see the Lord inviting children to come to Him. 'Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God', He invites children to come to Him. Is there a child listening to me this morning? You can come to Jesus just as you are, admitting your sin, your weakness, and your need of a Saviour. Not only does He invite children, He encourages parents to bring them - because, after all, it was parents who were bringing them to the Lord Jesus to be touched. If there was a survey taken today, it would seem very clear that most of us who are converted were saved as children, because children are ideal converts. Not, as some suppose, because they are gullible and susceptible to brainwashing, but their simplicity of faith that the Lord Jesus actually enshrines as an example for us to strive after! What a truth of God's kingdom this is, seen in the child who receives God's word simply and trusts God - and that's why they can so readily enter into God's kingdom.

But here we see one of the very few occasions where Mark records that Jesus was effectively indignant. He was displeased. It's interesting to see the cause why He was so displeased. The servants of Christ were too busy to minister among children. Right away my own heart is pricked here, because we who serve the Lord, and are busily serving - and remember there was no busier servant than the Servant of Jehovah here in Mark's gospel - but He was never too busy for the vitally important ministry of meeting the children's needs. May I say this, and I speak to my own heart: if you're involved in Christian service, never ignore the children - and especially not your own!

But there is a solemn warning here to any, the Lord is saying it: 'Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein'. He warned of putting a stumbling block before their inexperienced feet. There might not be a greater stumbling block before the feet of young children today than divorce, and the fallout from it that pours into their adolescence, young adulthood, and their own relationships and development. But isn't it wonderful, isn't it wonderful the picture that we're left with in verse 16 of our Lord Jesus: He turns from that stern indignation towards the disciples, and it says He took up these children 'in his arms, put his hands upon them, and blessed them'. It's one of the most graphic expressions of the compassion and the tenderness of the Servant of the Lord that we find. He took them, the little children, up in His arms and blessed them.

For our brokenness in marriage, or remarriage, or whatever situation we find ourselves in; for our brokenness as children, or adults, or older people - there is the tender compassion and graciousness of the Lord Jesus, who would take us up in His arms and touch us. Thank God for that! I can't help thinking that this incident is a throwback to the beautiful words of the prophet Isaiah in Isaiah 40:11, where it says of our Lord Jesus prophetically: 'He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young'. There are some wonderful children's hymns, one goes:

'There's a Friend for little children,  
Above the bright, blue sky,  
A Friend who never changes,  
Whose love will never die;  
Unlike our friends by nature,  
Who change with changing years,  
This Friend is always worthy  
The precious Name He bears'.
Is there a child listening to me, or an older grown-up child who has been affected by a marriage breakup - and it has left scars upon you? It is beginning to reproduce, perhaps, in ways in your own relationships. Listen: there is healing for this, there is help, there is salvation - but it's all in this Friend who never changes, whilst others change towards you. Maybe their love grew cold, or was overtaken by other passions in their hate and their resentment towards their wife or husband? But there is a love that never dies, unlike our friends by nature who change with changing years, this Friend is always worthy, the precious Name He bears.

For our brokenness - whether as husbands, wives or children - in this fallen, sinful, wayward world, there is always an answer. There is always the Lord Jesus, there is always His compassion, there is always His healing - for this, we have Jesus, bless His name. But isn't it good that not only do we have His compassion, but we have His clarity. In the confusion of our world, His concern is the sanctity of marriage and the security of the children. I ask you the question: should that not be our concern also? May God bless His word to all of you who listen, and may it make a change and a difference in all of our lives. Amen.

Let us pray: Father, we just thank You now for the words of our Lord Jesus Christ again. Words that are so piercing, and we, like the twelve, are astounded and say: 'This is a hard saying'. We know our own weaknesses, You see, Lord, and we know that You see them more accurately than we could ever do. Oh, we pray that You will forgive us for our shortcomings in marriage, for our unfaithfulness not only of actions but of mind and heart. Lord, we pray that You will make us better husbands, better wives, better parents, better children. Oh God, we ask that the difference that the power of God residing in us through the Holy Spirit, the difference that that makes would be evidenced in our everyday lives and our relationships. Lord, surely the cross, the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ must have an effect for good on our deepest and most intimate relationships. Lord, all of us have failed You, and all of us have messed up. Let us not receive condemnation from the devil for that, for there is no condemnation in Christ Jesus - but Lord, let us repent of that which is sin, and under which we have come in conviction, that we might turn and repent, Lord, that we might no longer have condemnation as we walk in the light is He is in the light, and seek to live the life that is holy before God. Lord, help those who are hurting - O, I don't want in any way to underestimstimate or to exacerbate any hurt, but rather I would long that the oil of Christ's healing would be poured into their wounds, and that they would find restoration and salvation through the Lord Jesus, His grace, the cleansing of His blood, the healing that the Holy Spirit brings as He dwells in the heart, and as His fruit is manifest in our lives. Lord, let that be the case, and let no one think that there's no way back; let no one think that there's no way out; let no one think that they're finished and discarded and no use for God, perhaps because of mistakes in their life. But let us all, Lord, whoever we are, continually come in brokenness to the cross, that we might again be made whole and made useful for the Master. Hear our prayer we pray, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.
I want you to turn with me in your Bibles in the New Testament to Mark's gospel chapter 10, Mark chapter 10 please. Mark chapter 10 beginning to read at verse 17. I want to speak to you this evening about a man who was rich, but wretched: 'Rich But Wretched'.

"When he", that is the Lord Jesus, "was gone forth into the way, there is came one running, and kneeled to him, and asked him, Good Master, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life? And Jesus said unto him, Why callest thou me good? there is none good but one, that is, God. Thou knowest the commandments, Do not commit adultery, Do not kill, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Defraud not, Honour thy father and mother. And he answered and said unto him, Master, all these have I observed from my youth. Then Jesus beholding him loved him, and said unto him, One thing thou lackest: go thy way, sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, take up the cross, and follow me. And he was sad at that saying, and went away grieved: for he had great possessions. And Jesus looked round about, and saith unto his disciples, How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God! And the disciples were astonished at his words. But Jesus answereth again, and saith unto them, Children, how hard is it for them that trust in riches to enter into the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God. And they were astonished out of measure, saying among themselves, Who then can be saved? And Jesus looking upon them saith, With men it is impossible, but not with God: for with God all things are possible".

Let us pray: Father, we thank You again for this holy book, the Bible. We thank You that it is Your infallible, ineffable, inspired, eternal Word. Lord, as we come to it, we have just been reading a passage that has set forth for us the Living Word, the Lord Jesus Christ. Oh God, it is Him that we covet, it is Him that we seek, we long for His presence, we long for His blessing, we long for His touch tonight. Just as this young rich man, this religious fellow, had an interview with the Lord Jesus Christ - oh God, that someone in this gathering would have an appointment with Jesus, that they will meet Him face-to-face and they will talk with Him - but Lord, unlike this young man, that they'll not turn their back on Him and walk away sad. Oh God, help us tonight, may the power of heaven descend upon us, may the windows of heaven be opened and the blessing pour out tonight, Lord. Unsaved people are with us, backslidden people are with us, cold-hearted believers are here - oh God, they need You! Speak, Lord, with a voice that wakes the dead. Come, and we'll give You all the glory, for You alone are worthy. In Christ's name we pray, Amen.

I want to direct your attention to verse 22, please. It says that this young man, after conversing with the Lord Jesus Christ, 'he was sad at that saying, and went away grieved: for he had great possessions'. Now who would ever have thought that we would have united those two words together: sad and rich? Yet circumstances of late in our own province, our nation and our world have associated these two concepts - indeed, thrust them together in an undesirable union, where many people who are rich and have great possessions have found themselves launched into deep sadness.
Of course, you would have to have been hiding somewhere in the back end of nowhere not to realise that we are in the midst of a credit crisis, a financial crisis, a credit crunch. If you have been to the bank lately to try and borrow any money, or you're involved in business, you will know how tight things are getting for folk. But what you will not probably hear on the BBC News or Newsnight is the fact that the credit crisis has become, for many people, a personal crisis. The Mail on Sunday a number of weeks ago reported the story of a 47-year-old man by the name of Kirk Stephenson who was a high-profile millionaire financier. He died in the pathway of a train travelling at 100 mph at a railway station in Berkshire, England. It is believed, as the paper report went, that he threw himself in front of the train. The report read that he had succumbed, it is thought, to the mounting personal pressures as the world's financial markets went into meltdown.

I'm sure many of you here, I certainly have my own stories that are more local to our own province, people who have been in business, people who have been dealing with finance, and they have despaired because things are so bad at this present time! Now if the fallout hasn't been as serious for some people as committing suicide, one thing is certain: many are stressed out and beginning to be depressed because of what's going on economically in our land. The Samaritans, a couple of weeks ago, reported a 25% increase in phone calls to their organisation. People do not know where to turn, and we're going to increasingly hear of banks recalling their credit, we're going to hear of businesses - big businesses - going under, unemployment is going to rise, it's going to be harder and harder to borrow money. People do not know where to turn to, and it's not getting better, it's going to get worse. It would seem the more money a person has, the more they have to worry about.

I don't know whether that's you tonight, but here in Mark chapter 10 is a young man - he is self-assured, he is successful. Matthew's gospel says he had great wealth, Luke's gospel identifies him as a ruler, he has been known as 'the rich young ruler', a young man who had reached the pinnacle of his career and ambition - affluent and powerful, self confident and determined. It seems that everything was going for him, and everything he went after he got. The problem was: though he was rich in money, he was wretched in his soul - sad because he was rich.

Now what the Lord says in this portion of Scripture, and indeed generally, concerning riches and possessions, our world desperately needs to hear tonight. Verse 23, if you look at the end of it, Jesus said: 'How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God!', and if you look at the end of verse 24 He says again, 'Children, how hard is it for them that trust in riches to enter into the kingdom of God!'. These two things are linked: if you have riches it is likely that you'll be trusting in your riches. Or could I put it like this: it's likely that if you have riches, they'll have you. Somebody said money talks, but they didn't tell us what it says - it simply says: 'Your soul is mine'.

The Lord explains why this is the case in Matthew's gospel chapter 6, in His well-known Sermon on the Mount. We read that the Lord Jesus taught: 'Lay not', verse 19, Matthew 6, 'Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also'. Many people have trusted, as Paul said, in uncertain riches. The tragedy is that because what they have trusted in is failing them, many hearts are failing them for fear, and they are despairing and they don't know where to turn.
Now that might be you, well-heeled wealthy businessman or businesswoman, but you might be sitting there tonight and thinking: 'Well, boy, did you miss the mark tonight, because I'm far from rich! This message isn't for me!'. Well, I think you've missed the mark if you're thinking that, because you don't have to have money to love money. You don't have to have it to lust after it, and to long for it, and live for it! The Bible doesn't just warn us about having money, it warns us about loving money - whether we've got it or not. The Bible says it is the root of all evil.

You know, this book has an awful lot to say about money and possessions. You would expect the Bible to have a lot to say about prayer, wouldn't you? Talking to God - well, there's over 500 references to prayer. Faith is throughout the book, that's how we get saved: faith and faith alone in Christ, and we are to live by faith, trusting in God - and there's over 500 references to that in the Bible. But there are over 2000 references in the New Testament, I believe, concerning money and possessions - over 2000! Out of the 38 parables of our Lord Jesus, 16 deal with how we handle money. In fact, Jesus talked more about money and possessions than heaven and hell combined! One out of 10 verses in the Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John is about money and possessions - that works out at about 288 verses in the four Gospels. Why did He emphasise the need to talk about money and possessions? Simply because there is a great danger that we get so taken up with money and materials that we miss what is spiritual in life.

The Lord Jesus knew that money is one of the greatest obstacles to people getting saved - do you know that? Money, things, possessions. Now let me give you a couple of examples. In Luke chapter 12 the Lord Jesus told a story about a rich businessman, he was a farmer. Things were going so well for him that he had to pull down his present barns and build greater ones to supply all his produce. He said to his soul: 'Eat, drink, and be merry! Things are going well, why not enjoy it? We've only got one life, so let's live it up while we have it'. But God came to him one night, and called him a fool - 'You're a fool! For this night', God said, 'Your soul shall be required of you, and then whose shall those things be which thou hast provided?'. You see the Lord Jesus spoke so much about money simply because it blinds us to our own mortality. When we get so comfortable, so affluent in this life, we don't seek to prepare for the next life.

There's a legend told about a fairy that came to a man and told him that she would give him anything he asked, and he asked for a newspaper, a copy for that very day a year from then in advance. Right away, like that, the fairy gave it to him! Quickly he turned to the financial page and ran his fingers nervously down the list of stocks and shares, and leaping from the chair he shouted: 'Hooray! I'm worth 15 million!'...then the page dropped, and he saw the obituary, and he gasped, 'I died two days ago!'. You see riches, wealth, possessions, comfort, affluence, ease, materials can blind us to our own mortality - particularly if we have more of them rather than less of them. We think we're going to live forever in the ease which we enjoy. Now the credit crunch maybe has shocked some of us out of that, but my friend: maybe you need to see more than just the fact that riches can go completely in an instant. You need to see that your own life is like a vapour that appears for a little time and then vanishes away, you've got to see your own mortality!

This rich farmer was blinded to it, he was too busy with making money in his life to see that one day his life was going to end. Another story Lord Jesus told a number of chapters after Luke 12, the rich farmer, we read in Luke's gospel chapter 16 about a rich religious man - probably a Pharisee. The Bible says he fared sumptuously every day. He had the best of life not just on his holidays, not once a month, every day of his life he lived it up. At the bottom
of his driveway, if you like, there was a bag of bones, a beggar. He had nothing, ate of the
scrapings off the ground, and yet that beggar had true faith and trust in God - but that rich
religious man trusted and lived for his riches. The Bible says that death visited both of them,
and the angels from heaven carried that beggar into glory - but the rich man lifted up his eyes
in hell, being in torment.

Now what many people forget is that just before the Lord Jesus told that story He was
teaching how you cannot serve God and mammon. He was teaching on the truth that riches
not only can blind you to your own mortality, but they can blind you to your eternal destiny.
Mammon is a personification of money and possessions, it's speaking of the god of things, and
how you can't worship God and worship things - because you'll love one and hate the other.
Money, Jesus was teaching - listen now - money can take you to hell, love of money can take
you to hell. People talk to me about religion being a crutch - and a lot of religion is - but faith
in Christ is not a crutch, it is a leg to stand on, it's new life. But money and possessions are a
.crutch, and you labour for them, and you dream about them, and you maybe on a Saturday
night get the ticket to see if you'll win them in the Lotto or during the week - and your great
aspiration is that if you can get them, your life will be better for living, but you've got to
understand that one day your life is going to end and there is an eternity to face!

Maybe God for some people, I'm sure it's certain, God has knocked the crutch from under
them - and the money and the possessions have suddenly disappeared, or at least they're
more fragile, and they're starting to shake in their boots because the things that they trusted
in, well, they're not worth trusting on. My friends, these things keep us from the realities of
eternity, and you need to wake up to it. A hundred and eighty years after the death of
Charlemagne, King of the Francs, the Emperor Otto around the year 1000 opened King
Charlemagne's tomb. They were astounded at the sight they saw in that great sepulchre,
because buried with that great monarch were all his treasures, all his riches, all his
possessions. Then they spied, when the light started to gain on their eyes, they spied the
skeletal figure of the King himself sitting on his throne, with the regal crown on his brow, but
wonder of all wonders: on his lap was a copy of the Gospels, and his bony finger was resting
on Mark chapter 8 verse 36, Jesus said 'What shall it profit a man, if he gain the whole world,
but lose his own soul?' - that's it! What does it matter, my friend, if you get all the money in
the world, and all the world of money, if it's not right with your soul, if you're not fit for
eternity? If you haven't got life abundant in your heart here and now, there's an aching void
that no money or possession can fill.

That's where you are tonight, whether you've got the money or you haven't. This young man
was rich in money, but he was wretched in his soul. You know, I believe this, that every man,
woman and young person without Christ is truly miserable. I believe that. I believe that. Oh
you can be happy for a season, and things can come along - whether wealth or love, or family
or success, or learning - that can be in themselves an opiate to make you feel happy, to dull
out all the sorrows and trials of life - but eventually they come upon you so heavily that you
can't deny them, you can't shake them off, until death itself stands and faces you...and
nothing, nothing can keep its bony hand away from you.

Not only was this young man rich in money and wretched in soul, I want you to see that he
was rich in morals, but he rejected the Master. Now if riches lead some people to hell, and
that's sure, one thing that is surer is that religion has taken more to hell. False religion, and I
define religion as man's selfish attempt to get to God on his own terms - the Gospel is not
religion! Here was a young man rich in character, rich in morality - and we could do with a lot
of young men like it in our society today. He was a good Jew - but please note: he was not a
saved Jew! You could be a good Protestant, a good Roman Catholic, a good Presbyterian, a good Methodist, a good Congregationalist, a good Episcopalian, a good Presbyterian, a good Baptist, a good member of the Brethren - and it matters nothing in God's eyes if you're not saved, if you're not born again my friend, whatever colour or hue of our creed!

How rich this young Jew was in manners and morals, and added to his religiosity: he felt and could confess that there was a lack in his life, he needed something more, and he'd heard the Lord Jesus teaching just before this passage and he was impressed at what he'd heard. We see in his approach in verse 17 how he ran and fell on his knees out of respect to the Lord Jesus Christ, and gasping for a breath he asks the Lord out of a heart filled with deep need: 'What must I do to inherit eternal life?'. Now that young man could be further on than you are tonight: are you concerned about your soul? Are you concerned how to get eternal life? Are you concerned how to know that you're sure that you're on your way to heaven when you die? This young man was: 'What must I do?'.

Now the tense of the original language here indicates that this young man expected the Lord Jesus to prescribe some great deed for him to do there and then. You see, what was in this young man's mind was: 'Look, Jesus, if You can just tell me the very thing to do here and now to sort this whole matter out and to get eternal life, tell me what I must do, and I'll do it - and the matter will be dealt with once and for all'. The implication is, his spirit and his motivation was: 'Lord, I know I can do anything that You would ask me' - after all, he always did everything that was asked of him. A superb young man, but the answer that he got from Christ was like an electric shock up his spine. He called Christ 'Good', and Jesus came back at him in verse 18 and said, 'There is none good but one, that is, God. Why are you calling me good?'. Now we know that Jesus Christ was God manifest in flesh, and I hope you know that. He was God walking about as man on this earth, and He was very man of very man, yet very God of very God - but this young man didn't know He was God.

You see, what the Lord Jesus was bringing to him was: this young man had faith in the goodness of humanity, that humanity could rise to an acceptable moral and ethical height that God would accept. Do you see it? 'Good Master, what must I do to inherit eternal life? What shall I do?'. 'All these things', when Jesus said, 'Keep these Commandments', all the Commandments that were towards our fellow man: do not commit adultery, do not kill, do not steal, do not bear false witness, lie, do not defraud, honour thy father and thy mother - 'All these have I observed from my youth up'. Now we could argue all night whether he had not, it doesn't really matter - but imagine his excitement when he thought that 'Jesus is going to ask me something I've already done, because I've kept all these commandments, I must have made it!'. There's a lot of people like that, and you see the Lord had to bring this out of his heart, because it was his problem, his obstacle in getting saved - externally he was blameless in keeping the religious rules of Judaism, he was like Paul the apostle who said, 'Concerning the righteousness, externally, of the law, I was without blame'. But the problem is not what we do with our hands and with our feet, and with our ears and eyes, and nose and mouth, the problem is what goes on in this heart of ours! That's why Paul said alternatively in Romans 7 that he had within his heart a problem with lust that spawned all sorts of covetousness, no matter how blameless he became externally he couldn't put this to death within his heart.

It's easy to keep an external rule when it hides a heart of all sorts of sins. What sins are hiding in your heart tonight? It could be a bad temper, it could be your fantasies, it could be your hatred toward another - you need to know that God, the God of heaven, sees every heart! In this young man's heart dwelt self-righteousness, and a heart that served riches as
an idol. Though he was very particular in keeping the commandments that were man-ward, he had neglected the first and the second commandment which are of the God-ward section, which says 'You shall have no other gods before me' - yet his god had become money and possessions, and his own self-righteous religiosity. The second commandment, 'Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, nor bow down to it' - and he was living for things, material substance. When Jesus had brought to the surface his self-righteousness, He nailed it, and He said: 'Right, one thing thou lackest: sell whatsoever thou hast, and give it to the poor'.

Verse 22 says that at this saying he was sad. The man's face fell, the word used by Matthew in his account describes a sky becoming overcast as a storm approaches. In other words, this young man's face darkened as it dawned upon him - what Christ was asking him to do was impossible for him! Here is the great refusal: a young man rich and morals, rich in money, and yet he rejected the Master! Oh what might have been! Maybe you're here tonight and you've got obstacles to coming to Christ. It may be your money, or it might be another idol, it might even be your moral self-righteousness and it is causing you to reject the Master, the Lord Jesus. You need to see this man's face, it was like death itself: he was sad because he couldn't let go and embrace Christ! Men and women are sad without Christ! They're not fulfilled, for none but Christ can satisfy!

But I have to say, I think especially rich and religious people are never happy. That's a strange thing to say - well, it's not really, because for both rich and religious people there is this in common: they never ever realise their goal, sometimes they don't even know what the goal is. Rockefeller was asked the question: 'What is enough?', one of the richest men that ever lived. He said: 'Just a little bit more' - that's the problem. Religion is exactly the same, you ask religious systems of this world: 'What is enough in works, and ritual, and righteousness, to get you to heaven and to buy eternal life?', and they don't know! Because nothing is ever enough.

What is your hindrance preventing you coming to Christ? Now you might be sitting here confused, and thinking: 'Well, who could be saved then?'. Well, that's exactly what the disciples thought. They were perplexed and nonplussed, and they said in verse 26: 'Who then can be saved?'. The Lord had taught them how hard it is for those who have riches and trust in riches to get into the kingdom of heaven, it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle! But this is what you want to see tonight, and I need to get you to see it: this young man walked away sad because he thought it was up to him to pull the idol down from his heart! He thought that he had to cleanse himself, he thought that he had to do the work, but the answer comes resounding from the lips of our Lord Jesus Christ: 'With God, nothing shall be impossible!' - Hallelujah! Whatever your sinful idol might be, or whatever your self-righteousness is, all you need to do is come to the cross and the Christ of the cross, and confess it and admit it, and He will deliver you!

Do you understand what I'm saying here tonight? He can deliver from self-righteousness, He can deliver from seductive riches, you just have to come to Him! You don't have to clean yourself up, or make yourself right first; you just come to Him the way you are, believing that He is able to do it, that nothing is impossible with Him, and He'll do it! You see, this is a problem: sometimes we are preaching repentance as being that a sinner has to sort themselves out, and forsake their sin before they believe the gospel - that's nonsense! That is not repentance. Repentance is a change of mind, 'metanoia' in the Greek, it means you realise what your sin is doing, that it's destroying you, it's damning you - but don't you think for one moment that you have got the power to deliver yourself from sin, you don't! 'To as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God' - you've got to
believe, and then you receive the power.

You see, the devil can keep a man or woman away from Christ by making them think: 'I've to turn from my sin, I've got to get rid of my alcohol, I've got to get rid of my immorality, I've got to get rid of my impurity, I've got to get rid of the strangling hold that riches have on me, I've got to get rid of my religion' - nonsense! All you've got to do is admit that you're in need, you're helpless and hopeless, and you're on your way to hell without Christ - and come to Him! The foot of the cross, that's where you need to get to tonight. The foot of Calvary's cross, where there the poor Saviour - He wasn't like these slick-wigged tele-evangelists, pleading for money at every cut and turn. He was born into a manger in a stable, He was a carpenter, and then when He went into His ministry He had no home of His own. We read in the scriptures that as He was feeding the people, and teaching them, meeting their needs, healing them, giving them satisfaction in their hearts - they all went every man unto his own home, but the Lord Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. The foxes have holes in the ground, the birds of the air have nests, but Jesus says 'The Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head'. He had only one garment, when He was illustrating a truth He borrowed a coin, and when He got to Calvary they stripped Him of the only garment He had till He was stark naked. When He was hanging, bleeding and dying with your sin upon Him, with the wrath of God on His heart for all sinners, they gambled for the only piece of clothing He had. Then when He died, they laid Him in another man's tomb. The grace of our Lord Jesus: though He was rich - He was God's Son, and is God's Son, and shared all the glory of deity at the right hand of the Father on high - and yet He came to this sin-stinking, filthy, hole of a world to save your soul; to bleed and die and suffer for love of you and love of me! Yet we value things in this world that are valueless, yet we do not esteem the precious, priceless, blood of the peerless Son of God.

Are you sitting here tonight, and you have to say with the hymn writer:

'Room for pleasure, room for business,
But for Christ the Crucified,
Not a place that He can enter,
In the heart for which He died?'

Isaiah said: 'Ho, every one that thirsteth, come to the water of life, come without money and without price'. It's free! You don't have to be rich with money, you don't have to be rich with morals! Jesus Christ does not want your riches, He wants your rags! He doesn't want your goodness, He wants your badness! The only thing that qualifies you for salvation is being a sinner, and we're all sinners: the problem is, we won't admit we're sinners, and that's what disqualifies men and women from coming to Christ - they won't confess their sin, they don't realise that even, as Isaiah 64:4 says, even our righteousnesses, our good works, are filthy rags in God's sight.

Jesus didn't want what this young man possessed and could do, He wanted him to admit there was nothing that he could ever do without Christ. Augustus Toplady in his hymn put it like this, and this is what you need to express - maybe not in these words, but this is the sentiment that the Lord was looking from this young man that he couldn't get:

'Nothing in my hands I bring,
Simply to Thy cross I cling!
Naked come to Thee for dress;
Helpless, look to Thee for grace!
Foul, I to Thy fountain fly,  
Wash me Saviour or I die!

Listen: this young man who did, did, did, all of his life in business and religion walked away sad because he thought there was something he couldn't do, and he didn't realise that if he could only have brought that inability, that sense of helplessness and hopelessness, to the foot of Christ and said: 'Lord, I can't get rid of my riches, I can't denounce my morals, but I know I need You, and I know I'm broken before You', the Lord would have done it! For there is nothing impossible with Him! You're not impossible either! Maybe some of you have sat for a long time under gospel messages, but there is one particular sin, there is one issue that has kept you from coming to Calvary, my friend. Well, the devil is going to keep you there until he sees you thrown into hell one day, if he can keep you. If he can deafen you and blind you to the fact that nothing is impossible with God - the blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, can cleanse us from all sin.

Just in case there is someone here tonight, and you think: 'Ach, do you not think being good, or doing good, or going to your church, or giving in does anything before God? Or that He's not pleased with that?'. My friend, if those things were enough, even if they're good things - and I don't know whether they are half the time - if they were enough, I ask you tonight: what was the point of God sending His only Son to bleed and die, and bear the death of deaths, and endure your hell on the centre cross at Calvary, what was the point of it all? If you could climb a ten rung ladder of the commandments to get into heaven; if it's enough for you to be a Protestant, or a Presbyterian, or a Baptist, or a Methodist, or whatever you are, or a Roman Catholic, or whatever cult or sect you're in - it's not enough!

I want to leave you with this verse 21, as this man walked away: 'Jesus beholding him loved him'. In a world of constant flux, isn't it wonderful that there is something that is unchanging, and that is the love of God. My dear friend, God loves you tonight. Christ died for you, and God is looking down upon you at this very moment in the seat where you sit, and He's loving you. But you know, just like this young man that walked away, He's not in the business of coming down and forcing people's arms up their back and making them get saved. There's never been a man saved against his will, never. My dear friend, the Lord Jesus is lavishing all His grace, His love and His mercy upon you - He loves you as He looks upon you tonight. Of all the people who came to Jesus' feet, as far as I'm aware, this man was probably the best that ever came to Him - and yet he's the only one we read of that went away worse than when he came! The man walked out of the sunshine into the storm, because he wanted salvation on his own terms, not God's.

Let us pray. God has been speaking to your heart tonight, you know it, and I feel I know it too. What are you going to do? God is giving you the opportunity to take the gift - it's a gift, you don't have to pay for it, or earn it, you don't have to be worthy of it, and you're not - none of us are. You just have to take it by faith. Will you do that tonight? The other option is: you turn your back like this young man on the Lord Jesus, and walk out sad. All the possessions of the world, if you have them, or the lust for them, but you'll walk away sad - and you'll be sad till the day you die, for it's only those with Christ that have the potential of being happy. Some of them don't look too happy, mind you - but they should be, they have all the reason in the world and heaven to be happy if they have Christ.

Will you take Him tonight? Where you are, just say: 'Lord Jesus, just as I am I come. Save me now, save me now', just cry out by faith to Him, knowing that Christ and Christ alone in His death is all that can save you - ask Him, and He'll do it! That's all He wanted this young
man to do: fall at His feet humbly and broken, and say, 'Lord Jesus, I come. I can't do it, but it's not impossible for You'. Now, will you come tonight? Oh, you've heard it for years, you've hardened your heart for years - but you're not impossible! That sin is not impossible, that obstacle is not impossible - oh, come tonight and let Him do the impossible for you by the power of His precious blood.

Oh God, by Your Spirit convince of sin, righteousness, and judgement to come. Woo sinners, and may they exercise faith in Christ tonight and settle this matter. Oh, bind the strongman, his influence in the minds and hearts of men - he would damn their souls, oh God, deliver them and save them tonight. For the glory of Christ we pray, Amen.
Now our next study in Mark's gospel is found in Mark chapter 10, and we're beginning to read at verse 28 through to verse 31 - so Mark chapter 10 please, and verse 28. The title I have chosen for this message is: 'You Can't Lose'.

Verse 28 then of Mark chapter 10: "Then Peter began to say unto him, Lo, we have left all, and have followed thee. And Jesus answered and said, Verily I say unto you, There is no man that hath left house, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my sake, and the gospel's, But he shall receive an hundredfold now in this time, houses, and brethren, and sisters, and mothers, and children, and lands, with persecutions; and in the world to come eternal life. But many that are first shall be last; and the last first".

Having witnessed the rich young ruler going away sad, because he was very rich; and having heard the Lord's subsequent explanation of the matter - that, if you look at verse 23, 'How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God!', and verse 25, 'It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God' - the disciples appear to have concluded that they may have succeeded where the rich young man had failed. Peter, again acting as spokesman for the twelve, says in verse 28: 'Lo', or behold, look, 'we have left all, and have followed thee'. Now that was true in a sense, because Peter and John had left a lucrative fishing business to follow the Lord Jesus. Matthew the tax collector had left a rich source of income at the seat of custom. So Peter appeals to the Lord: 'We have left all and followed Thee'.

Now, what was behind that statement of Peter's? I want you to think about that for a moment, because it's important that we don't take it at a superficial level and we understand the motivation for the apostle in asking this question. Now we might answer: 'Well, the motivation in him saying this was sincerity. He truly felt that he had given up all for the Lord Jesus, and he was just exclaiming that in the light of what had happened the rich young ruler, walking away sad, not willing to give up all his riches for the Lord Jesus'. But let me ask you a question if you, perhaps, perceive that that was his motivation: if you were sincere in giving up everything for the Lord Jesus Christ, would you say it the way Peter did here in verse 28? 'Behold', lo, everyone look, 'we have left all'. I don't think you would - and, in fact, in Matthew 19:27 we have Peter's words in the same context as this, but Matthew records a little bit more for us. He says that Peter said: 'Behold, we have forsaken all, and followed thee; what shall we have therefore?'.

So there seems to be a sort of selfish motivation here with Peter. I don't think it's sincerity that is behind this statement - maybe it was smugness? It was as if Peter was saying: 'Well, we have done what the rich man could not do. We have arrived! We have given up all and followed You!'. That may well be the motivation, maybe also he was seeking affirmation. He was looking to the Lord and saying: 'Lord, aren't we special for what we have been able to give up to follow You?'. Maybe he wanted the Lord to sort of give him a spiritual pat on the back. Perhaps, finally - and there may be other suggestions - mine finally is that there was a tone of sacrificial self-pity in Peter's statement. It's as if he's saying: 'Lord, we have sacrificed
a lot for You. Lord, look at what we have given up You! The rich man couldn't do it, but look at what we have given up for You!'.

Now, some might say it might be a combination of all these factors: sincerity, smugness, self-affirmation, sacrificial self-pity - but I happen to favour the latter. This really was self-pity, and this is borne out by what Matthew records. Peter's motivation is: 'Lord, what will we get out of this?'. Perhaps Peter may well have been thinking that the rich young ruler seemed to be a little bit better off than they were with all his riches and his position in life - and yet they had given up everything for the Master, and he's asking: 'What do we get out of it?'. Now if this is the case, and I believe it is, we have to say that Peter - speaking on behalf of the twelve - is articulating the fact that the twelve have missed the point again, that point that the Lord Jesus was trying to teach them. If you remember from our previous study of the rich young ruler, the point of the incident with the rich young ruler was that the Lord did not want that young man's goodness, but He wanted him to admit his badness. He wanted him to bring to Him his self-righteousness and his love of riches, and Christ wanted his brokenness, and then Christ would do what was impossible for the young man to do himself - who, remember, was obsessed with what he could do. Look at verse 17, just to remind yourself, he came to the Lord Jesus: 'Good Master, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?'. The Lord wanted him to realise he couldn't do anything - could it be that the disciples had fallen into the same trap as the rich young ruler? 'We have done', they are thinking, 'we have done this terribly difficult thing' - what difficult thing? What the Lord asked the rich young ruler in verse 21: 'Jesus beholding him loved him, and said unto him, One thing thou lackest: go thy way, sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, take up the cross, and follow me'. The disciples, through Peter, are saying: 'We've done this!'.

Again, I think they're missing the wood for the trees, because we've got to understand that the Lord here is not interested with the specifics of what the disciples were giving up for Him. He's not interested with the specifics of what we give up for Him. The lesson of the rich young ruler is that He wants brokenness first, He wants us to give up our own self-righteousness, and He wants, effectively, us to give up ourselves to Him! That's what the Lord wanted the rich young ruler to do. He wasn't interested in his riches, and He's not specifically interested only in riches, your house, or your land, or whatever you have to offer - what the Lord is saying to us through these passages is: 'My son, give me thine heart! I want you, and all of you'.

Now, when I thought about this - and I feel that this is the real crux of the message - I was reminded of the example of the churches of Macedonia who had given liberally to those saints of God who were so needy. It says in 2 Corinthians 8 that they give out of their poverty, so they hadn't got much to give, but even out of poverty they gave liberally. The reason, it seems, that they were readily able to make apparently great sacrifices was simply because they had given their hearts to the Lord first. He had all of them! That's what 2 Corinthians 8:5 says in this regard: 'but first gave their own selves to the Lord, and unto us by the will of God'. They had already given up themselves in brokenness to the Lord, so any other sacrifice or thing that was asked of them was nothing in comparison to their initial surrender!

Now, read again verse 28 in the light of what we have just said: 'Then Peter began to say unto him, Lo', behold, look, 'we have left all, and have followed thee'. Do you not hear the self-pitying tone? You see, I think Peter and the disciples had yet to learn: if you have given up on yourself, and given your broken self to the Lord - here is the message today - there are no real sacrifices when you have given up yourself to the Lord Jesus. You see, there's no real
sacrifices when you must give things up for Jesus - that's what this is teaching, verses 29 and 30: 'Verily', Jesus responds, 'I say unto you, There is no man that hath left house, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my sake, and the gospel's, But he shall receive an hundredfold now in this time, houses, and brethren, and sisters, and mothers, and children, and lands, with persecutions; and in the world to come eternal life'.

You see, what the Lord is really responding with is again the message of the cross. This is the gospel of the cross, this gospel of the Suffering Servant, and He's teaching them again the way of the cross - and of course that's what He ends on in this passage. Verses 32 through to 34, let us read that as well: "And they were in the way going up to Jerusalem; and Jesus went before them: and they were amazed; and as they followed, they were afraid. And he took again the twelve, and began to tell them what things should happen unto him, Saying, Behold, we go up to Jerusalem; and the Son of man shall be delivered unto the chief priests, and unto the scribes; and they shall condemn him to death, and shall deliver him to the Gentiles: And they shall mock him, and shall scourge him, and shall spit upon him, and shall kill him: and the third day he shall rise again".

Again, the Lord’s point is always that glory is through the shame of the cross. He had taught them this, had He not, regarding discipleship? Mark 8:34: 'Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me'. Now in verses 32 to 34 we have the third major prophecy of Christ's Passion. The first one was in chapter 8:31, and the second in 9:31, and now here this is the most precise. It mentions Jerusalem, that this would be accomplished in Jerusalem. Note please that it mentions Christ's going before them into Jerusalem, and this 'going before' is something that is unique to Mark’s gospel. He is depicted as the Leader of His people in suffering. He's going before them, He's taking His cross - that's borne out in Mark 8, He speaks first of all of His cross, then of their cross. Now He's leading them into Jerusalem to die on the cross, and they will follow Him there. He is the leader of His suffering people.

Now Mark bears this out not only in relation to the suffering of the Lord, but he leads us as saints of God into glory. At the end of the book, in chapter 16 in verse 7, an angel told the disciples after the resurrection of the Lord Jesus: 'Go your way, tell his disciples and Peter that he goeth before you into Galilee!', there He is, going before into glory, 'there shall ye see him, as he said unto you'. So, if He goes before us into suffering, and the suffering comes before the glory - if we want glory, His glory, we must follow His lead in the way of the cross. It is the Calvary Road, constantly, that our Lord Jesus is teaching us here.

So Peter's answer is: there are no real sacrifices when you must give up things for Jesus if you've already given up your heart to Him. This is what Paul bore out - who could ever say Paul's message is different than the Lord Jesus'? In Philippians chapter 3:7-8 he says: 'But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ'. Again in Galatians 2:20: 'I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me'.

So what I'm saying to you is that the answer of the Lord Jesus coming back was implying, if nothing else, that: 'If I have died with Christ, then self-pity has died too'. You see, dead people don't have rights, dead people don't feel pain or loss, dead people don't own anything!
If I've been crucified, I'm dead to myself, and He has my heart. So if I am nothing, I own nothing; and if I own nothing, I can lose nothing! So there are no real sacrifices when you must give up things for Jesus, if you have already given up your heart to Him. Are you getting the message?

C.T. Studd got this message. He was born to a rich inheritance in his family. He had a brilliant career as a cricketer, and his story tells us that he gave it up - all of it up. He summed up that apparent sacrifice in these words: 'If Jesus Christ be God and died from me, no sacrifice can be too great for me to make for Him'. You see, no sacrifice could be too great for C.T. Studd, because the Lord already had his heart. Jim Elliot was of the same spirit. He would die a martyr at the hands of the Auca Indians as a very young man, but he had given his heart to the Lord long before that moment of martyrdom - that was the secret to his life. He said, summing up all that he was and did: 'He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose'.

David Livingstone of Africa graduated as a medical doctor from Edinburgh University, but he was determined to do something for God. He wanted to work in some place in the world where there was great need, so he went to Africa. We know from his story that he opened up new roads into what was called 'the dark continent'. He said these words, I'm quoting: 'I am willing to go anywhere provided it be forward' - so he did, he went forward to Africa. Livingstone said early in his missionary career: 'I will place no value on anything I have or may possess, except in its relation to the kingdom of God. Anything I have will be given according as giving or keeping it shall most promote the Kingdom of my Saviour'. He began his work that ultimately extended 32 years in total, entirely dedicated to the continent of Africa. The first 12 years or so were in missionary travels, and the remainder of those 32 years were unveiling the unknown interior of Africa, where his geographical discoveries placed him at the pinnacle of exploration and achievement. On his last trip to Scotland, the University of Edinburgh conferred an honorary degree upon him. Now in Scottish universities, whenever there was a recipient of an honorary degree there was a custom that the recipient was basically fair sport, fair game, for the rest of the student body as he received his award. The recipient would have to run the gauntlet of all the raucous remarks. They would taunt them and shout, ridiculing them, sometimes with very lurid remarks and criticisms - simply because the person receiving the honorary doctorate had not worked to earn the degree.

So, in the day that David Livingstone was about to receive this honorary award, many wondered what the reaction of the student body would be. Do you know what the students did that day? They stood silent in an ovation of respect to this man. There, I want you to picture it in your mind's eye, Livingstone stood, one arm hanging at his side - his shoulder had been torn by a lion in the forests of Africa. There he stood, his skin like leather because the sun had completely destroyed it. With the students standing in silence, Livingstone was heard to say these words: 'Shall I tell you what supported me through all these years of exile among a people whose language I could not understand, and whose attitude toward me was always uncertain and often hostile? It was this: 'Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world'. People talk', he went on, I want you to hear this, mark it well, 'People talk of sacrifice that I have made in spending so much of my life in Africa. Can that be called a sacrifice which is simply paid back as a small part of a great debt owing to our God which we can never repay? Is that a sacrifice which brings its own best reward in healthful activity, the consciousness of doing good, peace of mind and a bright hope of a glorious destiny hereafter? Away with the word 'sacrifice' in such a view and with such a thought! It was emphatically no sacrifice, say rather 'It was a privilege'. Anxiety, sickness, suffering or danger now and then, with the foregoing of the common conveniences and charities of this life, may make us pause
and cause the spirit to savour and the soul to sink - but let this only be for a moment! All these are nothing when compared with the glory which shall hereafter be revealed in and for us. I never made a sacrifice! Of this we ought not to talk when we remember the great sacrifice which He made who left His Father's throne on high to give Himself for us'.

Silence hung that day in the air in the McEwan Hall in Edinburgh University. To this day, even, Livingstone’s name is still revered among a great many inhabitants across the vast reaches of the African interior. Succeeding generations acknowledge him as a legendary figure who dedicated his life to Africa and her people - that's why, when he died, his heart was buried in Africa, though his body is buried in Westminster Abbey.

You see, you've got to understand this message the Lord Jesus is giving in answer to Peter. The Lord is not seeking to motivate us to start giving up valuable things for Him as if we were fulfilling some checklist that will fast-track us to spiritual glory - no! A thousand times no! Rather, what the Lord is saying through all of this passage, including the rich young ruler, is that any true sacrifice is only a sign of a heart that has already been given up to God - that's it! I think it is very well illustrated by the story of Abraham being asked to sacrifice his only son Isaac. As he went up the Mount, and got the wood and the fire arranged, and the boy lying there, and the knife lifted above him ready to plunge into his heart - that is what God asked him to do, was it not? Yet God was not wanting the death of Isaac, God was not wanting Abraham to sacrifice his only son - sure He promised him that he would have him, and from that young boy would come a great nation that would bless all nations. Now, God shows us what His motivation was, as He cries out at that mountaintop: 'Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me'.

You see, God wanted to know what was in Abraham's heart. This was the great test of his faith, this is the great test of his devotion - he had failed so many before, but now God was wanting to find out whether He had his heart. You see, our motivation - if we have to give things up - should not be reward, but devotion. So there are no real sacrifices when you must give up things for Jesus, if you've already given up your heart to Jesus - for He is worthy. The Lamb that was slain is worthy to receive the glory.

Yet, though reward should not be our motivation, there is, Jesus says, recompense of reward. This is very clear in verse 30, let's see verse 29 again: 'No man that hath left house, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my sake, and the gospel's, But he shall receive an hundredfold now in this time', that's important, 'houses, and brethren, and sisters, and mothers, and children, and lands, with persecutions; and in the world to come eternal life'.

Now, it seems to me that in verse 30 there are two types of reward mentioned - there is temporal reward, and there is eternal reward. Let's deal with each of them: temporal reward - what does this mean? That if we have lost these things, and people, and possessions in our life, that we will 'receive an hundredfold now in this time'? Now let it be emphatically said that what is being taught here is not the prosperity gospel that we hear preached, particularly through satellite and cable television. Many of the very famous charismatic preachers tend to be of this ilk, and they espouse to this theology that God desires us to have material prosperity, and those who have faith in Him will have it - will have health, will have success in their business and relationships.

Now it is very interesting to note that our Lord Jesus, in all of these things that He mentions,
never mentioned money - but what He does mention are material possessions and relationships. What He is saying, it seems clear, is that any of these things - house, brothers, sisters, father or mother, wife, children and, lands - that you lose in one society, 'for My sake and the gospel's', will be restored an hundredfold (by the way, that's 10,000% restored) in the new society that God is creating by grace. That's what verse 30 is about.

Now this is not something new in Mark's gospel, because the idea of a new family compensating for the loss of our own family, we encountered in chapter 3 and verses 31 to 35 in the life of our Lord Himself, the Suffering Servant. Mark 3:31, and we read that: 'There came then his brethren and his mother, and, standing without, sent unto him, calling him. And the multitude sat about him, and they said unto him, Behold, thy mother and thy brethren! For whosoever shall do the will of God, the same is my brother, and my sister, and mother'.

You see, what the Lord Jesus was talking about here now in verse 30 is a spiritual family. We see this fulfilled in the Acts of the Apostles, in chapter 2 of Acts, verse 41 we read: 'Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls. And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers. And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles. And all that believed were together, and had all things common; And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need. And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved'.

Do you see it? Here is the outworking of what the Lord Jesus is talking about, that whatever we lose in one society for His sake and the gospel's will be restored a hundredfold, 10,000%, in the new society that God is creating by grace. Now maybe you're doubting that this is the meaning of the passage? Well, note an omission in verse 30 from the list of things that the Lord Jesus implies that we may lose in verse 29. They omission is simply: 'father'. Father is mentioned in verse 29, that we may have left father, but father is not mentioned in verse 30 - it's omitted. The simple and obvious reason for this is that there is a Father in our new spiritual family, and that is our Heavenly Father who unites us all together as the family of God. He is the Head.

So what the Lord Jesus is saying is regarding temporal reward now, if we lose any of these things. If we've lost a house, we have got hospitality in the homes of the Lord's people - and many servants of the Lord over the years have experienced that, including myself. If we have lost a brother or sisters, we will have new brothers and sisters in the family of God. If we have lost children, we will gain new children in the family of God. Campbell Morgan put it like this: 'One house gone, but a hundred doors are open. One brother in the flesh lost, but a thousand brothers in the Spirit, whose love is deeper and whose kinship profounder'.

Lands are mentioned here, and, though we might lose lands for His sake and the gospel's, the nations can be won for the Master. 'The heathen for thine inheritance', the Lord Jesus was told by God, 'and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession'. Wonderful! Is it any wonder Bill Gaither, many years ago penned the words:
'From the door of an orphanage to the house of the King,
No longer an outcast, a new song I sing;
I'm not worthy to be here, but praise God! I belong!

I'm so glad I'm a part of the family of God -
I've been washed in the fountain, cleansed by His blood!
Joint heirs with Jesus as we travel this sod;
For I'm part of the family, the family of God'.

Oh, I don't know - person listening to this today - what you have lost for Christ's sake and the gospel's. But here and now, in this new community of grace in the church of Jesus Christ, the Lord Jesus is able to give you 10,000% more in the family of God!

But please note - it would be very easy to miss it - at the end of this list of recompense in verse 30 the Lord mentions, after children and lands, 'with persecutions'. You know, He's still talking here about reward, and it's almost as if He's including this as one of the privileges - that if we lose people, relationships, and possessions for Christ, one of the privileges is that we'll be persecuted and suffer for Him. You remember that that was the exact same outlook as the apostles in Acts chapter 5 and verse 41, and it says that the apostles: 'departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name'. It's a privilege, He's saying!

Now I think this is implying that the foregoing of these things listed in verse 29 not only applies to those who have let go of people and possessions to follow the Lord in service, but also it applies to those who suffer loss of these things through persecution and suffering for the Lord. Now, for the Christians in Rome, that we believe Mark was initially writing this gospel for, or who were reading this gospel at least, suffering was the normal Christian experience for them. That's why Peter, interestingly Peter, in his epistle writes, 1 Peter 4: 'If ye be reproached for the name of Christ, happy are ye; for the spirit of glory and of God resteth upon you: on their part he is evil spoken of, but on your part he is glorified. Yet if any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf. 'Count it all joy', James says, 'when you enter into divers temptations'.

Now, I think it's obvious that this abolishes this prosperity teaching that we hear so often today. It also takes away in interpretation from these verses any idea of a quid pro quo, a favour for a favour from God - if we give up this, He'll give us that; You scratch my back, I'll scratch Yours - banish the thought of that! That has got nothing to do with this passage of Scripture! Now I believe God blesses those who give, and the Bible does teach that. There can be, at times, certain material possessions that come our way, but that is not what the Scripture is teaching. We've got to get away from the motivation that Peter had, and that's what prosperity teaching betrays - Peter asked: 'What can I get out of it? I've given all this up, unlike the rich young ruler, what can I get out of it?'. Do you know what the answer was that the Lord gave him now? Let's get it, here's what you get now Peter, here and now: a hundredfold in the blessings of God's family, and persecutions. Now that'll not get much rating on cable or satellite television!

What do we get out of sacrifice for Christ? A hundredfold in blessings in God's family, and persecution. You see, the Lord Jesus - and we have seen this very clearly from this gospel of the cross - never offered an easy way to anyone. Now, yes, praise God, we celebrate the gospel of grace by faith - which means that to become a Christian it costs you nothing, it's by
faith alone. But to be a Christian, to live a Christian life following Christ in discipleship, it costs everything! We're not thinking of the things that we give up, we're thinking of giving up ourselves!

But the Lord Jesus did not just mention temporal reward, at the end of verse 30 He mentions eternal reward. Now, let me be clear on this, because we know that eternal life, the whole New Testament teaches that eternal life is a gift of God. It is not a reward, it is not something we gain or earn by our effort. So we might ask, 'Well then, why does the Lord Jesus add on here that if we give any of these things up, because we have given up our heart to the Lord, that we will receive as a reward in the world to come eternal life?'. That's what it seems to imply. Well, perhaps the thought is that part of the reward will be a greater capacity to enjoy eternal life in heaven. So it's not getting eternal life, but a greater capacity to enjoy it. The New Testament does indicate in many places that there will be a gradation of rewards in heaven according to how we have lived on earth. But perhaps the meaning might be more accurate when we consider that this term 'in the world to come' is literally 'in the age to come', and that often refers to the millennium, the thousand year reign of Christ, and reward is always central to that thousand year reign of Christ on the earth. So it may be indicating that, according to how we have sacrificed for the Lord here and now, we will enjoy eternal life in millennial blessings, in wonderful millennial blessings. So the reward in itself is not the eternal life as such, but how we enjoy the eternal life.

But in all of this, let us not lose the point of this message: the Lord Jesus is saying, 'For my sake and the gospel's'. We must be sure that our motivation is right! What is our motivation for living to Christ? Peter says: 'We have given all this up, what do we get for it?'. Maybe there is a tone of self-pity - everybody else is living on a pig's back, and the Christian is suffering. Maybe I'm talking to people in lands where you are experiencing terrible persecution for your faith in Christ? The well-known industrialist of some years ago, R. G. LeTourneau, used to say: 'If you give because it pays, it won't pay'. If we sacrifice only to get reward, that reward will never come. Was this the reason why Peter was given verse 31, was it directly to him? 'But many that are first shall be last; and the last first'. Was it a rebuke to Peter in this very area? Peter, who was weighing up his own performance, measuring it to the rich young ruler - was the Lord saying: 'Peter, the ultimate judgements are with God'? Whilst many a man may stand well in the judgement of this world, or even the judgement of the church, or the judgement of himself - but God's evaluation, Peter, is very different!

Yet verse 31: 'Many that are first shall be last; and the last first', has a wonderful principle, and really sums up this whole teaching very well. The Lord, I think, is saying: 'Whatever it seems you have lost out on in this life, you will never lose out ultimately' - that's the message! You can't lose if you've lost your heart to Jesus! You can't lose! You see, the point is: reward is not measured on time, how much time you give to Jesus; reward is not measured on how much money you give to Jesus; how many houses, lands, possessions, positions you give to Jesus; how much success you've had on His behalf; or the sacrifice of things, people, relationships - but reward is measured by the heart devotion you have to Jesus! All these other things follow after that. How is your heart devotion to the Lord Jesus? Does He have your heart? It's all He really wants: 'Sacrifice and offering and thou wouldest not...but a broken and a contrite heart', that's what He wants.

So the Lord Jesus is saying to Peter - as he comes pitifully, self-pityingly, asking: 'Lord, look, behold, we have left all and have followed Thee' - 'Peter, you can't lose if you've lost your heart to Me. Peter, understand this, temporally, here and now, you will receive a hundredfold in the new family of God and persecutions', that means glory, 'and in the age to come the
enjoyment of eternal life with millennial and eternal blessings'. Truly you can't lose if you are a servant of the Suffering Servant on the Calvary Road, where the suffering is before the glory, and the cross before the crown.

Let us pray: Father, we are greatly humbled because so often we are motivated for the wrong reasons in ministry and in Christian experience. Lord, God forgive us, sometimes we think that we are giving up things for You, but we have given up very little - if anything. The bottom line is: if we have given up ourselves entirely to You, and if we're crucified with Christ, we don't own anything and so we have nothing to lose. Yet, whatever we may have lost in terms of this list that the Lord has mentioned, we can never lose if we've lost our heart to the Saviour. Lord, help us to understand this, and help us to have the true Spirit of the Sacrificial Servant who has given all, and therefore can lose nothing. Whatever is gain for us, let us count it loss for Christ's sake. Let us hear the voice of Master:

"For My sake, and the Gospel's, go
And tell redemption's story';
His heralds answer, 'Be it so,
And Thine, Lord, all the glory!'
They preach His birth, His life, His cross,
The love of His atonement,
For Whom they count the world but loss,
His Easter, His enthronement'.

O God, help us to learn the lessons that so often it seems the disciples missed - and we are no different, we have missed them too, Lord. Help us to be like Studd, and Elliot, and Livingstone especially, who said: 'I never made a sacrifice'. I never made a sacrifice! Of this we ought not to talk when we remember the great sacrifice of Your Son, who left Your right hand on high to give Himself for us. We ought not to talk of sacrifice. We ought not to be motivated by reward, but by devotion. Yet, Father, we thank You that there is blessed temporal and eternal reward that we are not worthy of, but we say to You today: 'May the slain Lamb receive the reward of the sacrifice, and all the glory, for He alone is worthy'. Amen.
Well, good morning to you all. It's good to be with you again - I didn't expect it, but here we are! I was going to preach to you on Psalm 19, but I'm not now - I felt the Lord just last evening impressing upon me this portion of Scripture. I'm not sure why, other than the fact that I've been going through Mark's gospel in exposition right from the very beginning of the book - and all of the messages are on the Internet - but this was the next passage. I had been meditating on it just on a walk yesterday afternoon, and I felt the Lord impress upon me that I had to bring it to you this morning.

So I want you to turn with me to Mark chapter 10, Mark chapter 10. Now I've taken as my title 'God's Qualification of Greatness', beginning to read at verse 35 of Mark 10: "And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, come unto him", the Lord Jesus, "saying, Master, we would that thou shouldest do for us whatsoever we shall desire. And he said unto them, What would ye that I should do for you? They said unto him, Grant unto us that we may sit, one on thy right hand, and the other on thy left hand, in thy glory. But Jesus said unto them, Ye know not what ye ask: can ye drink of the cup that I drink of? and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with? And they said unto him, We can. And Jesus said unto them, Ye shall indeed drink of the cup that I drink of; and with the baptism that I am baptized withal shall ye be baptized: But to sit on my right hand and on my left hand is not mine to give; but it shall be given to them for whom it is prepared. And when the ten heard it, they began to be much displeased with James and John. But Jesus called them to him, and saith unto them, Ye know that they which are accounted to rule over the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and their great ones exercise authority upon them. But so shall it not be among you: but whosoever will be great among you, shall be your minister", or your servant, "And whosoever of you will be the chiefest, shall be servant", or slave, "of all. For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto", or to be served, "but to minister", to serve, "and to give his life a ransom for many".

'God's Qualification of Greatness' - now, if you think for a moment of how our world, how our society judges greatness; how they qualify greatness - well, right away it will automatically, I'm sure, come to you that, for instance, in the academic world (and this is maybe too close to the truth for some of you this week), but qualification and success is measured on how many 'A' grades you get, or how many degrees and letters you have after your name. In the sporting world, and some of you might have been interested in the athletics this week, well, trophies and medals - whether they be gold, silver or bronze - they are the ways in which we qualify achievement, greatness and success in the sporting realm. In the business world if your profits in business exceed your competitors, well, I think you'd be justified in saying that you have succeeded, and had achieved at least some measure of greatness. In your career, if you're promoted, or if you're given bonuses, that is a good measure as to your greatness and success. This whole philosophy of greatness, success and achievement and qualification in our world has given rise to many cliches, such as: 'We are in a rat race', or 'We live in a dog eat dog world'. Darwinism, the philosophy that our society largely espouses to these days - celebrated in anniversary this year - it talks of survival of the fittest, that it is the strongest, the cleverest, that will survive and beat the rest.
So we can say that, generally, our world measures success competitively. Now do remember
that: our world measures success competitively. Who or what you can beat is the measure of
your success. Now, sad to say these days, in the church this has become the philosophy of
operation. The success of the church or a preacher or teacher is often measured by the
number of people in the congregation, maybe the number of books that the person has
published, the number of converts that they might have, the fame and the influence that they
have in the ecclesiastical world. This same idea has infiltrated Christendom. Now, listen
carefully to what I'm about to say: none of these, none of these is how God measures
success! None of these is how God qualifies greatness!

Now, I remember years ago studying the Sermon on the Mount and preaching on it, and there
was a quote - I think it was from R. Kent Hughes - and he really summed up what the Lord
Jesus Christ was teaching in these words. He said that the Lord Jesus had reached, as it were,
into the display window of this world's value systems, and He had switched the price tags.
Think about it: He had reached into the display window of this world's values, and He had
switched the price tags around. Now, this is where we as believers need to be very careful.
We are always accused of brainwashing people, but the fact of the matter is that our world
system has brainwashed us into what is really valuable, what true success is, what
true achievement is, what true greatness is and how it can be measured.

We need to understand that none of the ways our world measures greatness is the way that
God measures greatness. So then, what is God's qualification for greatness? Now let me put it
very simply: God's qualification for greatness is - wait for it - death. You weren't expecting
that, were you? God's qualification for greatness is death. The Lord Jesus said in John 12:24,
'Verily, verily', truly, truly, 'I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and
die, it abides alone: but if it die, it brings forth much fruit'. God qualifies greatness in His eyes
by death. Now, how is this qualification measured? What instrument is used to measure this
greatness? Very simply: the instrument that God uses to measure greatness is the cross.
That's the instrument.

So, if you want to know how great you are in God's eyes, how successful you are, how much
you have achieved before God, you need to measure yourself by God's instrument - the cross
- to see how dead you are, to see how crucified you are. Well, how dead are you? How
crucified are you? Now, I don't know how much you know about Mark's gospel, but I'm sure
most of you know that it's the gospel of the Suffering Servant - that is the theme. It is the
gospel of the cross, if ever there was one in the four, it's Mark - He is constantly talking about
the cross, and going to the cross, and He's emphasising how He would be delivered, and how
He would die, and rise again the third day. There are many many predictions that our Lord
Jesus gives of his passion. The one we have read this morning is His third major passion
prophecy. But even after His second one, the one before this in chapter 9, if you were to look
back at it, verse 30: 'They departed thence, and passed through Galilee; and he would not
that any man should know it. For he taught his disciples, and said unto them, The Son of man
is delivered into the hands of men, and they shall kill him; and after that he is killed, he shall
rise the third day'. Now look at this verse, this is very important in understanding the disciples
in Mark's gospel: 'But they understood not that saying, and were afraid to ask him'. They
were afraid to ask Him! 'When he came to Capernaum: and being in the house he asked
them, What was it that ye disputed among yourselves by the way? But they held their peace:
for by the way they had disputed among themselves, who should be the greatest'.

Now we come to chapter 10, and His third major passion prophecy that He would go to the
cross - and what are the disciples doing straight after it? We see again that they didn't get it, they didn't understand what the cross meant for Christ, they didn't understand what the cross meant for them. If you know Mark chapter 8, you'll know that He told them that He didn't just have a cross, but they had a cross, and they were to deny themselves, take up their cross and follow Him. No wonder they were afraid to ask Him what it meant! Because it didn't just mean that He was going to die, it would mean that there would be death for them - spiritual death, and perhaps even physical death. Yet, when the Lord is expanding this mysterious and wonderful truth, what is the frame of mind and heart of these disciples? It appears - it's astounding! - that they are self-obsessed with which of them would be greatest!

Now, we're very good at criticising the disciples - preachers especially! But if we're honest: which of us is any different than James and John here, or any of the disciples who disputed along the way who was the greatest? You see, what we all need to do - what we all need to do if we want to be great in God's eyes, if we want to succeed - we must measure ourselves by the cross. Now the first way, I think, we ought to measure ourselves by the cross in the light of this passage of Scripture is by measuring our prayers by the instrument of the cross. That might seem a strange one to you, but if you look at chapter 10, let us measure their prayers by the cross. Verse 35, essentially, is a prayer - because James and John, remember they were the 'Sons of Thunder', they come and they thunder a request. Thundering prayers are great things, aren't they? But here they come and they thunder a request to the Lord Jesus, effectively a prayer: 'Master, we would that thou shouldest do for us whatsoever we shall desire'.

Now, I don't know what your initial reaction is when you read that prayer. Mine is: 'Well, that's very presumptuous of them, isn't it?'. 'We want You to do', that is effectively what they're saying, 'We want You to do what we want'. We want You to do what we want! We think that's very bold - now hold your horses a minute. You've got to understand that whilst these disciples didn't understand a great deal about the cross, and there were many spiritual truths that they didn't get to grips with until after the resurrection, and some after Pentecost - they had been with the Lord Jesus now for quite a considerable time as the disciples under His teaching. One thing I'm almost certain that they did understand was, as Hebrews teaches us, that we are to come boldly, and come confidently - that's what it means - with much assurance unto the Throne of Grace.

Now, let me remind you of the Lord's teaching in this regard - Matthew 7:7-8, the Sermon on the Mount - He has taught them: 'Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened'. In that statement there is a progression: that first you ask, then you seek, and then you knock - there is an increasing intensity there, until you're nearly knocking the door down. So they understood this, and in Matthew 21 the Lord Jesus would say: 'And all things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive'. They believed that if they came to the Lord Jesus they would get what they asked. In John 14, now listen to this one, He would say: 'And whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If ye shall ask any thing in my name, I will do it'.

Now, I don't know whether that sheds a different light on their apparent presumption: 'We want You to do whatever we want'. Now there are lessons to be learned, because there was obviously a problem here. There was a problem because, as verse 40 shows us, they didn't get what they wanted. They wanted to be at either side of the Lord Jesus in His eternal kingdom, or His earthly kingdom, and the Lord said: 'That's not mine to give at this moment'.
So, what was the problem? Well, understand that the problem was not their boldness - we need boldness in prayer - but the problem was twofold: first of all, the problem was the basis of the request - now remember that - the problem was the basis of the request; and secondly, the greatest problem was their motive for the request.

Let's take each of these. Their basis for the request was a problem because prayer always has to be on the basis of God's will, according to God's will. That's part of what it means when Jesus said: 'Ask anything in my name', when we ask in His name we're asking upon His authority, and His authority is the declaration of His word. So the basis of our prayers must be according to God's will. Now here - now listen carefully - here is how we measure our prayers by the cross of the Lord Jesus: to surrender to the cross means to surrender to what the will of God is. That's very hard! And I'll tell you: do you know when it becomes harder? When you become bold and confident in prayer it can be very hard to bow to the will of God. Now, when we look at verse 40: 'To sit on my right hand and on my left hand is not mine to give; but it shall be given to them for whom it is prepared'. The Lord Jesus is saying: 'You've no right to ask this, you have no basis on which to ask this. I can't give you this'.

Now, don't misunderstand what I'm saying: there are times when we ask for things that we have no right to get, and we get them. Don't think I'm discouraging you from asking for things that you maybe don't have a word from God on, whether a written word or some other word. For instance, to give you an example: we can be motivated by compassion toward one who is ill to pray for healing, and we mightn't have a word from God and assurance that they're going to get healed, but that doesn't stop us praying for their healing! So we do pray for things that we have no right to ask, and we get them. But we need to ask this very important question: if the word of God doesn't motivate us in asking something of God, we must be careful what does motivate us in our asking! Are you with me? If we're not being motivated from God's word for asking, we must be careful. Now, if it's for healing for someone who is ill, and we're motivated by compassion, well, that's wonderful, that's in the will of God I believe - at least in a spiritual light, from your heart, it says a lot about you. But you see, the problem with these guys was, though they had a certain amount of knowledge about what God's will was for them - that they should receive things in prayer - their motivation was all wrong, their motivation was not the glorification of Christ but the glorification of self!

So, beneath the shadow of the cross, their prayers were being exposed as selfish. That frightens me, because beneath the shadow of the cross, often, my prayers are exposed as selfish too. The apostle James talks of this, if you would turn with me to James chapter 4 please. James chapter 4 verse 2, just at the end of the verse he says: 'You have not, because you ask not' - well, that can't be said of these two boys, because they were asking, and they were asking very boldly - but this is more their case, 'You ask, and receive not, because you ask amiss', you ask for the wrong reasons, you ask with the wrong motivation, 'that you may consume it upon your lusts'. You ask selfishly! So, in prayer, here's the lesson - and, for that matter, in general, in the Christian life in totality - motivation is the key! Now I want you to get that - it's taken me a long time in the Christian life to grasp this: motives are the crux of the matter.

Someone put it like this: 'We should often be ashamed of our best actions, were the world to witness the motives which produce them'. Let me repeat that: 'We should often be ashamed of our best actions, were the world to witness the motives which produce them'. But the fact of the matter is: God witnesses the motives that produce our best actions - forget about the world, forget about the church, God knows! The world says that actions speak louder than words, but with God motives speak louder than either - actions and words! God sees the...
heart! So what we do does not matter to God, and what we pray does not matter to God, as much as why we do, and why we pray. Just as water cannot rise higher than its source, prayers can never rise higher than the motives that inspire them. That's staggering now. As A. W. Tozer said, the test by which all our conduct as Christians must finally be judged is motive. Motivation is key.

Now we begin to understand James and John's motivation when we hear the request in verse 37: 'Grant unto us that we may sit, one on thy right hand, and the other on thy left hand, in thy glory'. Their motive was for a position of glory. Now don't be too hard on these fellows, and this is the reason why: Jesus had promised them glory. Now Mark doesn't give us this verse, Matthew gives it in chapter 19 and verse 28, He said: 'Ye which have followed me, in the regeneration', in the earthly kingdom, 'when the Son of man shall sit in the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel'. Now it's not included in Mark because it was written to Gentiles, and they wouldn't have understood what that all meant - but in the Jewish gospel, Matthew, it's there. Incidentally, in Matthew chapter 20, where we have this same account, it's Salome, James and John's mother who comes and requests - she's the mouthpiece for these two boys in asking the Lord Jesus could either of them sit on either side of the Lord Jesus in His kingdom.

Now, stay with me, this is important: that doesn't just show you a mother's heart for wanting the best for two sons, do you know what it tells us? This was a real, heartfelt request. The Lord Jesus, did He not say in Matthew 18: 'If two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven' - and here's three, James, John, and their mother Salome. They're coming to the Lord Jesus Christ, Jesus had promised them this, and it's right after that promise that they come. But more than that in John 17, the Lord Jesus' great prayer to His Father, in John 17 the Lord Jesus prays that the disciples should share in His glory: 'The glory which thou gavest me I have given them; that they may be one, even as we are one'. So Jesus promised them glory, Jesus prayed for glory for them, and we know - through the apostle Paul to the Romans and chapter 8 - that it is God's eternal purpose of redemption that we should share glory: 'Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified'. It is God's eternal purpose that we should have glory.

Now, where's the problem then? Well, the problem is that the disciples failed to understand that any glory we display comes from God. Now listen carefully to that - any glory we display comes from God, and it must go to God if it is to glorify God. I want you to understand this: any glory that we might have, it comes from God, but it must go to God again to glorify Him. When we covet any of His glory, do you know what happens to our motives? Now listen: our motives become Satanic! You might say: 'Now, that's a bit strong' - no, no, it's not. Because Lucifer was the Son of the Morning, Lucifer was the one whom we believe it was his job to reflect the glory of God. Many scholars believe that his actual appearance was reflective, and he would be before the throne of God, maybe hovering over God's presence, reflecting in a wonderful spectrum of rainbow colours the glory of Almighty God. No other creature had that place, and yet one day Lucifer decided: 'I don't want to reflect somebody else's glory, I want my own'. You see, pride is the parent sin. It was the mother of all sins, it was, as C. S. Lewis put it, the sin that made the devil the devil. Can I say something to you: I'm not preaching to you, because I have enough pride to sink the British Navy.

A valet of the German Kaiser said, after his decease: 'I cannot deny that my master was vain, he had to be the central figure in everything. If we went to a christening he wanted to be the
baby, if we went to a wedding he wanted to be the bride, if we went to a funeral he wanted to be the corpse'. He wanted to be the centre of attention, and we've all got that within our hearts! Here's what the Lord Jesus was teaching these disciples: 'You want spiritual greatness? You want true glory? Well, here's how you measure it, you measure it with the cross. It is achieved by death. Pride is spiritually deadly, and nothing of heaven can live in you boys' - Jesus is saying - 'unless pride dies in you'.

Now, pride comes from the flesh. You see, you can't redeem the flesh, you can't sanctify the flesh, the flesh must die. The flesh died with the Lord Jesus at Calvary, and so the only answer is for you to get to the cross, the only answer is to realise that you're dead in Christ, and your sin in your life is dead. The old man is put off, and the new man put on. True glory, true glory is available, but it comes from God - it's God's glory! The glory must go to God - and listen, here is a lesson I found out yesterday, and I always knew it, but it just encapsulated it for me as I studied: a concern for the glory of God is the ultimate motive for Christian living, start and finish. A concern for the glory of God is the ultimate motive for Christian living.

But here's the lesson these disciples did not get, I'm sure of that - I don't think they did - though we at least may understand the source of glory comes from God, and we might understand that the end of glory must go to God - we've got the source, we've got the end, but what we often don't understand is the means, the means by which that glory is achieved. Here's the answer, here's the answer - verse 38: 'Jesus said unto them' - they want the glory? - 'Ye know not what ye ask: can ye drink of the cup that I drink of? and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?'. Now can I just summarise that verse, basically what the Lord Jesus said was this: 'Yes', that's what His answer was. Often that verse is read, and you expect it to be a 'No, no you can't be baptised with my baptism, you can't drink the cup that I'm going to drink' - that is not what it's saying. The Lord is saying: 'Yes, OK, you want glory, well yes, but only if you're willing to drink of the cup that I will drink of, and be baptised with the baptism that I will be baptised'. In other words, He's saying: 'Yes, but only if you're willing to go the way of the cross' - that's it!

Now please don't misunderstand. We're not talking about atonement here. None of us could drink of the cup of God's wrath, or endure the baptism of His indignation for sin that the Lord Jesus would endure at Calvary. Only He could do that - but what I believe the Lord is meaning here is: 'You must follow Me the way of the cross. The cross comes before the crown. The suffering is before the glory, the suffering and then the glory'. This is why the Lord Jesus said at the beginning of verse 38: 'You don't know what you're asking!'. Now, if ever there was a lesson in prayer, it's that one. We need to be careful what we ask God for, you know. We tend in prayer to focus on the end, don't we? The source and the end, what about the means? How's God going to get you there? We all want the glory, we all want the blessing! I heard a man quote not that long ago, 'It is one of the mercies of God that He does not give us revival when we are not ready for it' - there's a thought and a half for you! You don't know what you're asking for! So much of the time in prayer I'm like that, I'm like the woman who goes into the shop and sees a beautiful frock - and, 'Oh, that would look lovely on me, isn't that gorgeous' - and then goes up and looks at the price tag...she still wants it, but she is not prepared to pay the price (or maybe he's not! But she's not prepared to pay the price).

That's the way we are, isn't it? So often in the Christian experience - oh, we want everything that God has for us - well, there's a price! And be careful what you ask for! Now, they say in verse 39, look at it: 'We can', or 'We are able'. 'Can you be baptised with the baptism that I am baptised with? Can you drink of the cup that I will drink of?', and they say, 'We are able'.
Boy, that was bold, wasn't it? We are able! Then the Lord Jesus says to them, now look at this: 'Then you will. Ye shall indeed drink of the cup that I drink of; and with the baptism that I am baptized withal shall ye be baptized'. If we were to look back in chapter 10 and verses 28-31, you would see that the Lord Jesus said: 'Look, you can't lose if you follow me. Don't worry about losing family, don't worry about losing property, don't worry about losing your reputation for the gospel's sake and my sake, because you'll receive an hundredfold' - verse 30 - 'in this time, houses, brethren, sisters' - that's your Christian family - 'with persecutions'. You can't lose, you'll get all this family of God's people, but there will be persecutions. There is a cost!

They said 'We're able!', Jesus said: 'Then you will drink of my cup, and you will be baptised with my baptism'. Now, here's a historical fact: James was the first apostle to be martyred - Acts chapter 12. He did drink of the cup, and he was baptised with the baptism. John, what happened the other one? He spent most of his life in exile, and he was the last apostle to die. Be careful what you pray for. You see, desire might be there, but we need a bit of realism. I'm not trying to frighten you, you shouldn't be scared of God's will, you shouldn't be scared of what the Holy Spirit does - but you should be aware that it's no picnic. You should be aware that we are in a battle, you should be aware that there is a cost. Paul said in Philippians 3: 'That I might know Him' - and what a great aspiration that is, that I would know Christ. We all want to know Him, I hope, and the power of His resurrection - who wouldn't want that? I believe that that power is available: the source is to know Christ, the end is the power of the resurrection - but what is the means? 'And the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death' - it is measured by the cross.

So, generally, James and John were asking for glory; and Jesus says: 'OK boys, you can have glory, but it's via the cross'. Now, specifically, He told them in verse 40: 'What you're asking, specifically, I can't give you, but you can have glory if you follow me'. Now look at verse 41, the reaction of the others, the other disciples. We've only been talking about James and John, verse 41: 'When the ten heard it, they began to be much displeased with James and John'. We ask questions of the Scripture, some people would say: 'Och, they were annoyed with these, their selfishness' - do you think so? I think verse 41 shows the measure of these men, they're being measured by the standard of the cross - and the word there means literally: 'They began to be much displeased', they were indignant! They weren't indignant at the self-centredness of the Sons of Thunder, I suspect that they were annoyed that James and John had beat them to it, to first and second place beside the Lord Jesus - that's more like it! Because all of them, a wee while back, were arguing who would be the greatest.

Now, I've measured myself, my prayers and my position, whatever that is, and my - perhaps - desire for glory, measured it against the cross - and I'll tell you, it doesn't look too good. Would you do that? Could you do that just now? Measure your prayers with the cross of Christ, measure your position or your desire for it, or for glory, with the cross of Christ. Look at verse 42, here's the qualification of greatness in God's eyes: 'Jesus called them to him, and saith unto them, Ye know that they which are accounted to rule over the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and their great ones exercise authority upon them'. Now here's a principle, a principle - lording it, lording it, is a worldly way to operate. Lording it is a worldly way to operate, and Peter addresses overseers in his little epistle, and he tells them not to lord it. That is the way our world operates: when you get authority, when you get any influence, well, you use it, don’t you? You capitalise on it, and you use it to your own ends. You throw your weight around, we say - that is not a principle in the kingdom of God.

But greatness - verse 43: 'So shall it not be among you: but whosoever will be great among
you, shall be your servant', the word is 'diakanos', it means 'one who executes commands of
another'. It was used of a servant of a King, it was used of a waiter at a table, is used in the
New Testament of the Deacon in the church who cares for other's needs. If you want to be
great, be a diakanos - servant. But I think the Lord Jesus is going a wee bit further in verse
44 when He says: 'And whosoever of you will be the chieftest', or first, whoever wants to be
first, 'shall be servant', or slave, 'of all. The word there is not 'diakanos', the word is 'doulos',
it means 'a bond slave' - and this is different, this is not just someone who has a free will and
can go and help somebody, this is someone who has given themselves up to another person's
will. This is someone who is devoted to another, disregarding their own interests - a slave.

But the supreme example of all is not this diakanos or this doulos, but verse 45 - the supreme
example is the Lord Jesus Himself: 'For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto,
but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many'. Now just ponder that for a moment,
please. If ever there was a Man who should have been served, it was the Lord Jesus. Yet we
read of Him: He made Himself of no reputation; He took upon Him the form of a servant, and
was made in the likeness of men. When Paul delivers that great doxology in Philippians 2, he
says: 'Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each
esteem other better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man
also on the things of others. Let this mind be in you', this attitude in you, 'which was also in
Christ Jesus'. He came not to be served, but to serve, and give His life a ransom for many. So
when we compare ourselves, Paul says in 2 Corinthians 10: don't compare yourself with
yourself, don't compare yourself with other people, but compare yourself to Him! When I
compare myself to Him, I'm left to say:

'He humbled Himself to the manger,
And even to Calvary's tree;
But I am so hard and unwilling,
His humble disciple to be'.

Now, I want you to look at Him just now:

'Wouldst thou be great, then lowly serve;
Wouldst thou go up, go down;
But go as low as e'er you will,
The Highest, has gone lower still'.

He's the example! True greatness means surrender to the cross, and surrender to the cross
means - listen carefully: one, recognition of His will in your prayers. That's what the cross
means to our prayer lives: recognition of His will in your prayers. Secondly, it means an
acceptance of the position that He chooses for you. A good axiom is: 'Let Him but choose, and
thou shalt have His best' - let Him but choose, and thou shalt have His best. A recognition of
His will in prayer, an acceptance of His position that He gives you in your life. Thirdly,
whatever reward is ahead, whatever reward is ahead - that might mean immediately down
here, or eternally up there - it should be enough, whatever the reward, it should be enough
that He receives the glory! That's what these disciples missed.

Now, we are to be motivated by rewards, the Bible is clear on that - but the motivation is that
the glory might go to Him, for the glory comes from Him, and the glory must go to Him. True
greatness is when you can swallow that - it's a big one to swallow, because we all want a bite
of the cherry, we all want to take a bit of the limelight, share a bit of the glory. I'm reminded
of the Moravians, those pioneer missionaries, as they were saying farewell to their loved ones
and sailing off to the mission field - knowing right well that they were going to their death - they were heard to cry: 'May the slain Lamb receive the reward of His sacrifice'. May the slain Lamb receive the reward of His sacrifice! Someone has well said: there's nothing God cannot do with us, if we keep our hands off the glory.

The beginning of greatness is to be little, the increase of greatness is to be less, the perfection of greatness is to be nothing. How great are you in God's eyes? How successful? Measure yourself by the cross: your prayers, your motives. Let us pray. What has God been saying to you just now? I don't know. I just felt an impression upon me to bring this to you, and maybe it has been wasted time for some of you - I don't doubt that. Maybe God has really spoken to you and touched your heart, He's certainly touched mine in studying for it - to realise how proud I can be, how self-seeking, even in reward, even in godly seeking of good things. How self can so easily rear the head in prayers and in positions, just because I'm not willing to get on that cross and realise that I'm dead with my Saviour, and He is to live through me - that's the secret. He is to live through you. Can you say this morning with Matheson:

'O Cross that liftest up my head,
I dare not ask to fly from thee;
I lay in dust life's glory dead,
And from the ground there blossoms red
Life that shall endless be'.

Father, You have said that You have placed this treasure in earthen vessels that no flesh should glory in Your sight. Lord, it is only ever our flesh that seeks to glory. Oh God, we pray that we will understand, that I will understand, what it means to be truly crucified with Christ, what it means to have true glory, have true success, have true achievement, have true greatness. It is when I die, and His glory shines from me, through me, and to Thee. Lord, for those whom this is for, may they receive it, and may it make a change, and may they become a diakonos, a doulos. By this spirit, may they follow the example of our Lord - bless His holy name, blessed Jesus - who came not to be served, but to serve, and give His life a ransom for many. Amen.
Now let us read together from Mark's gospel chapter 10, and we're beginning to read at verse 46 - and this is the great miracle of the healing of blind Bartimaeus. Mark chapter 10, beginning to read at verse 46: "Now they came to Jericho. As He", that is, the Lord Jesus, "went out of Jericho with His disciples and a great multitude, blind Bartimaeus, the son of Timaeus, sat by the road begging. And when he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out and say, 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!'. Then many warned him to be quiet; but he cried out all the more, 'Son of David, have mercy on me!'. So Jesus stood still and commanded him to be called. Then they called the blind man, saying to him, 'Be of good cheer. Rise, He is calling you'. And throwing aside his garment, he rose and came to Jesus. So Jesus answered and said to him, 'What do you want Me to do for you?' The blind man said to Him, 'Rabboni, that I may receive my sight'. Then Jesus said to him, 'Go your way; your faith has made you well'. And immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus on the road".

The point at which we have read from Mark's gospel is the place where the Lord Jesus is now nearing the end of the road, literally and metaphorically speaking. He is 15 miles from the city of Jerusalem. He's on His way, of course, to the celebration of the Passover feast - but we know, and of course Mark is the gospel of the cross, that the Lord Jesus is going to die for our sins. He's going to Jerusalem to be crucified. Now there's an apparent discrepancy in the gospel records regarding this account, because Mark and Matthew state that this healing took place as Jesus was leaving Jericho, and Luke's gospel says that the healing of blind Bartimaeus took place as the Lord was entering the city. Now there is, it would seem, a very obvious explanation of this: Mark and Matthew may well be referring to the ancient walled city of Jericho just north of the New Testament city of Jericho, while Luke in his record is probably referring to the New Testament Jericho alone. One thing is certain: beggars were a common occurrence, and a well-known sight on this Jericho Road to Jerusalem.

Another apparent difference between this account and Luke's account and that of Matthew's - in Matthew 20 verse 30 he records that there were two blind beggars sitting by the Jericho Road, and one of them was named Bartimaeus. Now it would appear that both Luke and Mark focus attention on Bartimaeus because he was the more vocal of the two blind beggars. Indeed it is probable, and many scholars believe, that Bartimaeus, 'son of Timaeus' in Aramaic, was known later in the church, perhaps even a stalwart of the early church in Jerusalem.

Now there are many many lessons that we can learn from the healing of blind Bartimaeus - for instance, just to begin with, there are so many gospel and evangelistic lessons that this story teaches us. I remember preaching the gospel from it under the heading 'Humanity's Blind Spokesman' - and he's a great picture of the awful darkness that humankind in their depravity find themselves. His pitiful condition, and how he is blind, and how the sinner is blind - 2 Corinthians 4 and verse 4 tells us that the god of this world, Satan, has blinded the minds of those who believe not. But not only is he blind, he's a beggar, and what a picture of the poverty of humanity - they find themselves so poor because they have been robbed by
the thief, the devil, in their sinfulness.

We see his pitiful condition, we also see his great opportunity. We read that Jesus was passing by, and of course the Lord Jesus has passed by many sinners. Historically He came to this earth, the Father sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world; but how many times has the Saviour, by the influence of His Holy Spirit, come to people and approached them, and even passed by them many many times? Now, as we see Him passing down the Jericho Road, this is a road He had passed down many many times - and yet we know from the record here that this was His last time passing down this road as He went to the cross to die. You know, there's a very very poignant and tragic lesson there for us - particularly for sinners who have never trusted Christ - that everyone hears the gospel for the last time at some time. I don't know whether there's someone listening to this message, and could it be that this is your last time, your last opportunity, the last moment that Jesus will pass by you - never to pass by again? Well, Bartimaeus is a great lesson for you, friend, because Bartimaeus was determined that he would not let Jesus pass by him this last time. He wanted to lay hold on Christ by faith - that's exactly what he did - and it's so dramatic, as he cast aside his cloak that he would have used to collect money as he begged, and he got up - it would seem, without any help from anyone else - and he approached Christ and cried out to Him! Will you do that today? As the old hymn puts it, say:

'Pass me not, O gentle Saviour,
Hear my humble cry;
While on others Thou art calling,
Do not pass me by'.

His pitiful condition speaks of humanity, his great opportunity speaks of humanity, but his earnest prayer speaks to us of our disposition, the way it ought to be, when we consider Christ. He was informed about Jesus, we see this from his cry: 'Jesus, Son of David'. He knew the Messianic promises, and he knew the Lord Jesus had fulfilled them. He was urgent in his earnest prayer, he cried out: 'Have mercy upon me!'. He was determined in his earnest prayer, twice he cried out. In fact, when people tried to silence him he cried out all the more! His prayer was an essential prayer for mercy, he knew that he had no hope in and of himself to be right before God - he couldn't earn God's forgiveness, he needed mercy as a great sinner. It was a personal prayer, he said: 'Have mercy on me', have mercy on me.

I wonder do you understand who Jesus Christ is? I wonder are you urgent in your desire for salvation? I wonder are you determined to get beyond the crowd, and even those who would silence you, that you would get by them and cry out for mercy? You know it's mercy you need, you're not able to earn your salvation, you're not able to be acceptable with God - and do you understand that this is a personal thing of repentance and faith in Jesus Christ? Nobody else can do it for you, and you can't get to God in a crowd or in an organisation, it must be by personal repentance and faith.

We see his pitiful condition, his great opportunity as Jesus passed by, his earnest prayer, and then we see fourthly the Lord's instant response to Bartimaeus. This is a great picture of how, in the gospel, the Lord Jesus is so ready, willing and able to hear our cry of repentant faith. It says that Jesus stopped - isn't this remarkable? In fact, the other gospel record says: 'He had compassion upon him'. The Lord Jesus now is going to do His great life work, which would be His death work, and the great work of all time and indeed eternity, the work that would be the means of this whole universe being redeemed and many souls being saved. Yet He had time to stop at the roadside on the way to the cross for this blind beggar. He wasn't too busy
for old Bartimaeus.

Not only did He stop, He called him. You know, it's wonderful to know that the call goes out in the gospel: 'Whosoever will may come'. Isn't it wonderful that the Lord Jesus listened to blind Bartimaeus. He cried out: 'Son of David, have mercy on me!', and in verse 51 we read that the Lord Jesus answered and said to him, 'What do you want me to do for you?'. Praise God, not only did He stop, and call, and listen to blind Bartimaeus, He healed him! And fifthly we see the miraculous transformation in Bartimaeus' life - and this is the miraculous transformation that can come into any pitiful, blind, beggarly sinner. If they realise the great opportunity that there is for them in the gospel as Jesus passes them by, and they cry out, like Bartimaeus, in an earnest prayer: 'Lord, be merciful to me' - the Lord will instantly respond to them, their repentant faith, and there will be a miraculous transformation just as there was for Bartimaeus!

It says that 'He received his sight' - but more than that, his faith had made him whole and well. Can you imagine what it was like for Bartimaeus? The first sight he saw was the Son of God! I can tell you, that was love at first sight. We know that he fell in love with the Master, because he followed Him. In John 10 verse 27 Jesus said: 'My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me'. I wonder is there someone listening to me today, and you're not a Christian, you're not born again, you've never repented of your sins and believed the gospel - you're unconverted. Do you realise the pitiful condition you're in? But do you realise the great opportunity that there is for you in Christ and in His gospel of free grace? Would you pray out like Bartimaeus, 'Be merciful to me', and know an instant response from Christ, and a miraculous transformation in your life as you receive your spiritual sight?

But I warn you today: don't be making the mistake of thinking, 'Well, I may have another opportunity' - because if Bartimaeus had waited for another opportunity, his opportunity would never have come, because Jesus would never have returned by that road again, because Jesus was going to the cross. In the days before modern harbours, a ship out in the sea had to wait for the flood tide to come in before it could make it to the port. The term for that situation in the Latin language was 'Ob Portu', that is 'a ship standing over against the port', that's what that statement means - waiting for the moment when it could ride the turn of the tide to the harbour. We get our English word 'opportunity' from that Latin term 'Ob Portu', of the ship waiting against the port for the rising tide. The captain and the crew were ready and waiting for that one moment, that opportunity, for they knew if they missed the high tide they would wait for another tide to come, and it might be a long time. But my friend: you may never have another tide, you may never have another crest of the wave of the Spirit's moving, of the Spirit's conviction, of the Spirit's convincing of Christ and His righteousness and His salvation - so I urge you to come to Jesus now, just now.

Do you know, there are very very pertinent lessons in this healing of blind Bartimaeus not just for unconverted people, but for the Christian. I feel that this is the main message as it's found here in Mark's gospel, and many of the thoughts that I'm going to bring out here I haven't found in any other commentaries. At times that ought to worry us, but I feel, having studied this whole book so far for so long now, and understanding, I believe, by the Holy Spirit's instruction, the main themes and messages and spiritual truths that the Holy Spirit through Mark is wanting to bring to us, I believe that there is a real message to the disciples here of the Lord Jesus, and to us as Christians - those trying by the power of the Spirit to follow Him in these days.

Now this was the last miracle in Mark's gospel, on the last journey of Jesus to Jerusalem - but
the significance about it, I believe, is that it involves blindness. We have already noticed in these studies in Mark's gospel the disciples' blindness concerning the message of this Gospel of Mark, that is: the way of the cross that Messiah must go, the suffering Servant that He would be, and the suffering service that is required of those who would be His servants and would be His disciples. Even in this chapter, of course, in verse 32, for the third time, the Lord Jesus predicts His death and resurrection to the disciples. He has already impressed upon them how they ought to serve one another, and that the greatest among them would be the one that serves - verse 44: 'Whoever of you desires to be first shall be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many'.

Now, please note as well that Bartimaeus, in this account, addressed the Lord Jesus as 'the Son of David' - now is it not ironic that the nation of Israel was blind to the presence of their Messiah with them at this moment, and yet here is a blind beggar Jew who had true spiritual sight when the majority of the nation was blind to Christ's identity! Christ was a stumbling block to the nation, but even the disciples - and we have seen this so graphically in previous weeks - even they had a problem with their spiritual sight, that they just could not see the true full identity of Jesus and what He was going, what He needed to do for the salvation of the world.

I think the greatest significance of this story is to the disciples of our Lord, and I want to show you this by a comparison. Our last study, verse 35 of chapter 10 through to verse 45, was showing us the desire of James and John - and another gospel tells us their mother as well - to have the chief place with Christ in His kingdom when He would come to reign. But when you compare James and John and the disciples' attitude with Bartimaeus', it is revolutionary - because I believe they're connected by verse 51, where Jesus says the same question to blind Bartimaeus as He says to James and John in verse 36. In verse 51 He says to Bartimaeus, 'What do you want Me to do for you?'; and in verse 36 He says to James and John, 'What do you want Me to do for you?'.

Now, when we compare James and John and Bartimaeus, we see such a difference, such a contrast in their characters in the face of the same question - Jesus asking 'What do you want Me to do for you?'. If we look in verse 37 we see that James and John's question was a request for selfish glory, in verse 37, 'They said to Him, 'Grant us that we may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on Your left, in Your glory''. Yet Bartimaeus, as we see in verse 47, his request was one for mercy: 'Son of David', he cried out, 'Have mercy on me'. We see that the motivation of James and John was that of pride, but the motivation, obviously, of Bartimaeus was that of brokenness. We see the attitude of James and John was a sense of a worthy right - they believed they had a right to the position beside Christ in His coming kingdom - and yet the attitude of Bartimaeus was the antithesis of that, a sense of his desperate need that only Jesus Christ could meet.

Come with me to verse 48 and see something else. It says that many warned Bartimaeus to be quiet. Luke says that it was the crowd in front of him, probably going to the Passover feast, and they rebuked him: 'Be quiet!'. Now, if you turn to verse 41 you will see that the ten disciples were similarly indignant with James and John for asking this question that they wanted Jesus to do whatever they asked, and they were asking to sit on the right hand and the other on His left in His glory. I think the reason for that was that the ten were probably annoyed because James and John had beat them to that question, because they felt, the ten felt worthy of the position of glory themselves! So the ten were indignant at James and John for the question, and now look in this account of Bartimaeus - the crowd, and we don't know
if the disciples are included among them, the crowd silenced Bartimaeus because they felt Bartimaeus was unworthy. Do you see this?

The disciples were indignant with James and John because they thought themselves worthy, and yet the crowd - whether the disciples were included or not in this Bartimaeus account - they were indignant and angry at Bartimaeus because they felt he was unworthy! Now if you look at verse 13, we see more indignation - but this time the indignation is on the part of the disciples and the Lord Jesus. Verse 13: 'Then they brought little children to Him, that He might touch them; but the disciples rebuked those who brought them' - isn't that interesting? - 'but when Jesus saw it, He was greatly displeased', some translations put it 'indignant', 'and said to them, 'Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of God'". Do you see what Jesus gets annoyed about? What Jesus gets angry, we would even say 'indignant', about? Very interesting, isn't it?

Now I believe with all my heart - if you believe the Bible, you must believe this - that this was a literal healing of blind eyes that were made to see, but the miracles often were parables in action. This is illustrating truth for us, and I believe this healing of Bartimaeus is an illustration of verse 31 of chapter 10: 'But many who are first will be last, and the last first'. If it's an illustration of verse 31, it's also an example of verses 43 through to 45, what the Lord was teaching His own servants about true greatness: 'Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant. And whoever of you desires to be first shall be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many'.

The lesson to the disciples was simply this: in verse 35 they demanded of Jesus, 'Teacher, we want You to do for us whatever we ask', and yet Jesus called Bartimaeus. The disciples were driven by pride, in a sense, of the worthy right that they should sit at either side of the Lord Jesus; and the other disciples were driven by an annoyance that they might have missed the boat as far as that was concerned, because James and John got in first - but no, Bartimaeus cried out, realising how despised and how broken he was, and looking for mercy; and it was Bartimaeus that Jesus called.

Do you know what the great lesson in this is - not only for the disciples but for us all? Jesus is teaching us that brokenness is the fast track to Himself. Do you realise that? Brokenness is the fast track to Jesus. When we break something, whatever it is, crockery or our computers or mobile phones, we dispose of them, we discard them - but God uses broken things, broken men with broken hearts. He uses the earthen vessel, so that the glory of the treasure within will shine forth. The Bible says: 'A broken and a contrite heart, God will not despise'. James says: 'God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble' - that means the Almighty, Omnipotent God of creation, He resists the proud but He can't resist the humble.

There's a great secret in this: if you want to be near to God, brokenness is one of the keys. God is nearest to those of a broken heart. Isaiah 57 verse 15 says: 'For thus says the high and lofty One who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy; I dwell in the high and holy place, with him who has a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite one'. God dwells with the broken.

Now the disciples asked the question 'We want You to do whatever we ask', and Jesus responded, 'What do you want Me to do for you?' - the same question He responded to Bartimaeus' question with, 'What do you want Me to do for you?'. But the difference was: Bartimaeus knew he was blind and needed sight, but the disciples were blind and couldn't see
That's it! I'm convinced that these two accounts are connected in this regard - but additional to that, which reinforces this conviction in my mind, is the fact that this is the second of two healings of blind men recorded in Mark's gospel. Blind Bartimaeus we've just read about, but if you come back with me to Mark chapter 8, we read there in verse 22: 'Then He came to Bethsaida; and they brought a blind man to Him, and begged Him to touch him. So He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the town. And when He had spit on his eyes and put His hands on him, He asked him if he saw anything. And he looked up and said, 'I see men like trees, walking'. Then He put His hands on his eyes again and made him look up. And he was restored and saw everything clearly. Then He sent him away to his house, saying, 'Neither go into the town, nor tell anyone in the town'.

Now when I preached on that about ten lessons ago in this series, I entitled it 'Blindness in Degrees' - and that's exactly what this passage in chapter 8 is all about. The context is, at the beginning of the chapter, the feeding of the 4000, and the disciples still could not understand the lessons that the Lord was teaching them through the feeding of the 4000 and the feeding of the 5000 - that being, His identity as the Bread of Heaven among them, as the great Jehovah who could provide; and His sufficiency, that they don't need to run to shops, even though they're closed at night, for bread, that He can supply whatever they needed. We see that very clearly in chapter 8, in verse 17 Jesus says: "Why do you reason because you have no bread? Do you not yet perceive nor understand? Is your heart still hardened? Having eyes, do you not see? And having ears, do you not hear? And do you not remember? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of fragments did you take up?" They said to Him, 'Twelve'. 'Also, when I broke the seven for the four thousand, how many large baskets full of fragments did you take up?' And they said, 'Seven'. So He said to them, 'How is it you do not understand?'. All these verses in chapter 8 are about blindness, blindness in different degrees.

Now, the failure to perceive these great truths of the identity and sufficiency of Christ was first among the Pharisees - they were the most blind, weren't they? They were willfully blind from the hardness of their hearts. But the second group in this chapter that are blind are the disciples, with an ignorant blindness because of the dullness of their hearts. Now, they were not as blind as the Pharisees, but there still wasn't enough light getting in. In order to illustrate that condition of the disciples, the Lord Jesus performs a partial miracle, and then straight after it a complete healing of this blind man. Now this is a unique miracle in the whole of the life and ministry of the Lord Jesus that we have revealed to us, and there's got to be a reason for that. We've seen very clearly, I believe, in our study in the past, and now again it comes afresh to us, that this partial healing was an illustration again to these disciples: 'You're missing the obvious, you're slow to learn, you're blind to what I'm trying to teach you'. What a lesson there is for all of us in that! So often we miss, we are blind to, we are slow to learn what the Lord would have us see clearly.

So the Lord partially heals this man - not because He ran out of power, but because He had a lesson to teach! In verse 24 we see the man being healed testified: 'I see men like trees, walking'. 'Disciples', Jesus is saying, 'you're dull. Your knowledge of Me, My identity, My sufficiency, it's only partial - it needs to be completed'. You see, the disciples only dimly grasped the true purpose even of His mission, and we've seen this so often in Mark's gospel, this enigma to their minds of how the great Messiah who was promised in the Old Testament should suffer and die - they couldn't take it in! You see in chapter 8 verses 31 to 33, He's again predicting it, and it's Peter who comes and openly rebukes Him! He can't take it, and even less can the rest of the disciples take the teaching that He goes into from talking about His cross, then in verses 34 through to 38 talking about their cross - that there is a cost, and
it's the cross, and the way of the cross is the way to glory, the way of the cross is the way to the crown, and there can't be any gain without the pain of the cross.

We need to learn that, because we who want to know Christ and follow Christ, and truly be His disciples, we need to learn what Paul said: 'That I may know Him', we want that, 'and the power of His resurrection', we want that, but he goes on to say 'that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death'. These disciples just couldn't get it, and that's the context of this blind man's healing in chapter 8 of Mark, and I believe it's a similar context now in Mark chapter 10. The disciples are still blind, even as the Lord Jesus goes to the cross, 15 miles away from Jerusalem, and this is the last miracle He is to perform, and it's one of blindness. Isn't it very interesting that it's not until after the resurrection that the disciples' eyes are opened about the whole plan of the cross and resurrection. He urges the two on the Road to Emmaus, Luke 24: 'O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?'.

But Bartimaeus, though he was literally blind, had inner eyes to see - and he calls Jesus: 'Rabboni', that is a beautiful word. 'Rabboni' means 'Master', 'My Master'. 'Rabboni, that I might receive my sight' - now, the only other person in the Gospels who used the name 'Rabboni' for Jesus was Mary Magdalene who once possessed seven demons. You understand the preciousness that Jesus held in her heart for her great deliverance and emancipation, and here we have this blind man - and yes, he twice called the Lord 'Son of David', a national messianic title, he understood who He was, the theology of it all - but see the tenderness where he says 'Rabboni', that was an expression of faith. Faith! Rabboni!

We know it was faith because the Lord Jesus said to him in verse 52: 'Go your way; your faith has made you well' - your faith, literally, has saved you - your faith has saved you! Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus on the road. You see, Bartimaeus had faith, and he must have heard about the Lord Jesus in His healing miracles, perhaps miracles of giving blind eyes sight - and Romans 10:17 teaches us that faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God, 'The just shall live by his faith'. We begin in the Christian life by faith, but we continue by faith - to believe is to see, and to believe is to see the unseen truths of the kingdom of God. Without faith it is impossible to please God, and faith is the evidence, the substance of things not seen, things hoped for. Here was a blind begging Jew who could see farther even than the disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Someone once bluntly asked blind and deaf Helen Keller: 'Isn't it terrible to be blind?', to which she responded, 'Better to be blind and see with your heart, than to have two good eyes and see nothing'. Better to be blind and see with your heart, than to have two good eyes and see nothing. She said on another occasion: 'The only thing worse than being blind is having sight but no vision'. Through faith in Christ, having heard the word of God and the testimony of Jesus, this blind beggar received his sight and was saved. The first sight he saw was Jesus, and I believe he never took his eyes off Him because we read: 'He followed Jesus'. Immediately, having received his sight, he followed Jesus - do you know what that means? He followed Him into Jerusalem, he followed Him to the cross, he witnessed the triumphal entry that we will look at in our next study on Palm Sunday - but then he went all the way to Calvary and he witnessed the horror of the crucifixion. I'm sure that he witnessed the message of the resurrection, and maybe even the resurrected Lord Himself. Talk about getting your eyes opened!

I hope your eyes are open to the gospel lessons in this portion of Scripture. If you're a sinner, the pitiful, blind and beggarly condition that you have - but, oh, that your eyes would be
opened to the great opportunity as Jesus has come to us in the gospel, as He has passed by our way; and by His Spirit and through His word now as He's passing by you, that you will not miss Him, but you will cry out earnestly, like blind Bartimaeus, knowing who Jesus is, determined to cry out no matter who shouts against you and rebukes you, crying for mercy. Personally saying: 'Lord, be merciful to me' - that your eyes would be opened to see that the Lord will instantly respond to your repentance and faith. He will stop, He will call you, He will hear you, and He will heal you - and you will miraculously be transformed and receive your sight!

But believers, we need to have true spiritual vision, and we need to see that brokenness is the fast track to Jesus. We need to beware that our requests that we make of God are not motivated by selfish glory like James and John's were, but by mercy, by the need of mercy that Bartimaeus felt. We need to make sure that our motive is not pride, but brokenness, realising our need; that our attitude is not a sense of worthy right - though we have many rights, they are all in Christ, not in our own worthiness - and that we express constantly to God a sense of our desperate need, that brokenness is the fast track to Jesus. If we want to know true abiding with God and communion with God, we will have to know true brokenness.

So often we miss, are blind to, and slow to learn what the Lord would have us see clearly. I wonder what the Lord has been trying to get you to see lately? I know what He's been trying to get me to see, and I'm slow to learn, I'm blind to see clearly. O, may we come to the Lord afresh just now, just like Bartimaeus, and with a tenderness that is expressed in that term 'Rabboni', come to Him in faith, that our faith may make us whole, we may see as we ought to see and truly follow Christ, hearing His voice. If we follow Him, like Bartimaeus, we will enter into such sweet communion, and indeed such revelations of Christ - His cross, His resurrection, His triumph, His glory and His power that can truly be described as an eye-opener. May God bless His word to our hearts.

Let us pray: Rabboni, my Master, open my eyes to see myself as You see me. Open my eyes to see Yourself as You are, and the cross as it was and as it is in my life, and is to be daily in my life. Lord, help us all to know what it is to have true brokenness before You, that Your mighty life would inflow us and outflow to others to the glory of God in sacrificial service through the power of the cross. For we ask these things because, Rabboni, You have died and risen again, and are our Saviour and our Lord. Amen.

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Transcribed by Andrew Watkins, Preach The Word – December 2009
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Good morning, it's good to be with you again to Ards Evangelical to minister God's word. I've really been looking forward to the next four weeks, including today, together as we look at God's word. I do hope sincerely that you're not here to hear me, because you'll be sadly disappointed. I hope that you're here to hear from God, and hopefully through the exposition of God's word you will hear His voice - that's what I've been praying. I've been seeking God over what to bring to you these four weeks, and I feel led to start by turning to Mark's gospel chapter 11. What we're going to do in these four weeks, morning and evening, is to go through the last week of the life of our Lord Jesus. So that's what we're going to do, now I can't make any promises how far we're going to get - I hope we might get through the whole week. We've got eight sessions, I think I'm right in saying, and the Gospel will be throughout these studies - so there'll not be one particular message a Gospel message as such, but the Gospel will be here and there - how could it not be when we're looking at the last week of our Lord's life as He goes towards Calvary, the cross?

So we're turning to chapter 11 of Mark, and this morning I want us to consider verses 1 to 26 - but we're only going to read just now verses 1 to 10: "Now when they drew near Jerusalem, to Bethphage and Bethany, at the Mount of Olives, He", that is, the Lord Jesus, "sent two of His disciples; and He said to them, 'Go into the village opposite you; and as soon as you have entered it you will find a colt tied, on which no one has sat. Loose it and bring it. And if anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' say, 'The Lord has need of it,' and immediately he will send it here'. So they went their way, and found the colt tied by the door outside on the street, and they loosed it. But some of those who stood there said to them, 'What are you doing, loosing the colt?'. And they spoke to them just as Jesus had commanded. So they let them go. Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their clothes on it, and He sat on it. And many spread their clothes on the road, and others cut down leafy branches from the trees and spread them on the road. Then those who went before and those who followed cried out, saying: 'Hosanna! 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD! Blessed is the kingdom of our father David That comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!'".

Let us pray together, and I would ask you please that you pray with me now, do pray with me now that the Lord may speak to you. Are you looking for the Lord to speak to you? You come here, perhaps, with needs, with burdens, with heartaches, with problems, besetting sins, shortcomings. You need the Lord to speak to you. Maybe you have come and your head is cluttered with all sorts of stuff, maybe even how you failed Him yesterday, or last evening, or this morning. All sorts of things can happen, you can have a row with the husband or the wife on the way out to church, and I know what it's like trying to get a clatter of children out as well! But let's just calm ourselves now, conscious that we are in the presence of God, the One whom we've been praising. Let's now supplicate Him, ask Him, to speak to us, and to manifest Himself in a very real way in our meeting this morning.
Father, Abba Father, Holy Father, we come in the name of Your Holy Child Jesus, and we ask now for Your help as we come to this portion of Scripture, and indeed this very sacred holy week, the last week of our Lord's life. Lord, we pray that this will not just be a Bible study, we pray that it will not just be a session of teaching where we will learn more than we knew before - but we ask in His name that this will be a time, and indeed this series of meetings will be an experience, of meeting the risen, glorified Lord; and that through the Holy Spirit He will come to us. Lord Jesus, that is Your promise to Your people: 'I will not leave you orphans, I will come to you'. So Lord, we pray that as we look at the last week of Your blessed life, that we would not look at this as history, but we would encounter You as real, and that You may minister the truths of those last days of Your life into our lives that we may be changed. For this we know we need the Holy Spirit, and so we ask now for the breath of Your Spirit to be upon us, and to minister not just to us but in us - for the glory of Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.

Now we all know that a man or a woman's last words are very important. There are whole books on that, I have one in my library about the last words of famous men and women. As the last words of anyone are important, so are the final acts, the things that they did before they died. Now of how much more importance must be the last words and the final acts of the Son of Man and the Son of God? Now that's Mark's emphasis from chapter 11 right to chapter 16. If you're familiar with Mark's gospel, you will know that Mark's gospel is the gospel of the Suffering Servant, and it's the gospel of the cross - now that's not to say that the other gospels don't mention the cross, or emphasise it, but Mark in particular gives what we would have to say is a disproportionate amount of his gospel to the last week in the life of our Lord Jesus as He goes to Calvary. So we see clearly that this is his emphasis.

Now the words and the actions of our Lord Jesus Christ - and this is very important - all His last words and final acts were with the perfect knowledge of what was going to happen during this week. That's what makes this week, the last week of His life, different than the last words or final acts of any other human being that has ever lived - because He knew what was going to happen. Indeed, not only had He premeditated the events, but these events were prophesied in the Old Testament, and more than that: they were preordained by God, they had to happen, and they had to happen in the exact manner and order that they did happen as we will see these weeks. That's profound, because I'm left in awe of that: what a Servant! This gospel is about the Servant of the Lord, the One who has come - chapter 10 tells us that He did not come to be served, but to serve, and give His life a ransom for many. He has come from heaven, to the babe in the manger, to the man ministering among men, and He's going to the cross - and with utter, complete, absorbing determination, He makes his way to the fulfilment of the determination of God's will.

Here we have the beginning of that last week. The occasion is the Passover season, we call this 'The Triumphal Entry', and it happened at the Passover season. If you don't know anything about that, the Passover season was a religious festival, a feast for the Jews. Thousands of devout Jews from all over the world would come to the holy city of Jerusalem to celebrate Passover, which was a commemoration of how God, through Moses, delivered the children of Israel from Egyptian bondage through the Red Sea and all that. Jerusalem, every Passover, would be filled with religious zeal and nationalistic fervour as Jews from all over the world would come on this pilgrimage. Now this feast was an absolute nightmare, a headache, for the Roman occupying power, because you can imagine that they're trying to keep a grip on anyone who would rise up in insurrection, and all of a sudden a whole load of Jews come from all over the world to celebrate their identity nationally and religiously! There was a great fear among the Romans that this would spill over into some kind of insurrection - these Jews who were always looking for their Messiah and their Deliverer to come, that they would find
somebody and put their hopes in him, and before you know it they would have a lot of trouble on their hands.

So we're at Passover, incidentally the day is Sunday, the first day of the week. In verse 1 we read that Jesus has 'drew near Jerusalem, to Bethphage and Bethany', and we believe that on His journey He would pass through Bethany and then Bethphage. At Bethphage He would be 2 miles from Jerusalem, 2600 feet above sea level - so in other words, the Lord Jesus would be at Bethphage looking down with a breathtaking view of the holy city. He is contemplating now His entrance into that place in fulfilment of God's will. So we read that He sends two disciples into Jerusalem to get a colt, for He's about to ride into Jerusalem as their promised King, as their Messiah, as the Christ.

Now before we study this, the Triumphal Entry, I want you to note - and I think it is very instructive, personally, for you - some interesting principles, I think, here, and lessons from how the Lord directs His people. They are given in His instruction to these two disciples to go and get the colt. If you look at verse 2, look at it: 'He said to them, 'Go into the village opposite you; and as soon as you have entered it you will find a colt tied, on which no one has sat. Loose it and bring it''. Now the Lord Jesus is speaking emphatically here: 'This is what's going to happen: go into the village opposite you, and you will enter and you will find a colt, loose it and bring it to me'. He's speaking with absolute knowledge, omniscience you might say, of this event - He knows what is going to happen. Now I know there's great mystery in God becoming flesh, and what things the Lord Jesus willingly laid aside in use, though He was God in flesh. There is a whole debate there, and a whole discussion we're not going to have this morning - but all I know is this: this Christ is not the Christ of modernism, it is not the Christ of liberalism, this is the Christ of history and the Christ of heaven - the Christ who has the very powers of God at His disposal to know things. Now maybe you're here this morning and you are seeking wisdom from God, you ought to be if you're a Christian. Maybe you're seeking a way ahead from God, maybe you have a dilemma or a decision to make and you don't know how to go about it. Now listen carefully to what I'm saying, here's a lesson: you can trust the knowledge of your Lord Jesus Christ. He knows the way you ought to go. He knows the way to take, and you can trust Him. Now can I ask you: do you trust Him? Do you go to Him when you need counsel, and when you need knowledge?

I've been meditating over Christmas on that wonderful verse in Isaiah: He's Wonderful, Counsellor. Do you need counsel? Do you need guidance? Do you need direction? Well, He has perfect knowledge of your situation, He knows it inside out and He can give you what you need if you will come to Him. So often we don't, we go to all sorts of counsellors, we lift the phone to ring family, we maybe go to godly men or women that we esteem - and there's nothing wrong with getting help - but sometimes those are our first bases, and not God, not Jesus.

Here's something else: we must have faith in His promise. Verse 3, Jesus says: 'If anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' say, 'The Lord has need of it,' and immediately he will send it here'. Now this seems incredible to me, because sometimes we read these stories and we are so familiar with them that we don't enter into the reality of what this must have been like. You know, to put it into modern day parlance, over in Loughries there, the Lord tells you: 'Go over to number 24, knock the door, and tell them that the Lord has told you that He needs your BMW'. Imagine if the Lord told you to do that! And the Lord says: 'Now, immediately he's going to hand over the keys of the BMW' - they'd probably be no use in the ice and snow anyway, sorry if you have a BMW! Maybe they would give it over gladly, I don't know! But do you understand what I'm saying? These people would have thought: 'These are
thieves, I mean, who thought up that line, 'The Lord told me that He needs your colt'? These are thieves!'. But you see, the two disciples had to trust the promise - do you understand? They had to believe that the Lord knew everything, and it was from that faith that He had complete knowledge of the situation that they could place their trust in the promise.

Now can I say something to you: if you really want to go on with God, and go deeper in the things of the Christian life, sometimes the Lord will ask you to do things that are very strange. Often those strange things that He asks you to do will be misunderstood by others, and they might even think that you're doing something wrong - but all that shouldn't matter, and this is where I try to get to in the things I do for God, even though others may not just agree with it, if it is God I must obey Him. I have only one to please, I have only one to obey, and that is God. It's alright saying those things, but if you were in their situation what would you do? We have to believe God's promise: faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God - and so Christ spoke with all knowledge, and they exercised their faith in the promise... but something else was needed, and this is what's missing in what I've been saying already. It takes courage! It does, doesn't it? James says that faith without works is dead, in other words: faith needs to be animated. You've got to step out on faith, if it's a sure foundation it's worth acting on. They had to have the courage and the boldness to go down and to actually untie this colt without asking for it, without asking for it - is that not theft? Well, we'll not go into that, I don't think it's theft, they let them take it - but it could have been construed as that, couldn't it? But they had boldness to do it and to believe that if anybody said anything to them about it, that if they said 'The Lord has need of it', that they would get it. Can I add something to that? If you look at verse 6: 'They spoke to them just as Jesus had commanded' - they did not deviate from the message that Jesus gave them. They didn't engage in Chinese whispers and add their own little spin on it, and try to couch the blow for these people losing their colt. No, they just said it like the Lord told them, and because they spoke the word of God and stood courageously on the foundation of the word of God, what Jesus said would happen did happen.

Can I say something to you? Often when we are obeying God, the devil will fill our heads with all sorts of reasons why we ought not to obey Him, and all sorts of doubts concerning God's word. We suppose this is going to happen, and we assume the other is going to happen, and very rarely does any of it ever happen! Here's why: because when we stand upon God's word, He always honours His word. He has set His word, the Bible says, above His name - in other words, He has staked His reputation on His word. Do you trust it?

When I was studying this, my mind immediately went to Paul the apostle in the shipwreck in Acts 27. If you want to turn to it you can - if you want to turn to it you can! I can hear the pages you know! - Acts 27, I want you to see this, these are not fairy stories, this is reality. Imagine you're in a shipwreck, imagine you're in a shipwreck or a plane is about to go down. He's on his way to Rome and there is a great storm, and everybody is in fear of their lives and start throwing cargo off the side of the boat to lighten the load. Paul says in verse 22 of Acts 27: 'And now I urge you to take heart, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship'. So the ship is going to go down, but everybody is going to survive. Here's the basis on which Paul could say this to these mariners: 'For there stood by me this night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve, saying, 'Do not be afraid'. Take heart, men, for I believe God that it will be just as it was told me'. Now that's faith! That's the faith that we're talking about: God has told me, I believe it - and so he was willing to courageously say to these men, who knew more about boats probably than he did, 'Don't worry, we're all going to be saved, but the boat'. I mean, what would you think if somebody said: 'Now don't worry, the plane is going down and it's going to be wrecked, but we're all going to survive'? 'The
boat is going to sink but we're all going to be alright', this is before there were lifeboats, lifejackets! But God told him, and he believed - he said: 'I believe God that it will be even as He has told me'

Now if you're wanting guidance from God - and I know I'm digressing a wee bit this morning, we'll get back into the text in two seconds - but if you want guidance from God, we all want guidance, we treat God like a Sat Nav: 'What turn? Is it right at the lights or left? Straight through the roundabout this decision?'. If you want guidance from God you have got to believe Him, have faith in God, and we'll see He says that later on. You can see it in this ass, this donkey, this colt. It's amazing, the Lord Jesus jumps on it, it has never been ridden before, it's an unbroken beast, but it surrenders to the will of its Creator. That's the key of guidance: the surrendered will. Maybe this beast is more surrendered to God's will than you are, imagine that! An untamed, untrained animal! You see there are many people say: 'This is the key, this is the secret, this is the answer to the Christian life and how to be victorious'. There are many facets to how to really live a successful, victorious Christian experience - but I'll tell you: none of them bypass the will. One of the great secrets of living the Christian life is the surrender of the will.

So that leads us to verse 8, this great commotion, what was it? Well, the Lord Jesus is on a donkey. We find this astounding, but the donkey was the equivalent of a Daimler in these Old and New Testament days - it was a royal vehicle, a royal animal. There is a sign here that gives us the information that this is a royal coronation that we're reading about. If you go into the Old Testament you find that Solomon was on David's donkey when he was crowned King. Now this is the only time that the Lord Jesus permitted a public demonstration of His honour, that's astounding. He healed people and He said: 'Shh, Shh, don't tell anybody. Away you go, do whatever offerings you have to with the priest, but don't tell anybody' - and then everybody went away and blabbed everything. But that's the way the Lord worked, He didn't work for crowds, the common people came and heard Him gladly because He was healing and He was teaching and doing wonderful things - but He didn't seek fame. But this is a time where He does go out of His way, and He allows a public demonstration of His honour. The reason why is to fulfil prophecy, Zechariah 9 and verse 9, over 500 years before this event - Zechariah the prophet said: 'Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your King is coming to you; He is just and having salvation, Lowly and riding on a donkey, A colt, the foal of a donkey'. What He was wanting to do was, He was wanting not only to fulfil prophecy but to jog the Jew's memory of that prophecy, for them to realise, the penny to drop: 'This is our King! This is our Messiah that we have waited for!'.

For a moment, this moment, He was acknowledged as their King. He was affirming His Kingship before them as the Son of David. They cried, verse 9, look at it: 'Hosanna!', that simply means 'Save, we pray' - they were acknowledging Him as some kind of Saviour and Deliverer. 'Save, we pray!', and then they said in verse 9, the second part, 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!' - quoting Psalm 118, which is a reference, prophetically, to the promised Messiah. So they're now recognising Him as the promised Christ! Now, all this sounds wonderful, doesn't it? As you read the other gospels you get such a clear picture of the wonderful, vibrant, explosive praise - and I'm not saying it wasn't genuine - these people were rejoicing and welcoming Jesus as the Servant King.

But there's a problem, and the problem is found on Monday - for as we move to verse 12, we see in verse 11 that after the Triumphant Entry, Jesus goes to the temple and looks around, and then goes to Bethany again with the twelve. Then in verse 12 we read this: 'Now the next day, when they had come out from Bethany, He was hungry. And seeing from afar a fig tree
having leaves, He went to see if perhaps He would find something on it. When He came to it, He found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. In response Jesus said to it, 'Let no one eat fruit from you ever again'. And His disciples heard it'. So, on Monday, Jesus comes out of Bethany and curses the fig tree - now, what's all that about? Sometimes we read these portions - and I'm actually welcoming the opportunity to do big chunks of God's word, especially these gospels week after week, because you get a real train of thought of how the writer is linking all these things. He is linking the cursing of the fig tree with the Triumphal Entry. Here's how: the fig tree in Scripture is a figure of Israel, the nation, the people before God. Just as Jesus came to this fig tree and looked for figs, fruit, Jesus had come to His own people, Israel, and looked for fruit from them and found none.

Now, I used to wonder about this story, because it says that Jesus came when it was out of season and was looking for figs. I thought: 'Why would He curse the tree when it was out of season?', but what it's speaking of is the regular bumper crop of figs. You see figs would come on a fig tree at other times in the year, and there would usually be leaves when that happened. But if there was no early fruit - and it's early here, it's not the bumper crop, it's not the season yet - if there was no early fruit on the fig tree, that was a sign that there would be no bumper crop. Jesus saw leaves on this tree, but there was no fruit - it says, look at this, it's a chilling statement: 'He found nothing but leaves'. In other words, this tree was taking up space, but it was fruitless.

Now please note: I believe that this incident is our Lord's interpretation of the Triumphal Entry. I believe He's saying: 'There's a big fuss and hullabaloo about me coming in, and it's to fulfil prophecy, and there are people there that are genuine in their praise, and they're welcoming me - but it's not going to be very long until 'Hosannas' are replaced with 'Crucify'". I think, maybe, verses 9 and 10 where they cry: 'Hosanna! 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD!' - many of them, patriotic Jews among them who were fed up with the iron heel of Rome upon them, they were crying out: 'Lord, save us! Hosanna! From the Romans! Set up Your earthly kingdom now in order to defeat our enemies'. I just wonder, I can't be dogmatic on this, but I wonder did our Lord ride on that colt of an ass with a heavy heart? You see, these people wanted a Christ of their own making. They wanted a warrior deliverer to put the Romans out, to set up an earthly kingdom, to make them all well and wealthy. You know, I have to say to you that I think that this is an indictment and an ailment of the 21st-century church in the West. We want a Christ of our own making. We come to our churches, and we do our 'Christian things', and we mould Christ according to our expectations, and according to our desires and our lifestyles - rather than surrendering to the way He really is. We have made a God in our own image, a God and a Christ that suits us, rather than surrendering to the way He really is.

We read in verse 14 He cursed this fig tree - this was remarkable. As far as I can see, apart from when the Lord Jesus sent the demons into the pigs and they ran headlong into the sea, this is the only time the Lord Jesus curses something; or, indeed, rather than blesses, He destroys rather than restoring. Could He have healed the tree? Of course He could have! So why did He not heal it? Because this is a picture of Israel, and soon - if you know the order of these events, and this doesn't come in in Mark, but it comes in in the other gospels - soon He's going to look over the whole city of Jerusalem again, and He's going to weep buckets. He going to say: 'Oh, you that killed the prophets and stoned those who God sent unto you, often I would have gathered you as a hen gathers her chicks, but ye would not!'. He had to curse the fig tree because they would not - they would not what? They would not receive Him, they would not accept Him.
Are you here this morning and you haven't received and accepted Christ as your Saviour and Lord? You haven't recognised Him, you haven't bowed to Him, you haven't surrendered to Him - do you know what's going to happen? You're going to be cursed! You're going to be cursed, and you're going to send yourself to judgement, because you would not!

Do you see what this fig tree is all about? John the Baptist, when he came, he said: 'The axe is laid to the root of the tree', in other words he was going to start cutting this fig tree down - and now Jesus is coming, and He's saying to them with tears in his eyes: 'Your house is left unto you desolate, for you knew not the day of your visitation'. In A.D. 70 the Romans would come in and destroy the temple, and destroy all Jerusalem, and scatter the Jews right across the world. Israel were to be a vehicle for the glory of God, they were to bear fruit for God - you look in the Old Testament, that's the reason why God chose them: to declare God to the nations. Yet Jesus comes unto His own, and He finds the fig tree empty! They are taking up space, but they're fruitless!

Now let me challenge you: there's an awful lot of churches in Ulster just like that fig tree. There's an awful lot of so-called 'professing Christians' just like that fig tree. They are taking up space, they are professing something, but they are empty! They are praising God - we've all been doing it this morning - and yet their praise is shallow, there is no fruit in their life. Could I ask you this morning: is there fruit in your life? What's fruit? Well, if you go to Galatians 5 - we don't have time to look at it, but you look at it when you go home - you've got love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, meekness; the fruit of the Spirit. That can only happen when you've been filled with the Holy Spirit, and most Christians have never been filled with the Holy Spirit because they've never surrendered their will, and never asked God to fill them with the Holy Spirit. If you're an unfilled Christian, you can't bear the fruit for God that you need to. But there's not just the fruit of Christ-like character, which is the most important thing, the most important fruit that people eat - and fruit is for eating by the way, people will feed on you if you're bearing that type of fruit, and you will help them - but there is the fruit of also bringing others to Jesus, and doing all sorts of things for the Lord Jesus Christ and for His glory.

Well, we must move on, for Jesus moves from that fig tree scene to the cleansing of the temple in verse 15. Is it any wonder He cleansed the temple when you see what's going on? Verse 15: 'So they came to Jerusalem. Then Jesus went into the temple and began to drive out those who bought and sold in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. And He would not allow anyone to carry wares through the temple. Then He taught, saying to them, 'Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it a 'den of thieves'. Now, this is the second time the Lord Jesus cleansed the temple. The first time was at the beginning of His ministry, you can read about that in John chapter 2. This is now the second time, and it's almost like at the start and finish He's marking His ministry with the fact that Israel has failed, Israel has been fruitless - outwardly fruitless, but now He's gone into the temple to say that they're also inwardly corrupt. This is not just a problem outside, it's a problem inside.

Now, what can we gather from this action of the Lord Jesus? Very simply - and I'm not going into too much depth in these studies. I can't because time won't permit us, but maybe the surface level meaning is what we need. Sometimes we delve into the minutiae and miss the whole weight of what God is saying: this tells us that Christ hates empty religion! He hates it! He hates hypocrisy! Do you know where hypocrisy comes from? The word comes from the Greek word for 'mask'. He hates people who wear masks and try to pretend to be what
they're not deep down. He hates profession without possession! He hates us talking about things that we have no knowledge of, talking in ways that we have no experience of.

Now imagine, and I know it wouldn't happen here, but imagine some boy comes in here and starts turning over the chairs, and the coffee table is out and he kicks it over. He shouts at you all - some of you, if you were able to hold yourselves back, would be ringing 999 immediately, wouldn't you? This is strange, isn't it? I'm sure there were people saying: 'What kind of a way is this to behave in the house of God?'. This is a special place, the temple - it's more special than here, because we believe we are the temple of God, it's not a place - but they, in the Old Covenant, believed the temple was the place where God dwelt. Right back to the Tabernacle, we find that 'Tabernacle' simply means 'the dwellingplace of the Shekinah glory of God'. The Shekinah glory was how God manifest Himself in light, and fire, and cloud. He did that visibly in the Tabernacle, and then they move from a transitory Tabernacle tent to a permanent, static Temple in Jerusalem. At the Solomon dedication of the Temple the glory of Shekinah came down, and God filled the house so that everybody couldn't minister any longer. So this is what the Jews understood: 'This is the place where God's presence and glory dwells, and He's coming, this upstart is coming in here and kicking tables over and causing a commotion!'.

Ah, but you have to know all Jewish history. You have to know that in Ezekiel the Shekinah glory of God left the temple because of Israel's idolatry, and it never came back. Haggai the prophet promised that the glory of the latter house would be greater than that of the former, that meant that the new temple that would come after Solomon's Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians, the new temple would be more glorious - but it wasn't. It paled into insignificance. When the old people who remembered Solomon's Temple looked at it being built, they wept! But it wasn't talking about the structure, do you know what it was talking about? The Christ of God! God's glory would come into this temple in flesh at this very moment - at His birth, of course, He was brought into the temple for dedication, but now He's coming in but He's coming in in judgement - and when He goes out, and this is what I want you to mark, when He goes out the glory goes out. There is no glory in this temple but Jesus, and when He exits, it exits. Are you with me?

So all these, you know, religious prudes who say: 'What kind of a way is this to behave in the house of God?', the problem was God wasn't in it. Was this not sacrilege? Well, there was nothing of God in it. Can I say something to you: we should not be precious, religiously precious, about things that God isn't in. Do you understand? You can apply that to doctrines which are only the teachings and commandments of men. We can apply it to tradition. We can apply it to a whole lot of things, but God wasn't in it - and that's why Jesus behaved this way. Can I tell you something: you might say, 'Ach, well, you can't apply that to the church' - can I not? Turn with me to Revelation chapter 3 - this is the church at Laodicea, and if you were to ask me what spirit the church has in the West, this is the spirit that I would say they have, the spirit of Laodicea. 'So then', verse 16, 'because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth. Because you say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing'; and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked'. Point proven! The Laodicean spirit in the church makes the Lord sick. If you're lukewarm, now the Lord loves you, but you make Him sick, you make Him nauseous if you're neither hot nor cold - in fact, He'd rather have you cold than lukewarm, that's a staggering statement! He'd rather have you for or against Him than sitting on the fence the way most Christians do, just ticking over.

Do you know what the problem in the temple was? Well, let me put it like this: Duncan
Campbell was used in revival in the Hebrides in Scotland in the 1940s and into the 50s. Later on in his life, a Faith Mission man, he made this statement: 'Our problem is we have got everything but God'. We've got everything but God! We've got the hymns, and the programs, and the preachers, and the ideas, and the schedules, and the models, and the systems, and the doctrines - but if God is not in it, it's worthless! Is that not what this teaches? 'My house shall be a house of prayer'. Here's one to ask - this is getting hard now - if the Lord came into our places of worship, what would He change? What would He change? Don't think I'm talking about externals, He's not into externals, He's into internals. Have our churches become places of shallow praise - we know the songs because we've listened to them on CD all week - or are we really exalting the Lord? Are we prepared to praise? Were you prepared to come here this morning to praise, to worship, were you prepared? Did you bring something from your heart to God?

You see, the Jewish problem was: they were professing without possession; they were giving lip service, prayers, without the heart - but you know, it gets worse. Verse 17, they were actually making the temple a place for thieves to hide in, a den of thieves! Do you know what that means? The temple was being used to cover up sin! The church can be used to cover up sin! I read a book recently about child abuse in the evangelical church. Oh, we're all hammering the Roman Catholic Church about that, but you know it's going on everywhere. They might have a particular problem, but I'm telling you it's not only to the Roman Catholic Church that it's a problem! This church, now this is going back into a couple of decades ago, this evangelical church - with good motivation, they thought - covered it up! They covered it up, but it came out - even onto the front of the local papers it came out. Now listen: you can't cover up sin! Can I say a word, if you'll permit me, to your oversight here: a tendency in overseers is to close things down, to keep things quiet, to keep things in. Now, I understand there has to be confidentiality, of course there has to, and it's not right to go and blow everything all over the country - but I'll tell you this: there needs to be more transparency than ever in churches today. We cannot cover up sin.

But rather than praying 'This shall be a house of prayer', God's word says - do you know what they were doing? They were not praying, they were preying! They were preying on the people, they were using religion and God's word to make money - and that is going on today! Now you might think this is a negative message - I'm sorry, but I'm just preaching what's in this passage - just be thankful the Lord isn't coming in and turning tables over and all the rest, I'm being gentle on you! I'll just bare my heart - and maybe these are bugbears for me - but, do you see concerts, where you have to pay, you have to take a mortgage out to go and buy a ticket? For the life of me I cannot understand that, I can't understand that! Bible conferences - now I'm not talking about meeting needed expenses, we've all got to - I mean if you come in and you're using heat, and you're eating five meals a day or whatever, and you're sleeping in somebody's bed, you have to pay for expenses. I know all that, and these people need to live and all the rest. But when you're paying to hear men preach the word of God we have lost our way somewhere! We really have! When men are producing books to make a living - the Lord never wrote a book, apart from the Bible, but He didn't sit down with a pen and write it of course. You know, I have a sneaking suspicion - and I thank God for the amount of Bibles we have, translations and Bible study books - but I reckon there are some people sitting in a room somewhere, probably in America, thinking: 'What about a Bible for ornithologists, or a Bible for cyclists?'. I was in a bookshop yesterday and I found the 100% waterproof Bible. Now if you've got it this morning, don't be offended, because I almost bought it myself because it was such a novelty - I said to the wife, 'You could read it in the bath, look, it's 100% waterproof!'. What do you need a 100% waterproof Bible for? They're producing these things - and tell me they're not producing it to make money, tell me that!
Now, thank God for the resources we have, but we've got a problem here in the West - you know what it is? We have more resources, and therefore more knowledge, than our ancestors ever had - yet we're bearing less fruit. We're taking up more room, like Israel, but we're less effective. Now, how can that be? Then there are folk, and I have to be careful here, and this is not just 'Hit this one, that one, and the other one', but this is from my heart - there are folk in ministry, and years ago the evangelical church would have hammered the established denominations for men who are 'good living for a living', and evangelicals are no different - and I confess to you that at times I may have been guilty of that myself. Their eye is more on their salary than their service.

Now we can't hide from these things - but if you think, 'Aye, he's right in that now, and he's right in that one, and those boys, those pastors, I always thought they were hungry for the wee brown envelope'. Malachi said to Judah: 'Can a man rob God?'. What he was getting at was: the people retorted back to Him, 'We have not robbed You, in what way have we robbed You?'. God says: 'In tithes and offerings. You are cursed with a curse, For you have robbed Me, Even this whole nation'. There is the curse coming in. God was pouring resources into them, but it wasn't coming out in fruit for God! What do you do with your money? Do you know the materialistic Western church has even invented doctrines to service lust for money? The prosperity gospel, you know, 'Give me $1 million, and God will give you $100 million' - but why doesn't he give away all his hundred million dollars to get more? It doesn't figure. They're lies, that's why, they are liars, false prophets a lot of them - not all of them, but a lot of them are.

Here's a thing that you need to waken up to, and I do as well: dead religion or false prophets, the Lord Jesus is sick of them! He is! Both the ones who have all the right doctrines but there is no life there, and the ones who are running around claiming life and all they are interested in is the fast buck. I'll tell you, you see when you start preaching the way I'm preaching, and behaving the way the Lord Jesus behaved, false prophets and false professors don't like it. Look at verses 18 and 19: 'The scribes and chief priests heard it and sought how they might destroy Him; for they feared Him, because all the people were astonished at His teaching. When evening had come, He went out of the city' - they sought to destroy Him. They didn't like it.

Now, is there an answer for this problem? Problem? What problem? Shallow praise, false profession, empty lives taking up space but really not producing anything for the Lord, lukewarmness - is there an answer? Is there any hope? Well, yes there is, verses 20 through to 26. Now if you persist in empty profession there is no answer, if you persist in a profession without power - having a name that you live, but you're dead - there's nothing can be done for you until you waken up to it, and say 'Look, there's something wrong here, there's something wrong here'. The 'something wrong' might be in verse 20, 'Now in the morning, as they passed by, they saw the fig tree dried up from the roots'. They go by this scene again after the cleansing of the temple the next day, and they see that the tree has dried up from the roots. Now, if there's no fruit in your life it's more than likely the case that the problem is with root - there is something wrong with the roots deep down. You need to ask yourself are you truly saved? A lot of evangelicals in Ulster need to ask that question, because some of them just - you know, if you're born a Muslim over there in Iraq or Iran, you know, you're born an evangelical here and you just follow what you learn - I'm telling you, a lot of people do that in Ulster in Christian homes. All they have is a tradition and a way of life of their parents, and they have never been born-again! Have you been born-again? Maybe the lack of fruit in your life is because there is a lack of root, or maybe there is something wrong with the
root? Maybe you're having problems just where you are? I don't know, God knows, maybe you know, maybe you don't know - but I'll tell you what the answer is.

Verse 21: 'Peter, remembering, said to Him, 'Rabbi, look! The fig tree which You cursed has withered away'. So Jesus answered and said to them, 'Have faith in God. For assuredly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be removed and be cast into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that those things he says will be done, he will have whatever he says. Therefore I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you will have them'. Now there are many applications here and lessons that we don't have time to go into, but the context would teach us that what the Lord is saying here is: faith can remove obstacles that cause unfruitfulness. Believing prayer can remove those mountains that are causing unfruitfulness in your life. There is a principle here: a life of Spirit-filled, believing prayer - when you surrender yourself completely to the Lord, and you get filled with the Holy Spirit and continue to be filled with the Holy Spirit, and you pray persistently in faith - it will deliver you from death. It will! Dearth and deadness and fruitlessness! Do you have a life of Spirit-filled, believing prayer? Very few people have that life.

It's not easy. 'Does not doubt in his heart', verse 23 says - but here's something else, right, if you thought that was hard: is there an answer for this? Yes! But if you think believing faith is difficult, well there's a twofold answer, verse 24: 'Therefore I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you will have them', and verse 25 then, 'And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses. But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses'. It's faith and forgiveness!

I'm going to tell you something - it might be an open secret, I don't know - but one of the greatest contributory factors to fruitlessness in the church and in the Christian life is unforgiveness. The writer to the Hebrews calls it 'the root of bitterness', he says in chapter 12 verse 15: 'looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled'. You see you don't sin unto yourself, you're not an island. If you have bitterness in your heart that rubs off on your family, and it rubs off on your church family too. Have you fruitlessness in your life? Is their bitterness? Is their bitterness against a believer? Is their bitterness against something that was done to you? Maybe you're legitimate in your hurt and your smarting because you were offended - but, my friend, do you understand, you need to get over that! For if you don't get over that, do you know what's going to happen? You're going to be the greater victim! You are! These people maybe who hurt you are running around scot-free enjoying themselves, don't have a conscience at all about it - but you have a curse on you, you have fruitlessness on you because of unforgiveness.

Is there an answer to this type of fruitlessness and deadness? Yes, there is: faith and forgiveness. The conditions of answered prayer, the conditions of fellowship - and if you want revival and renewal in your life, it's wonderful: take God's word. It's the New Age that teaches, by the way, that if you believe something it will come true - that's not what these verses say. Faith in the Christian sense is: 'We believe what is true'. We don't have faith in something to make it true, we have faith in something because it is true, God said it is true. You take God's word, claim it in your life. If you're not filled with the Holy Spirit, claim it! 'If you being evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your Heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask'. Claim your right in Christ, come believingly in prayer - but if there is unforgiveness in your heart, do you know what's going to
happen? This is talking about parental forgiveness, not being saved, it is talking about this: you will not know fellowship with God in forgiveness in your vertical relationship with Him, if your horizontal relationship with your brothers and sisters and with other people is not right.

Let us pray. We are coming to the Table, I think, soon - and what a place, if you need to have dealings with God, to have dealings with God. I am interested in some revivals that have happened in the past, and it's amazing the revivals that took place around the Lord's Table in varied denominations - because we are meant to examine ourselves. When you read where the Lord Jesus or Apostles speak on the Lord's Table, there's always instruction, and it's usually exhortation to their own heart. I'll tell you, do you know what Jesus said? If you've anything against your brother, leave your offering, go and make it right. We get it all wrong, you see - if you missed the table, 'Oh boy!'. You know, there's a thousand men and women in this country should be missing the Table this morning. He doesn't want you to miss the Table, He wants you to get right and come to the Table - that's the point. He doesn't want you to walk away if you have burdens here today, He wants you to deal with them, He wants you to bring them to Him and confess them, and ask in faith, believing, and forgive from your heart those who may have wronged you - and have that fellowship that you ought to have, that God is looking for in your life. But don't be taking up room and bearing no fruit!

Father, we thank You for what we have learned this morning from the Servant King's short-lived welcome into Jerusalem. But the Lord, with those piercing eyes that we see Him now having, eyes of fire, He could see into their hearts and He knew: 'They honour me with their lips, but for many of them their hearts are far from me'. Lord, let that not be said of us, but let us be a people who worship You in spirit and in truth, and give our lives to You. May we not just give praise in the sense of the fruit of our lips but, Lord, our whole hearts. 'My son, give me your heart', that's what You're saying to us today, 'My child, give me your heart, give me your all'. As we come around the Table, and remember what our Lord Jesus did as He journeyed towards Jerusalem, where He was going and what He was going to do for us - may that make the difference, may that compound this effect of the word of God today upon us, to know what this was all for: His determination, that we may be able to bear fruit through the new covenant. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.
It's good to be back with you tonight again, and we're turning to Mark's gospel chapter 11. If you weren't here this morning, it was the first instalment of the series that I hope to do, God willing, each week, indeed each morning and evening both, on the last week of the life of our Lord Jesus, the last week of His ministry here on earth. So tonight we're looking again at chapter 11, just the latter verses, and then the whole of chapter 12. Now, I know it might have been longer than some of you are used to this morning, I'm sorry about that, but that's about as long as I'm used to preaching - so hopefully the Lord is speaking and doing a work, and I do trust that the Lord is moving in your heart, and I believe He will if you are open to God.

Before we start let's pray again, and just ask the Lord's help. It's vital that we have God with us in what we're doing. I know that might seem redundant when we're in church, we would expect God to be there - but we saw this morning in the temple that He wasn't there, and that's why the Lord Jesus came in and cleansed it. He caused a lot of fuss, but the fact of the matter was that God didn't own a lot of what was going on in His name. It's the same today, there's no doubt about it in my mind and my heart. We so often are so guilty of being religious, going through the ritual, and maybe not meeting God. We want to meet God here, don't we? So let's open our hearts, all of us, just now open our hearts and say: 'Lord, what do You have to say to me? What do You have to say to me? Whatever You have to say, give me the strength and courage to do Your will'. So let us pray.

Father, Abba Father, we thank You in the name of our Lord Jesus for the record of the life, ministry, death, resurrection, ascension, and glorification of our Lord Jesus. We thank You, Lord, that we have this book in our hand - and we are so guilty, Father, of abusing the privilege that we have. Lord, we are so responsible for being partakers of the life of Jesus, knowing what He did, knowing what He said, knowing how He lived, knowing what He commanded us, knowing what He expects of us, knowing what He promises us. Yet, Lord, it is a mirror, because when we look into it we see ourselves falling far short of what is expected. Yet, Lord, we don't want to be unnecessarily negative - because, though we confess our guilt, and though we confess our sins, we thank You that this life that has been given to us in Christ, everything that we need is in Him and there is no reason for us to be on a back foot, there is no reason for us to be living beneath the promises and the blessings that He purchased for us with His own shed blood. So, Lord, we pray that tonight, as we look into Your word, we will not just be going away feeling: 'Oh, I don't measure up', but we will be invigorated and excited about what we can be and what we can know. Lord, I pray for those here who maybe aren't Christians, maybe have never believed on the Lord Jesus, maybe asking many questions. I pray tonight, not so much that their questions would be answered because none of us have all our questions answered, but Lord that they would encounter the living Christ, that they would realise that Christ is the answer that they need to the questions, perhaps, that they are not asking. So, Father, we pray, we need the Holy Spirit. I can do nothing without Jesus' power in the Holy Spirit, and so I pray now, and we all pray, for the Holy Spirit to come into our midst in a very definite and even, indeed, manifest way and minister to us now. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.
Now the portion of Scripture we're starting with tonight, we're not going to read an initial reading, we're starting at verse 27 of chapter 11 of Mark's gospel. We've probably now entered Tuesday in the last week of the life of our Lord Jesus Christ. We saw this morning that Sunday, the first day of the week, the Lord Jesus rode into Jerusalem as the King of the Jews, the Triumphal Entry we know it as. Then we moved on to Monday and we saw this cursing of the fig tree, and then we saw the Lord Jesus enter into the temple, and He cleanses it, turns the tables up and He speaks here in verse 17 about the house of God is meant to be a house of prayer, but they have made it a den of thieves. Now, naturally, that caused a rumpus and a fuss - indeed an outrage - among the Jewish religious leaders. Their natural reaction was: 'Who does He think He is?'. You see, they were the guys in charge, if you like, of what went on religiously in Judaism, and particularly what went on in the precincts of the temple. He is coming in and He is assuming authority to go in and upend the tables, and to lambast them for what they're doing: buying and selling, and trading and making money in the name of God.

But worse than just being outraged, Jesus Christ was a threat to them. He was a threat to their little powerbase and so, as far as they were concerned, He must be dealt with. Serious stuff. In verse 18 we saw this, immediately after the cleansing of the temple, the scribes and the chief priests 'sought how they might destroy Him' - it's not watering it down, is it! They want to destroy Him, 'for they feared Him, because all the people were astonished at His teaching'. You see, the reverence that they once knew was now being transferred in a far greater extent over to the person of Christ, and they were jealous. But I want you to know something that is incredible, astounding: this provocation by Jesus of the religious authorities was deliberate. I hope that has sunk in. His provocation of the religious authorities was deliberate, and Jesus was in complete control of what He was doing. It wasn't simply the case that He was sharing a few truths that were slightly controversial, and He knew deep down that He might offend some - He was actively going out of His way to offend. He was in control of the situation.

Now that answers a great question that theologians, philosophers, historians have debated for years: the question of 'Why was Jesus crucified?'. Some will say it was murder, He was murdered. The Jews, we see, the Jewish hierarchy wanted to destroy Him. Of course the Romans, they didn't want insurrection and rebellion and any civil unrest in this little conclave of their empire, and so they wanted to sort Him out ultimately. So this was a religious and a political murder. Others say, 'No, it was more than that, it was martyrdom'. Jesus was founding a religion and 'a good cause', if you like, and so He was dying as a martyr. Others will look at it from a legal point of view, and they will say: 'This was a miscarriage of justice', and we might look at some of the trials as we go through this last week of our Lord Jesus Christ - and there's no doubt about it, that this was the greatest miscarriage of justice that has ever been. Others will say that this was just a tragic mistake, Jesus was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

I have to say to you a resounding emphatic 'No' to all those explanations of why Jesus was crucified. The reason why Jesus was crucified was divine motivation, divine motivation. The apostle put it like this when he preached at Pentecost, speaking to Jews: 'This Jesus was delivered up according to the definite plan of God and His foreknowledge'. He turned to them and said: 'You crucified and killed Him by the hands of lawless men'. There we see, incidentally - and I'm not going to digress to this - but the balance between the sovereign plan of God and responsibility of men. This last week of the life and ministry of the Lord Jesus, as indeed all of His life was, was preordained of God. He was God's Eternal Son sent into the
world to be our Saviour, and He was going to die - that is why He came! Yet there is still responsibility on the behalf of those who crucified Him.

Now this was Mark's theme, as we saw this morning, that's why he dedicates six chapters at the end of his gospel - a disproportionate amount in comparison to the life of the Lord Jesus and what went on, to dedicate six chapters to one week. We saw that Mark is the gospel of the cross, how he dwells here - but also in Mark we see that the Lord Jesus continually tried to get this into the minds of the disciples, that this was the reason why He came.

Let me show you this, if you turn back to chapter 8 of Mark, verse 31: 'And He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He spoke this word openly'.

Look at the reaction of the disciples to this: 'Then Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him. But when He had turned around and looked at His disciples, He rebuked Peter, saying, 'Get behind Me, Satan! For you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men''. The disciples had a great problem in getting this point, that Jesus had come - according to the determinate counsel of God - to go and die on the cross for men's sins, to be buried, and to rise again. Turn to chapter 9 verse 31, verse 30: 'Then they departed from there and passed through Galilee, and He did not want anyone to know it. For He taught His disciples and said to them, 'The Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of men, and they will kill Him. And after He is killed, He will rise the third day'. But they did not understand this saying, and were afraid to ask Him'. Just before the chapter that we're looking at tonight in chapter 10, He reminds them again, verse 33: 'Behold', they are on their way to Jerusalem, He's explaining why they're going there, 'we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and to the scribes; and they will condemn Him to death and deliver Him to the Gentiles; and they will mock Him, and scourge Him, and spit on Him, and kill Him. And the third day He will rise again'. So He has all the instigators mentioned there: the Jewish hierarchy, the chief priests and the scribes; and the Gentiles, the Romans. He's being even more specific about why they're going to Jerusalem, that this is the grand finale, the great crescendo of His life and ministry on Earth: to go to the cross and bleed and die - this is the reason that He came into this world! This is the reason He was crucified: to die for me.

So it wasn't murder only, although it was an act of murder. It was martyrdom, it wasn't only a miscarriage of justice, and it certainly was no mistake. It was divine motivation that led Jesus Christ to the cross for me! I love to be able to say that tonight: for me. Can you say that? I mean, do you understand this great plan of the ages: that God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life - for me! You see, it is personal. There are so many people, and they go to places of worship, and they're called Christian places of worship, and they can identify with this story in a sort of nebulous way - but they cannot make it personal because they have never been born-again, they have never trusted Christ as their personal Saviour and personal Lord. Why was Jesus crucified? For me. Say it: 'For me'. I love the old hymn, and one verse goes like this:

'Was it the nails, dear Saviour,  
That held Thee to the tree?  
Nay, 'twas Thine everlasting love,  
Thy love for me, for me'.

Why was Jesus crucified? For love of me, for love of you. Now think about this: He is in Jerusalem at the Passover season to be the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world.
He is there to die. Incidentally, the last Passover that Jesus attended in Jerusalem was at the beginning of His ministry, when He cleansed the Temple the first time - and I mentioned that this morning, I think incorrectly, I said you could read about it in John 12, it's John 2 you can read about it. At the beginning of His three and a half years of ministry He cleansed the temple, and He was at the Passover season then - but He did not attend the intervening three Passovers in His ministry. You ask: 'Why was that?'. Simply because of the animosity of the Jewish rulers. He knew if He went into Jerusalem for the Passover they would get Him. He was waiting for His hour, God's ordained and appointed moment when He would go today. Now His hour has come, and I want you to see this again: He is provoking them, in fact He is inviting them to take Him and crucify Him according to the sovereign plan and determination of God. Isn't it wonderful?

Here in chapter 11 and the end verses in chapter 12, the Sanhedrin, the Jewish religious ruling body, questions Him. They scrutinise Him. The motivation is clear from verse 13 of chapter 12: 'They sent to Him some of the Pharisees and the Herodians, to catch Him in His words'. They wanted to trap Him. Now, incidentally, at Passover every Jewish family, according to Exodus chapter 12, chose a lamb to be sacrificed. They chose the lamb on the tenth day of the month, and they were instructed by Moses to carefully examine the lamb until the fourteenth day of the month in order to make sure it was a lamb without blemish and without spot, a lamb without defects. Now during the last week of the ministry of our Lord Jesus, God's Lamb was being examined in various ways that we will look at over these next weeks - but He passed every single test! As Isaiah 53 tells us, neither was deceit or guile found in His mouth. They tried to trap Him in his words, but they couldn't!

Here the Sanhedrin questions Him: 'What right have You to assume the role of authority, to cleanse the temple? What right have You to make Yourself the Messiah of God's people? We alone have the authority to do these things and claim these things!'. So let's look at these questions, and there are four that come from the Sanhedrin, and then there is a fifth question in this passage that actually comes from the Lord Jesus. So let's look at question one, and it's a question of authority - verse 27 of chapter 11: 'Then they came again to Jerusalem. And as He was walking in the temple, the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders came to Him. And they said to Him', here's question number one, "By what authority are You doing these things? And who gave You this authority to do these things?". But Jesus answered and said to them, 'I also will ask you one question; then answer Me, and I will tell you by what authority I do these things: The baptism of John; was it from heaven or from men? Answer Me'. And they reasoned among themselves, saying, 'If we say, 'From heaven,' He will say, 'Why then did you not believe him?'. But if we say, 'From men'"; they feared the people, for all counted John to have been a prophet indeed. So they answered and said to Jesus, 'We do not know'. And Jesus answered and said to them, 'Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things". Now don't you just marvel at the masterful wisdom of the Lord Jesus Christ in exposing their wicked, unbelieving hearts? You see, the leaders had not been honest with John the Baptist, and now they're not being honest with the Lord Jesus Christ in their questioning. You see what's happening here: John had come as a prophet, and the people recognised that. So Jesus turns the tables on them, and says: 'Right, if you want to know where My authority comes from, where did John's authority come from?'. They were afraid to say that it was only the authority of men, because the people recognised John as a prophet of God; and they were afraid to say his authority was from heaven, because they were the very ones - just as they are doing now to Jesus - who opposed the ministry of John the Baptist! So the Lord had them in a corner, and they said: 'We don't know'. Jesus said: 'Neither do I tell you where My authority comes from".

416
Now there is a principle here that all of you need to come to terms with. It's a very simple principle, and the sooner in the Christian life you get a grip of this the better. It's this: obedience is the instrument of revelation. Obedience is the instrument of revelation. In other words, when we obey God, God teaches us more. Let me show you this from John 7 verse 17, if you care to turn to it, John 7 verse 17 - when we obey the word of God, God teaches us more. John 7:17, we saw how important the will is in the Christian life: 'If anyone wants to do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God or whether I speak on My own authority'. So what the Lord Jesus was saying to these folk was: 'Look, if you want to know where My authority comes from, if you want to know whether My doctrine is true, obey God's will. If you obey God's will, He will give you revelation, He will show you the truth'. The problem is, the converse of this is: if we disobey God, or if we fail to obey in some manner where He is telling us to do something and we are stalling and stopping and we're not doing it, God will close the door on revelation - He will cease showing us any more.

Have you ever learned this in the Christian life? Sometimes we wonder why we are at a standstill, and it may well be because at some point in our life God told us to do a thing, and we said either 'No', or we became passive and decided 'Well, I'll not do either thing - I'll not go against Him, but I'll not go with Him'. God says: 'Right, that's okay, until you learn that lesson, and until you take that step of obedience, I'm not going to show you anything else'. Is that why some of you are where you are tonight? I'm not telling you this to condemn you, I'm wanting to help you, and want you to learn how to go on. Obedience is the instrument of revelation. If you want to know more you have to obey! It's a bit like a glowworm. I'm led to believe that a glowworm shines ever only enough light for the next step - and, incidentally, it's not until he takes the next step that he gets light showing where he is to go further. Do you understand?

Another principle comes out of this and, indeed, this event - and that is: when we start to question Christ, His ways and His word, revelation ceases - when we start to question God. Now when I speak of questioning God, we've all got questions. I'm not speaking about just asking questions to understand, I'm talking about coming from a negative position of doubting questions, doubting God, doubting Christ and His word. Now the fig tree this morning, and I don't have time to go over it if you weren't with us, but it taught, didn't it, regarding the nation of Israel that were to be a witness for God and His glory to all the other Gentile nations of the world, that when they failed in their responsibility and did not bear fruit but only took up space, a curse came upon them - isn't that right? You see, the curse came to a crescendo in the life of the Lord Jesus when they rejected Him as Messiah - and that's why we see what is happening in this last week of our Lord Jesus Christ. They had questioned Christ, here they are doing it; and they were questioning the word of God. So a curse came upon them - sure, all we need to do is go back to the book of beginnings to find out this. Even before there was sin in our world, in the Garden the serpent suddenly came to Eve and said: 'Has God really said that when you eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil that you will die? Has He really said?'. He was casting doubt on God's word.

Now this is vitally important. It's serious, really serious, to cast doubt on God's word. Sometimes as Christians we get ourselves into a state - and whether it's because we're being bombarded by a secular and godless society, through the media in particular, and if you're just saturated constantly in the media this is going to happen to you - you start to imbibe the worldview, you start to be pushed into the world's mould, and sometimes you start to question the Scriptures in a way that the world does. But you've got to understand - I'm not saying that you don't have understanding, we're to find out as much information as possible,
we're not to leave our brain at the door - but we've got to understand it's got more to do than with just intellect, much more. This is a supernatural thing, it's a spiritual thing, and it involves faith. Whenever we start falling into the trap of casting doubt on the word of God, something terrible happens: a curse or a standstill.

Some of you may have heard of 'Biblical higher criticism' - have you heard of it? That's not what happens around the dinner table, by the way, after the preacher has given his sermon - sometimes there's a lot of criticism goes on then! Biblical higher criticism was really a movement that questioned the authenticity of the history as the Bible presented it. You know, 'Was there a crossing of the Red Sea?', and 'Did Moses help the Pharaoh in Egypt?', and all these things - and you see it on your news, usually around Christmas and Easter time they're questioning things to try and cause doubt in the minds of Christians. Now Biblical higher criticism had its rise in Germany - and, incidentally, Germany was the land of the Reformation, which was the rediscovery of Biblical truths. Yet, from about the mid 18th century to the beginning of the 20th century, various scholars of the original documents - copies of course - of the Scriptures, started to critique them and pick holes in them in Germany. I was listening to a sermon of Derek Prince's not that long ago, and he pointed out this very fact: that from the same nation of Germany, a nation so blessed in the word of God, came two of the most evil monsters that the human race has ever known - Karl Marx and Adolf Hitler. Now, I can't say this was that, but there are consequences even for present-day nations, even for our United Kingdom. Whenever we cast doubt on the word of God, whenever society starts to suppress the knowledge of God, there are consequences. There are going to be consequences for the UK, for the way it's behaving, for the way the government is behaving and popular society.

Let me show you this in case you're not convinced, Romans chapter 1 please, verse 18. Paul was writing to the Roman church, and I believe he had the Roman Empire in view here: 'For the wrath of God', verse 18 of chapter 1, 'the wrath of God', His anger, 'is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness'. 'Suppress' simply means 'to hold down', that's what we're talking about here. When a society holds down or suppresses the truth, or tries to cast doubt on the truth, or water down the truth, God is angry! Verse 19: 'Because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them', God has given us all enough to believe, 'For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made', creation, 'even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse' - everyone in the world has no excuse for not believing in God, because of the witness of the creation. Verse 21: 'Because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man; and birds and fourfooted animals and creeping things' - that's why people worship graven images. Now here's the consequence: 'Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves, who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. For this reason God gave them up to vile passions. For even their women exchanged the natural use for what is against nature. Likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust for one another, men with men committing what is shameful, and receiving in themselves the penalty of their error which was due. And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge' - this is their sin, they don't want to retain God in their knowledge - 'God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting; being filled with all unrighteousness, sexual immorality, wickedness, covetousness,
maliciousness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evilmindedness; they are whisperers, backbiters, haters of God, violent, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, undiscerning, untrustworthy, unloving, unforgiving, unmerciful; who, knowing the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are deserving of death, not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them'.

Now, what you have there is a society who suppresses truth and the knowledge of God, and there is a progressive decline in that society that is coming from God directly. Now you see the decline in our society: it is coming as a direct result of God withdrawing His gracious influence upon us. Here are the signs outlined for us in Romans chapter 1: first there will be idolatry, they will worship the creature rather than the Creator; then there will be rampant immorality, cite 1960s and following; and then there will be an enshrining of homosexuality, here we are. Men's and women's minds are becoming perverted that, even if they don't engage in these things, they take pleasure in those who do and even make laws allowing it to go on. But can I say to you tonight, if you're not a Christian, what can be applied to a nation here can be applied personally. If you suppress the knowledge of God in your life, if you hold down what God is trying to do in your life and try to keep it back and under wraps, and pour cold water every time you hear God speak to you, you're running the risk of - just like this nation - being given up, given up and given over to what you're choosing. That's a serious thing. You see, we all have this sort of silly idea that, you know, 'I'll get right with God when it suits me' - no, you'll not! Or, 'I'll get through the door when it's ajar, just before I pop my clogs' - no, you'll not! No you'll not!

'Seek ye the Lord while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near' - do you see if you suppress the truth, and the knowledge of the truth, there are consequences. There were for the Jews rejecting God’s Son. In His replies to their questions on authority, it's very interesting, He gives a parable, a story. He reveals in this story who He is, and consequently who they were rejecting, and yet they would not accept the truth. Verse 1 of chapter 12: 'Then He began to speak to them in parables: 'A man planted a vineyard and set a hedge around it', Mark chapter 12, 'He dug a place for the wine vat and built a tower. And he leased it to vinedressers and went into a far country. Now at vintagetime he sent a servant to the vinedressers, that he might receive some of the fruit of the vineyard from the vinedressers. And they took him and beat him and sent him away emptyhanded. Again he sent them another servant, and at him they threw stones, wounded him in the head, and sent him away shamefully treated. And again he sent another, and him they killed; and many others, beating some and killing some. Therefore still having one son, his beloved, he also sent him to them last, saying, 'They will respect my son'. But those vinedressers said among themselves, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours'. So they took him and killed him and cast him out of the vineyard. Therefore what will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the vinedressers, and give the vineyard to others''.

He is the Beloved Son, the only Son of the Father, sent by the Father. These Pharisees and religious leaders are the vinedressers, and they're protecting their own position in the establishment. Then Jesus goes on in verses 10 and 11 to quote Psalm 118, and to describe how He is, Jesus, 'The stone which the builders rejected', and He's going to 'become the chief cornerstone. This was the Lord's doing, And it is marvelous in their eyes'. Now, let me press fast forward for a moment, past the death, the resurrection, the ascension of our Lord Jesus, and past the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, to an incident in the Acts of the Apostles - if you turn with me to chapter 4. Peter and John were going up to the temple to pray, and they healed a lame man, and they were arrested for healing this lame man because doing anything in the name of Jesus had been banned. So, because of this, they were questioned by
the Sanhedrin - does that sound familiar? In Acts chapter 4 we begin the reading and verse 7, they are standing before this Jewish ruling council, the same group: 'And when they had set them in the midst, they asked, 'By what power'", or authority, "or by what name have you done this?'.

Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, 'Rulers of the people and elders of Israel: If we this day are judged for a good deed done to a helpless man, by what means he has been made well, let it be known to you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by Him this man stands here before you whole. This is the 'stone which was rejected by you builders, which has become the chief cornerstone'. Can you imagine being one of these men? Hearing the same words that were spoken by the very lips of Christ repeated, and knowing that it has been fulfilled and Jesus has risen, and He's ascended, and these scaredy-custard disciples are now bold men of God turning the world upside down and performing healings in the name of Jesus of Nazareth - and hearing these broad fishermen telling them the same words: 'The stone that you rejected has become the chief cornerstone'.

More than that, verse 12, look at it: 'Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men whereby must be saved'. You see, they were rejecting Christ and they were rejecting life. They were trying to hurt Christ, and all they were doing was hurting themselves. Now, my friend, if you're running away from Jesus, that's all you're doing. You're hurting yourself, like Paul on the road to Damascus - Jesus said to him: 'Why do you keep kicking against the goads, the pricks?', like an animal is goaded along the road by a sharp instrument, the Spirit was goading Paul towards Jesus but he was kicking out. If you kick against a sharp instrument you're going to get hurt yourself, and when you kick out against the conviction of the Holy Spirit in your life, and God's revelation in your life, you're only going to hurt yourself. Thank God Paul was converted, but these Jewish people were not because they hardened their hearts more - and what did we say? Obedience is the instrument of revelation. If you won't obey, God will close the shutters and you'll get no more light! Now, if you're here tonight and you're not converted, that's every reason for you to be this very night here in this meeting.

We've got to move on. A question about authority, and then there's a question about taxes, verses 13 to 17 of chapter 12. Second question: 'Then they sent to Him some of the Pharisees and the Herodians' - now this is very interesting, because the Pharisees and the Herodians were enemies of one another. The Pharisees were the strict sect of the Jews following the Torah Scriptures. The Herodians were very liberal, and they supported Herod who was, of course, in cahoots with the Roman rulers. So these two poles apart groups are now united to oppose Christ - interesting how enemies can come together against God! But this was a subtle ploy, you see they were asking a question about taxes to the Roman government - and no matter how Jesus answered, it wouldn't please either one of these two parties, the Herodians or the Pharisees. They start off by flattery in verse 14, the Pharisees and the Herodians come to catch Him in His words: 'When they had come, they said to Him, 'Teacher, we know that You are true', that was a lie, 'and care about no one; for You do not regard the person of men, but teach the way of God in truth' - and here's the sting - 'Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?'.

You see, Satan is quite happy using flattery to get his own ends - and can I tell you: he'll use anything to get his own ends. He'll use church, he'll use Christian things to get his own ends. For him the ends justify the means, and this question is given: 'Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?'. 'Oh, we've got Him again', that's what they think, they're trying to catch Him in His words, that's their motivation in verse 13. I'm not going to go into the ins and outs of this, save to say that this is a question about responsibility. You see, they knew that there had to
be responsibility to pay taxes, but they knew that they were paying taxes to the Roman power, the Gentile, unclean power. Let's just pause there for a moment, because there is a responsibility there for us as well - and if you want to know all about it read Romans chapter 13. Sometimes, over the last 40 years of problems in our province, I wonder how many times Romans 13 was preached on down through those years because it tells us that the powers that be are ordained of God. We are to obey them as far as they do not force us to transgress our confession of Christ in an ungodly way.

I wonder are you observing this principle? It's found in the answer that Jesus gave in verse 15: 'Shall we pay, or shall we not pay?'. But He, knowing their hypocrisy, said to them, 'Why do you test Me? Bring Me a denarius that I may see it'. So they brought it. And He said to them, 'Whose image and inscription is this?' They said to Him, 'Caesar's'. And Jesus answered and said to them - wonder, wonder and marvel at His wisdom - 'Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's'. And they marveled at Him'. What He was really saying is: 'You guys aren't rendering to God what you should render to Him'. But can I ask you: are you rendering to Caesar the things that are Caesar's? Let me be blunt: are you paying your taxes, or does the pen have a little slip when you're filling in the form? It's serious. We're told in the word of God to walk circumspectly, do you know what that means? Walk carefully before God and before men. I don't know whether you've ever heard of W.P. Nicholson, the great evangelist, and there was a revival through his ministry here in our land. He was taking a crusade, I think in Belfast, and he went to a tailor and was getting fitted, I think, for a suit. He asked the tailor would he come along to the mission, and the tailor says: 'I wouldn't be seen dead near your mission'. He was a bit taken aback, and he said: 'Why ever is that?', he says 'Because there are umpteen of the people flocking there every night, and they owe me money!'. Do you know what Nicholson did that night? Before he preached, he said: 'I was at the tailor's today, and he happened to tell me that some of you owe him money', and he says, 'He gave me all your names', and he says, 'If you haven't paid by this time tomorrow evening I'm going to read the list out' - and every bill was paid! Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's.

Well, that's the principle, but look at His masterful answer - and even His enemies marvelled at Him. At the end of verse 17 when he said 'Render to Caesar...!', 'And they marveled at Him'. Listen unsaved friend here tonight, you can admire Jesus and at the self-same time reject Him! There's very few people would say a bad word about Jesus - I mean, really, when they examined His character and what He did in His life and ministry, most people, even other religions of the world, sort of revere Him in some shape or form. Yet they reject Him, they're still questioning Him, trying to get Him to fall.

A question of authority, a question of taxes, the third question is a question of resurrection. Verse 18: 'Then some Sadducees' - by the way, this is the only place in Mark's gospel that he mentions the Sadducees. Just to fill you in a wee bit about the Sadducees, they only believed in the Torah - that's the first five books of the Bible - they only believed in the writings of Moses and none of the rest of the Old Testament. They also did not believe in the soul, they did not believe in life after death, they didn't believe in a resurrection of the body, they didn't believe in judgement to come, neither did they believe in angels or demons. I learned at Religious Studies in school, that's why the Sadducees were sad, you see - did you learn that? Now this is a question of eternity - the Sadducees, 'who say there is no resurrection', verse 18, 'came to Him; and they asked Him, saying: 'Teacher, Moses wrote to us'', there they're emphasising Moses and his writings, "that if a man's brother dies, and leaves his wife behind, and leaves no children, his brother should take his wife and raise up offspring for his brother' - that's called a Levirate marriage. "Now there were seven brothers. The first took a wife; and
dying, he left no offspring. And the second took her, and he died; nor did he leave any offspring. And the third likewise. So the seven had her and left no offspring. Last of all the woman died also". Here's the question: 'Therefore, in the resurrection, when they rise, whose wife will she be? For all seven had her as wife'.

Now, I'm not going to go into the details of this story - in fact, I actually did it the last time I was here in one of the question evenings, so if you want to get that recording you may do so - but here's the point: the Sadducees thought they were clever, asking this question of the Lord Jesus. But Jesus shows them that all they're doing is showing their ignorance - look at verse 24: 'Jesus answered and said to them, 'Are you not therefore mistaken, because you do not know the Scriptures nor the power of God?''. They were ignorant of two things: first, the power of God; and second, the Scriptures. What does He mean by the ignorance of the power of God? Verse 25: 'For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven'. In other words, Jesus and God, they are going to change life in the future - even our bodies are going to be changed, and we're not going to live life exactly the same way as we live down here. But they were ignorant of the power of God, they didn't believe in the resurrection - are you ignorant of the power of God? Are you all intellectual about faith, and you're not prepared to open up to the supernatural and allow God into your life to prove Himself to you? That's where these guys were.

But they were also ignorant of the scriptures, and incidentally: isn't it interesting who Jesus quotes to them in verse 26. 'But concerning the dead, that they rise, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the burning bush passage' - you should know that, Sadducees! - 'How God spoke to him, saying, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not the God of the dead, but the God of the living. You are therefore greatly mistaken"'. Powerful, isn't it? What He was saying to them is: 'Listen, you're questioning Me about whose wife this woman will be of the seven husbands she married, but you're not asking the important question: God is not the God of the dead, but of the living' - that means there is life after death, there is life for Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and there will be life for you when you die... where will you be? That was the question. Jesus says: 'You're ignorant! You think you're clever, you think you're clever asking these questions' - is that you tonight? Do you think you're clever? Maybe you're trying to destroy the faith of other young Christians. You're not clever, you're a fool! I say that kindly to you, because - as Jesus said in Matthew 12 - if God would require your soul of you tonight, and He said it to a man: 'You fool, for tonight your soul will be required from you, and then whose will those things be that you have provided?'. Where will you be in eternity? Where will you be? That's the question! Is it not?

Then there's a fourth question, the question of the most important commandment in verse 28. 'Then one of the scribes came, and having heard them reasoning together', this is all going on in the temple, I'd love to have been a fly on the wall! 'Perceiving that He had answered them well, asked Him, 'Which is the first commandment of all?'', or the greatest, foremost. 'Jesus answered him, 'The first of all the commandments is: 'Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one'' - that's the Shema from Deuteronomy chapter 6, all Jews quote it - "And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength'. This is the first commandment. And the second, like it, is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'. There is no other commandment greater than these".

Now, we haven't time to look at this, but these two commands are the sum total of the whole law of God - both our duty Godward and manward. Even if you look at the Ten Commandments you will see that both these commands sum the whole thing up - but this is a
question of priority of love. They want to know which is the greatest commandment, and Jesus is turning it on them and saying: 'This is the greatest: do you love, truly love, God'. Now I have to say to you tonight: it is utterly impossible for any man or woman just in the simple strength of their human flesh to love God the way it says here, with all their heart, with all their soul, and with all their mind, and with all strength; and to love their neighbour as themselves. That's why we live in this messed up world, because men can't do it - they try to do it, that's called religion, but they can't do it. The only way you can do this is by grace, a free gift, through faith, that's what you accept the gift with, when the Holy Spirit comes into your life when you're born-again as a Christian, and the Lord God of heaven starts to live out the life of Jesus in you - that's the only way that can be done, through the law of the Spirit in the New Covenant, no other way.

Verse 32, this is the man's reaction: 'So the scribe said to Him, 'Well said, Teacher. You have spoken the truth, for there is one God, and there is no other but He. And to love Him with all the heart, with all the understanding, with all the soul, and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, is more than all the whole burnt offerings and sacrifices''. Now mark this, verse 34: 'Now when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, He said to him, 'You are not far from the kingdom of God' - you're not far from the kingdom of God. Can I tell you something: this man would remain near, but outside the kingdom of God, unless he ceases questioning and starts believing Christ - and that will be the same for you. You might be near to coming to Jesus, 'Oh, but I just have to get this little question, or that little question, or the other little question answered before I come'. I know you have to have legitimate questions, and you have to understand the Gospel before you believe, but you will never understand everything - you will never! Once you get one question answered, the devil will very readily give you another one to keep you going for another couple of months - and on, and on, and on, ad infinitum until you fall into hell! You will forever remain maybe near, but outside the kingdom until you - is this a word for someone here tonight? - until you stop questioning Christ and start believing Him!

Boy did that silence them! Look at the last statement in verse 34: 'But after that no one dared question Him'. Don't you love Him! Ah, but there's one more question - this time Jesus is asking it. He turns the tables on them. They've asked Him a question about authority, about taxes, about resurrection, about the most important commandment - and now He asks them a question in verses 35 and 36: 'Then Jesus answered and said, while He taught in the temple, 'How is it that the scribes say that the Christ is the Son of David? For David himself said by the Holy Spirit: 'The LORD said to my Lord, 'Sit at My right hand, Till I make Your enemies Your footstool'. Therefore David himself calls Him 'Lord'; how is He then his Son?'. And the common people heard Him gladly'.

Let me just explain that. David, in the prophetic Psalm, there it is in Psalm 110 that He's quoting, He says: 'The LORD said to my Lord', and 'my Lord' there is speaking of the coming Messiah, and yet Messiah is known as the Son of David - He has to be in the lineage and line of David. So Jesus is saying: 'How does he call Him Lord? How does David call Him Lord if He is his son?'. It's a bit complicated, but the only way David's son could be David's Lord is if He's God. The only way David's son could be his Lord is if He's God, and He is. But this is the point of Jesus saying this: it's a question of identity - that's what Jesus' question is, a question of identity. He says, 'You're looking to get answers to all these foolish questions' - He knows they're trying to trip Him up, but He's trying to waken them up. These were guys who spend every day debating and questioning one another in the minutiae of the Old Testament law, every jot and tittle of Hebrew. He says, 'You're asking all these questions, but the most important question is: 'What do you think of Christ?'. David said He was Lord, and all your
political questions about taxes; all your hypothetical questions about a woman married so many times and whose wife will she be; they are nothing compared to the most important question: 'Is Jesus your Lord?' - that's what Jesus was saying. Like David, is Jesus your Lord? Is He? All the questions, oh, you can ask them, and it's your right - but what about the big one: is He your Lord, and do you love Him through the power of the Holy Spirit in your life?

Well, I love that phrase at the end of verse 37: 'the common people heard Him gladly'. That's not just a throwaway remark, the humble poor believed, the ordinary people. These highbrow - remember the Tefal ad, the boys with the big heads? - that's what they were like, religiously speaking: highbrow intellects, religious upper-class - they just questioned. But the humble poor believed! The common people, that's what Jesus said: 'I thank You, Father', Matthew 11, 'that You have not revealed these things to the wise and prudent, but You have revealed them to babes'. Matthew 18: 'Except you become like a little child and be converted, you will never enter the kingdom'. Isn't it wonderful? The reason why the humble poor believed was: they hadn't got the pride to overcome, they hadn't got the massive intellects and the position in their life that they were guarding, like the vinedressers. They hadn't to protect anything, they had nothing going for them and they needed a Saviour! So they didn't question Him, they believed in Him.

Let's close by looking at the soul that God values, in contrast to the pharisaic hypocrites. Verse 41 - and I think this is what this means in the context, it's a contrast with what has gone before with this questioning religious crowd. 'Now Jesus sat opposite the treasury and saw how the people put money into the treasury', in the same Temple, 'And many who were rich put in much' - probably the Pharisees, and made a big show of it too. 'Then one poor widow came and threw in two mites, which make a quadrans. So He called His disciples to Himself and said to them, 'Assuredly, I say to you that this poor widow has put in more than all those who have given to the treasury; for they all put in out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all that she had, her whole livelihood' - that's the one God values: the simple soul that believes and gives all they have to Jesus.

I must question you: what is your answer to Him? Will you question Him, or will you believe Him? Let us pray.

Now I hate, well, you would gather that I hate rushing, but I hate rushing at the end of meetings - especially when there is a sense of the presence of God, and an awareness that God has been speaking. I don't know who He's been speaking to, maybe believers who needed to hear that obedience is the instrument of revelation. You're at a standstill and you want to go on, but you can't, and God's not going to let you until you do that thing that He asked you to do that you haven't done, or you stop doing that thing that He asked you to stop doing that you haven't stopped doing. Maybe there is an unbeliever, a great intellect, or just an inquisitive person curious to know every angle and every answer to every question - well, you aren't going to have it, for nobody has all the answers only God. So, when are you going to humble yourself and believe, and see God work in your life? Maybe even tonight, would you say: 'Lord, I'm stopping all the questions and I'm stepping out in faith. I believe You, reveal Yourself to me' - and I believe He'll do it, I do believe He'll do it if you mean it.

Father, we thank You for this time. Lord, we don't grow tired of beholding the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. We just love gazing on Him, what He says and what He does, and how He says and does it. We praise Him, He is wonderful! We love Him more and more every time we get a glimpse of Him! How He answered these men, and yet Father, He's answering us in many of the foibles and failures that we have in these areas. Lord, we pray
that You'll help us all to be obedient. We pray that any who are struggling and have not yet
come to complete faith in Christ, that tonight they will cry out: 'I believe, help my unbelief' -
and tonight they will settle the matter. It's not a leap into the dark, Lord, but a leap into the
light - it's still a leap, but it's into the light and into the truth. It will be confirmed for them,
we believe, Lord, when they come - and we pray that You will be quick to receive them and
confirm it to them. We thank You for this evening, we thank You for this day, and we thank
You for the refreshments provided for us now, and we pray that You will bless our time and
our journey home. In Jesus' precious name, Amen.

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Transcribed by Andrew Watkins, Preach The Word – February 2011
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Now we're turning in our Bibles to Mark's gospel chapter 13, and we'll not read the portion for the sake of time - what we will do is, we'll go through it verse-by-verse as we come to each part. If you wanted a title for what we are going to study this morning - and it is more of a Bible study, tonight will be a challenge and a devotional thought or two, but this morning is quite an in-depth Bible study on the 'Signs of the Second Coming' of the Lord Jesus. We are taking these weeks a series on the final 'Countdown To Calvary' - in other words, what Mark does in these last chapters of his gospel, from chapter 11 right to chapter 16, is: he gives us a breakdown in the last week of the life and ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ. Quite disproportionate in the sense that it is only a week of His life, and yet Mark gives so much time in his gospel to it - but it's vital to his theme, because Mark is, of course, the gospel of the cross.

Now, last Sunday morning we started on the Sunday of this last week, as Jesus rode - it's called the 'Triumphal Entry' - rode on a donkey into Jerusalem as the King of the Jews. Then we moved on, still on Sunday morning past in our time, we moved on to Monday as far as Jesus was concerned, where He cursed a fig tree, and then He went into the Temple and He cleansed the Temple of the thieves and those who were dealing there. He told them: 'My house shall be a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of thieves and robbers'. Then we saw last Sunday evening that the Lord Jesus, probably on Tuesday, was questioned by the Sanhedrin. We saw four questions that Jesus had to answer about various subjects - they were trying to catch Him in His words. Then we saw that the fifth question in the passage was from Jesus, as He turned the tables on the Pharisees and Scribes and asked them the most important question of all - and that was: what they really thought of Him. That is the most important question of all, what we think of Christ.

Now, I'm not dogmatic about these events being on particular days of the week, but it's more than likely that what we're going to read and study this morning took place on Wednesday of the last week of the Lord Jesus. Mark's gospel chapter 13 encompasses for us the teaching of the Lord Jesus concerning His second coming, which has come to be known as 'The Olivet Discourse'. Of course He taught on the Mount of Olivet, and you can also read it in a more elongated form in Matthew's Gospel chapters 24 and 25, and also in Luke's Gospel chapter 21 - but we will be sticking really to Mark's record of it in chapter 13.

Now, if you were with us you will remember that the Lord Jesus has spent some time in the vicinity of the Temple area, and that's where the Sanhedrin were questioning Him. In that context, moving out of the Temple and out to the Mount of Olivet, verse 1 of chapter 13: 'As He went out of the temple, one of His disciples said to Him, 'Teacher, see what manner of stones and what buildings are here!''. This particular disciple, we don't know who he was, just was awestruck at the magnificent architecture and structure of this Temple. Now, I'm not going to go into a detailed description of what it was like, but just to let you know that it still had not been finished at this point in history. The building of this Temple, which is known as Herod's Temple, which was based on Zerubbabel's Temple, was not finished until A.D. 64 - so there are 30-odd years still left of the building of the Temple, and yet at this point it was so
magnificent in its structure that it drew from this disciple awe and wonder. We're told by Josephus, the Jewish historian, that there was gold plating on this Temple on every side - so much so that when the sun rose in the morning and you looked at the Temple, you could get blinded by the reflection! It was also made of limestone bricks, and it is recorded that strangers approaching the holy city of Jerusalem, as they looked and saw the Temple, thought it looked like a snowcapped mountain. So you can imagine the wonder and magnificence of this sight, and this disciple is turning the attention of the Lord Jesus to the Temple.

So in verse 2, the Lord Jesus - in relation to the Temple - makes a prediction: 'Jesus answered and said to him, 'Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone shall be left upon another, that shall not be thrown down'. The Lord Jesus says: 'No matter how magnificent and wonderful this Temple is that you're looking at, I am predicting that it is going to be destroyed'. Now, if you know your history, you will know that in A.D. 70 the Romans came in with all their armies and destroyed this very Temple, indeed the whole city of Jerusalem. Now, may I remind you of some of the thoughts that we pondered last Lord's Day morning in particular: empty religion is worthless to God. Remember that's what the sign was of the Lord Jesus going into the Temple and driving out the thieves and the businessmen. He was signifying also when He cursed the fig tree - it was taking up room but bearing no fruit, just like the children of Israel - that empty religion is worthless to Him. This is the final death knell to Judaism, at this point at least, when He predicts the destruction of the Temple. These are the consequences for suppressing the truth of God.

Now this was literally fulfilled, as I said, in A.D. 70 - but it wasn't just literally fulfilled by the destruction of the Temple, but Jesus actually prophesied in verse 2 that 'not one stone shall be left upon another, that shall not be thrown down'. It was literally fulfilled to the very jot and tittle, the exact details of this prophecy. The reason why that is: we know from historical records that Titus, the Roman general who was given the job of going in and destroying Jerusalem, he apparently wished to salvage the Temple - most likely because there was much gold there. There was gold in not only the edifice, but in the furniture and even the decor inside and outside. But unfortunately the Roman soldiers beat him to it, and they set the Temple alight and burned it to the ground. What happened to the gold then? Well, the gold melted, and it ran down the edifice of the Temple and into every nook and cranny, into the joins and the cracks of the bricks. So the general, Titus, gave the order to take the remains apart - brick by brick - to salvage the gold. The Lord Jesus' prophecy fulfilled to the exact minutiae: not one stone would be left upon another.

Now, the only remaining wall of that Temple is the foundation wall that some of you who have been to Jerusalem will have seen - but, apart from that, not one brick was left upon another. Now we learn from that that we have got to take prophetic Scripture seriously, and we've got to look in detail at every specific thing that is said in the word of God. Not to just fudge it or spiritualise it but, if we can, to try to isolate specific details to understand what God is saying - but let me also say to you, maybe you're not a believer here this morning: prophecy is how God authenticates His message. Some unbelievers will say: 'How can we know that God is there? How can we know that Jesus Christ is His Son? How can we know that what He said was true? That what is said in the Bible really is the case, that He died for sins, rose again, and is coming again? How do we know?'. Prophecy is God's stamp of authenticity on His message. We can know that the Bible is true, we know Jesus is true, we know the message of the Gospel is true, because prophecy has proven it to be such. In other words, God fulfilling His word shows His authenticity in the message. You can believe God's word, and incidentally: Jesus, when He came the first time, fulfilled over 300 prophecies in the Old Testament Scriptures that were made hundreds of years before He was born - but there are eight times
more prophecies in the word of God concerning His second advent, His second coming, than there were of His first. So you can be eight times more sure that He's coming again, and that He will fulfil to every jot and tittle what has been prophesied concerning that great event.

Now, that prediction about the Temple moved them on in verses 3 and 4 to more questions from the disciples: 'Now as He sat on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked Him privately, 'Tell us, when will these things be? And what will be the sign when all these things will be fulfilled?''. Now, as I said at the beginning, this discourse is also recorded in Matthew and Luke, and we know from their record that the disciples actually asked more than simply when the Temple would be destroyed. Matthew 24 verse 3 says: 'Now as He sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately, saying, 'Tell us, when will these things be? And what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?'. So they're not just asking Him when the Temple would be destroyed, but they are asking Him about His return: when it will be and what the signs will be of His coming.

Now, it seems to me at least, that in the minds of the disciples the destruction of the Temple coincided with the end of the age and His return. Therefore the verses that follow in Jesus' answer, answer both these questions: one, when the Temple would be destroyed; and two, when Jesus would return and what the signs of His coming would be. Let me say, before we delve into it, as you read this portion of Scripture you will see that some of these predictions obviously referred to the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70 - there's no doubt about that. Yet, as you read, what is equally obvious is that these prophecies go farther into the future, and indeed right to the events preceding the second coming of the Lord Jesus.

Now, a few tips for you in interpreting prophetic Scripture. One is that you always must harmonise what you read in any prophetic passage with other prophetic Scriptures in the word of God, they have all got to fit together. We will see this morning, if you turn to verse 14, that Jesus refers there: 'when you see the 'abomination of desolation', spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing where it ought not' (let the reader understand), 'then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains". Now, He is appealing to Daniel's prophecy in the Old Testament. You've got to remember also that Mark, writing his gospel, was writing to Roman Gentiles - so he wanted them to understand, without the Jewish background, that biblical prophecy and specifically the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ is rooted in depth in the Hebrew prophecies of the Old Testament. So, in order to understand these great future events that are going to happen, you've got to put all prophetic Scripture together and don't take any in isolation.

That's the first tip, you've got to harmonise biblical prophecies. The second is: you've got to understand that, specifically in chapter 13 of Mark in the Olivet Discourse, these are questions asked by Jews - the disciples were Jews - of, essentially, a Rabbi, Jesus, who was a Jewish Teacher. So the environment, the climate of these prophecies and their fulfilment is essentially Jewish. They involve inherently Jewish issues and we ought not to forget that. A third thing to remember in interpreting Bible prophecy is: there always must be practical application. Now, if you look at verse 5 you will see that Jesus says: 'Take heed'. If you look down again at verse 23, He says: 'Take heed'. In verse 33 He says: 'Take heed'. In verse 7 He says: 'Do not be troubled'. In verse 13 He says: 'Endure'. In verses 18 and 33 He says: 'Pray'. In verse 9, verse 33, verse 35, and verse 37 He says: 'Watch'. There is a practical application to prophecy - and I'm sad to say that in many evangelical circles today, much study on these matters is simply idle speculation, or selfish gratification of the knowledge of the future. Often this preoccupation and selfish gratification leaves lives unchanged. People
are full of prophetic head knowledge, but their life remains the same. That was never the Holy Spirit's intention in giving us prophetic truth, it was always with a practical application. It was not given to gratify and satisfy our curiosity, it was given to engender holiness of life and watchfulness - as we do not look around us for signs, but we look for the Saviour who will come for those who believe in Him. I'm reminded of that hymn that refers to the Lord's Table by C.H. Spurgeon - and I'm taking it completely out of context, but you'll understand what I mean when I recite it to you - he said, concerning the Lord's Supper:

'If now, with eyes defiled and dim,
We see the signs, but see not Him,
O may His love the scales displace,
And bid us see Him face to face!'.

Now, applying that to the second coming doesn't lose any of its meaning. If we see the signs, but do not see Him, there is a problem - because there has to always be a practical application to these truths.

Now, to get a complete picture of this Olivet Discourse and the predictions, all three Gospels must be studied. We haven't got time for that this morning - you'll be glad to know! - but we may add some information from the other gospel writers as we go through here. Now, before Jesus answers what they actually asked He gives them some characteristics of the present age in which they were living, and in which we are living to a certain extent, and He tells them of things that are not signs of the end of the age and of His return. Verses 6 and 7: 'For many will come in My name, saying, 'I am He,' and will deceive many. But when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be troubled; for such things must happen, but the end is not yet'. Now, the Lord Jesus just wanted these Jews to know that every time some false Christ or false Messiah arises, or there is a war somewhere, they are not to conclude that that is the end and that Jesus will come soon.

Now, history bears this out, for as far as I am aware, historically, Jesus was the first to claim to be Messiah - but, after that claim, His life, death, and resurrection, many arose - Jews and Gentiles - who claimed to be the Christ. What Jesus was warning these disciples of is: 'This is going to happen. It's going to happen more and more, but don't conclude that this is the end and that I'm coming soon. This is going to happen in your time' - and it's happening in our time. But also He mentioned wars and rumours of wars, and what He was telling them is: there will be local wars, and when local wars arise, even in the Middle East, it is not necessarily significant and not necessarily pointing to the fact that it is the end. Now note verse 7, and this is clearly what He's saying at the end: 'Do not be troubled; for such things must happen' - what things? false christs and local wars, but the end is not yet.

What will the signs be of the end? Well, verse 8, I think, gives us the clue: 'For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be earthquakes in various places, and there will be famines and troubles. These are the beginnings of sorrows'. Now you can check this out yourself, but all three Gospels, Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, give what Mark here mentions as the sign at the end of the age as being: 'Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom... Earthquakes, famines, troubles. These are the beginnings of sorrows' - that could be translated, 'These are the beginnings of travail'. Your margin might read, 'These are the beginnings of the birth pangs'. Now, you women in the meeting this morning who have been through labour will know that it starts with a sharp pain - you would think I knew what I was talking about here! I do know what a sharp pain is, mind you, after the delivery! - but you will know that the birth labour pangs, the contractions,
increase just before the delivery. What Jesus is saying here is that 'This is the beginning of
the birth pangs, it's the start of the process of the end of the age which will bring My return'.
The first pang, if you like, the first labour pain and contraction is verse 8, the beginning:
'Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom'.

Now, if you ask questions of the Scripture rightfully you will be wondering now: 'Well, what is
the difference between the beginning of verse 8 and what Jesus said about wars and rumours
of wars in verse 7?'. If He said not to get all excited about wars and rumours of wars, what's
the difference between that that does not signify His coming, and nation rising against nation,
and kingdom against kingdom, which is a sign of the beginning of the birth pangs? Well, I
think it may be obvious enough that verse 7 is speaking of local wars. Jesus is saying that
there will always be local wars in humanity right across this globe, but verse 8 seems to be
more encompassing than that: nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom -
in other words, many believe this to be an idiom in the Hebrew language, or in the Hebrew
mind at least, of a world war. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom.
So verse 7 may be referring to local wars - we're not to get worried about that, that will
happen - but when we see world wars taking place, it may well be that they are birth pangs of
the end of the age, and a signal that the second coming of Jesus is soon. The end has begun
when world wars begin.

Now, I'll not test you if you can remember the first one - I'm not looking at anyone in
particular! - World War I, 1914-1918, was the first world war ever. It may well have been the
fulfilment of this first birth pang. There are many who believe that World War II, 1939-1945,
was essentially a continuation of World War I. It's very interesting to note that both these
world wars had significant impact on the Jewish history. World War I gave impetus to the
growth of the Zionist movement, and World War II led to the re-establishment of the Jewish
state in 1948. Now, some interpret - and I have sympathy with this - World War I, the first-
ever worldwide conflict, to be the beginning of the birth pangs, testifying that the end of the
age has begun.

He also says in verse 8 that there will be earthquakes in various places. Dr Arnold G.
Fruchtenbaum, a Jewish Christian and Bible scholar, says that according to the Encyclopaedia
Americana, between the years 63 and 1896, there are only 26 recorded earthquakes. Now,
obviously, the records weren't as extensive as we have today - nevertheless, it's interesting
to note. The US geological survey says that most of the world's earthquakes with 1000+
deaths began since the year 1900. Now, obviously our ability to detect earthquakes has
increased, but nevertheless it does appear that there is an increasing trend - that earthquakes
are increasing. In the first thousand years after Jesus, there were approximately 5 recorded
major earthquakes - now, as we said, there were certainly others in more remote areas that
were not recorded. But watch the pattern: the 14th century, 157 major earthquakes; the 15th
century, 174; the 16th century, 253; the 17th century, 278; the 18th century, 640; the 19th
century, a massive jump, 2119 - what of the 20th century? Nearly 900,000 earthquakes! That
works out at approximately 1 per hour! Over the period of a month recently, just December,
on the 2nd of December there was an earthquake of 6.9 magnitude in New Guinea; on the
17th of December an earthquake of 7.2 on the California-Mexican border; December the 20th,
5.6 in El Salvador, December the 21st, 6.2 in Sumatra and 7.4 in Japan on the same day; on
December the 25th, 7.6 in Fiji; and on January 5th, this month, 6.6 in Vanuatu in the South
Pacific - and 10 minutes later there was another earthquake in the same place of 5.5.

Now, you interpret that as you like, but I think the evidence signifies that earthquakes are
increasing - incidentally, round about the same time as the First World War! Jesus said these
would be signs of the end of the age and of His second coming - and, of course, we'll spend no time on famines, pestilences, and troubles! We're looking on our news every day and seeing climate catastrophes and so on and so forth that seem to be on an accelerated scale that we have never known before.

Verse 9 appears now for Jesus to be turning His attention to the present time again, that means His present time with the disciples. He starts to address in verse 9: 'Watch out for yourselves', He starts to address the experiences that the Apostles could expect. Now Luke actually makes it more clear when he says: 'Before all these things', before these signs of the ends of the age will occur, Apostles, you need to be careful and watch because there are things that you're going to experience that you need to be ready for. He gives a list of the things in verses 9 through to 13: 'Watch out for yourselves, for they will deliver you up to councils, and you will be beaten in the synagogues. You will be brought before rulers and kings for My sake, for a testimony to them. And the gospel must first be preached to all the nations. But when they arrest you and deliver you up, do not worry beforehand, or premeditate what you will speak. But whatever is given you in that hour, speak that; for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit. Now brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; and children will rise up against parents and cause them to be put to death. And you will be hated by all for My name's sake. But he who endures to the end shall be saved'.

Now, we'll not go into the details here, but all you need to do is read the Acts of the Apostles and you will see that all of this was fulfilled in the life of the Apostles in the early church. I believe the Lord was interjecting here, preparing the Apostles for what they must expect, to teach them not to expect the end of the age too soon, not to expect the Tribulation too soon, and the second coming to the Mount of Olives too soon. Now, verse 14 then, Jesus now turns, I believe, to answer the question that they have asked about the end of the age. In verses 14 to 23 He speaks about what we know as the Great Tribulation that will lead up to His second coming. When I speak of His second coming, I'm not talking about the rapture of the church which many believe will take away believers, faithful Christians, to be with the Lord before this period of time. You can read about it in 1 Thessalonians 4, 1 Corinthians 15, and John 14 and several other Scriptures. What we're talking about is the Lord Jesus coming to the Mount of Olives to judge the world and reign from Jerusalem for a thousand years - and I call that His second coming.

We're going to read here in verses 14 to 23 about what Old Testament prophets called 'Jacob's Trouble'. Now, birth pangs, travail, would equate well with that description, 'Jacob' being Israel, the people of God, the chosen generation in the Old Testament, it's their time of trouble or tribulation. It's also described as a time of wrath, unprecedented indignation and punishment upon this world. In Daniel 9 it is spoken of as 'Daniel's 70th week'. I don't want to get too technical on Sunday morning, but prophetic weeks are made up of weeks of years - our week is made up of a week of days, 24-hour days; prophetic weeks are made up of weeks of years. In other words, one day is as a year, and so one week of prophetic weeks, seven days, will be seven years. We believe that 'Daniel's 70th week' means that this period, this Tribulation period on the earth, just before Jesus comes to the earth, will last seven years - and Revelation also bears that out, but we'll not go into that this morning.

Jesus gives, from verse 14 on, an overview of this period - mainly, in Mark's gospel, its the second half, in other words the last three and a half years; Matthew and Luke give the whole overview of this seven year period. So verse 14 really is the halfway mark of the seven year time, so three and a half years into this Tribulation period we read that this is what will happen, this actually will mark the three and a half years: 'When you see the 'abomination of
desolation,' spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing where it ought not' (let the reader understand), 'then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains'. Now, what is the 'abomination of desolation' spoken of by Daniel? Well, it refers to an idolatrous pollution of the Jewish temple by the Gentiles. They will come into the Temple, that holy, sacred place of God's people, and they will desecrate it. Now the Temple was defiled in 167 BC by the Syrian King Antiochus Epiphanes - but the fact of the matter is: what Jesus is speaking of is future to that. This is after that event, and in fact Mark says here in verse 14, for the benefit of his Roman Gentile readers, not Jesus' listeners now but the Gentile readers: 'let the reader understand'. So this is future in time.

Of course the Temple was defiled in A.D. 70 when the Romans came in and destroyed it, but Jesus here is clearly referring to a future abomination of desolation, still to be even in our time. Now this is referred to - this is how we know this is future - it's referred to in other scriptures. Turn with me to 2 Thessalonians, please, chapter 2 and verse 3: 'Let no one deceive you by any means; for that Day will not come unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin', that's the Antichrist, 'is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God. Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things?'. Now that is a future abomination of desolation, where the Antichrist will come into the Temple of God - and by the way, that necessitates that it will have to be rebuilt after its destruction in A.D. 70. What sits on Mount Zion is not a Temple, it's a mosque, and somehow there is going to have to be a Temple built there, either on top of it or, as I suspect, probably beside it in some new peace agreement that the Antichrist will bring into the Middle East. Nevertheless, this abomination halfway down through the seven years is going to be Antichrist setting himself up in the Jewish temple to be God, and to be worshipped as God.

Now, if you're interested in the rebuilding of the Temple, you might like to know the plans have already started. If you go to Jerusalem - some of you, I know, have been there recently - you will visit down a little street a place called 'The Temple Institute'. You don't have to go to Jerusalem to find out about it, you can go online, Google 'The Temple Institute', go to 'About Us', and you will find that this is what they say: 'Our short-term goal is to rekindle the flame of the Holy Temple in the hearts of mankind through education. Our long-term goal is to do all in our limited power to bring about the building of the Holy Temple in our time'. They have already made much of the furniture for the Temple.

Now this is also prophesied in Daniel 12:11 - don't turn to it - this 'abomination of desolation', but to show you that this is future turn with me to Revelation chapter 13, speaking of the same event. Verse 14 of Revelation 13: 'He deceives those who dwell on the earth by those signs which he was granted to do in the sight of the beast', that's the Antichrist, 'telling those who dwell on the earth to make an image to the beast', the Antichrist, 'who was wounded by the sword and lived. He was granted power to give breath to the image of the beast, that the image of the beast should both speak and cause as many as would not worship the image of the beast to be killed'. Now this completely corresponds with 2 Thessalonians chapter 2: there is going to be an image of the beast, the Antichrist, set up in the Temple of God. The false prophet is, by supernatural power, going to give that image the appearance of life - and he will demand to be worshipped. That's what Jesus is talking about, is it not? The act of the desolation of the Temple.

He goes on in verse 15 of chapter 13 of Mark, please, the abomination of desolation halfway through this seven year period will signal for the Jews to flee Jerusalem. We read here in
verse 15 back in Mark 13: 'Let him who is on the housetop not go down into the house, nor enter to take anything out of his house. And let him who is in the field not go back to get his clothes. But woe to those who are pregnant and to those who are nursing babies in those days! And pray that your flight may not be in winter', for obvious reasons, for pregnant women wintertime will not be the most satisfying time to flee Jerusalem, so pray that it's not winter, 'For in those days there will be tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the creation which God created until this time, nor ever shall be'.

Now this flight of the Jews, if you go back to Revelation, this time chapter 12, Revelation chapter 12, you will find it's also prophesied there. This is future, not just referring to A.D. 70, but future - Revelation 12 and verse 13: 'Now when the dragon', that is Satan, 'saw that he had been cast to the earth, he persecuted the woman', I believe that's Israel, 'who gave birth to the male Child', that is Christ, 'But the woman was given two wings', Israel was given two wings, 'of a great eagle, that she might fly into the wilderness to her place, where she is nourished for a time and times and half a time, from the presence of the serpent' - three and a half years. So this is a signal, the abomination of desolation, this is a sign that Jesus is coming soon. It's a sign for the Jews to flee, and the elect Jews in verse 20 - I believe that's who the elect are here in this passage - 'And unless the Lord had shortened those days', back to Mark 13, 'Unless the Lord had shortened those days, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect's sake, whom He chose, He shortened the days. Then if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or, 'Look, He is there!' do not believe it. For false christs and false prophets will rise and show signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect'. We've seen that, the false prophet will do signs and wonders that will cause the whole world to marvel. But Jesus is saying to the chosen people, Israel, they are not to believe during this period that any Messiah has arisen secretly. Many will come to the Jews and say: 'O, here is Messiah, there is Messiah' - Jesus is saying, 'At that point I will not come secretly, but when I come', Revelation 1 verse 5 says, 'Behold, every eye will see Me' - every eye will see Me!

Even if signs and wonders accompany such false christs, they are not to believe. Incidentally, if you were to read 2 Thessalonians again and chapter 2 and verse 7, we read that the mystery of this lawlessness, this lawlessness of Antichrist, is already at work. What that simply means is that, I believe, as we come closer to the second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ there will be miraculous deeds done in the name of false christs and false religion that will deceive even the very elect of God. Now don't misunderstand what I'm saying here, I believe in miracles, I believe in the supernatural, I believe that the Holy Spirit is the same as He was in the Acts of the Apostles - but when the miraculous is divorced from biblical truth, we're not to believe it, for there is coming a day when someone will do signs and wonders that have been unsurpassed in reference to what the world has already seen, apart from Christ. But when miracles are divorced from the truth of God we have to take heed and flee. Let me be more specific: some of you have got religious television, and cable television, and satellite television that bombard you with 'evangelical' trash - another way of putting it, an effluence of wickedness, doctrines of devils. They are doing things, supernatural things, in the name of Christ or a christ, but their demeanour, their language, their way of life - Jesus said of false prophets: 'By their fruit you will know them'. I don't care what miracles are being done - and I believe in miracles - but I don't care who's doing miracles, if their life and their teaching is divorced from this book it's not of the Holy Spirit but of a false spirit.

Now a sign of Jesus' return is found in verses 24 to 27: 'In those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars of heaven will fall, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory'. Now, after the Tribulation and after these seven years of
wrath being poured out on the Earth, there will be a solar blackout - lights out. We read that the light of the moon and the stars also will deplete, will be blocked, and indeed the very forces that keep stellar bodies in their orbit since creation will be shaken. There will be utter blackness. Now, why is there utter blackness? The utter blackness is to be a backdrop for Jesus returning, verse 26: 'Then you will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and great glory'. The great glory that He's coming with is the Shekinah glory of God that dwelt in the Tabernacle, the Temple, and at Pentecost and on various other occasions - that Shekinah light of God's presence will precede Jesus coming, that will be the sign that Jesus is just at the threshold of the door - and the backdrop will be this solar blackout. Think about it, it's wonderful, isn't it? We read about it in Zechariah 12, we'll not look at it - but He did tell the Jews that He would not come again until they asked for Him. We read in Zechariah 12 and Zechariah 14 that Jerusalem will be surrounded at this last point in the Tribulation period by the armies of the world, and they will be almost obliterated, and they will cry out to their Messiah that they rejected and He will come.

Now, the Lord Jesus at this point in the Olivet Discourse didn't want His disciples to be taken up with the signs and not live up to the responsibilities - and that's not the result He wants either for us this morning. I know I have bombarded you with a lot of information, but this is what the Lord felt fit to give His disciples on the last week of His life, and I think it bodes well for us to take attention and time in looking at it. But in order that they don't make this mistake of getting taken up with the future and doing nothing in their lives presently toward holiness and godliness, He ends with two parables. Now Matthew records three more parables than Mark does, but we'll just deal with Mark's this morning.

The first is the parable of the fig tree, verse 28: 'Now learn this parable from the fig tree: When its branch has already become tender, and puts forth leaves, you know that summer is near. So you also, when you see these things happening, know that it is near; at the doors! Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away'. Now we know that the fig tree represents Israel, we saw that last week - but here I don't think that's the specific point, because Luke also says that the fig tree and other trees bring forth leaves. I think it's just an illustration to say that, just as you know summer is coming when spring comes and the leaves start to sprout on fig trees and all sorts of trees, when you see these signs taking place you know that the return of Jesus is near.

Now, remember He's talking in the context of the Tribulation. The sign that He gave in verse 14 is that midway in the Tribulation this abomination of desolation will happen, and those who are there who have believed during this period, when they see this happen in Jerusalem, are not only to flee but they are to count down from that moment three and a half years to know that Jesus isn't very far away. That will give them help to endure, we read that in verse 13, there's no doubt about that - but look at what Jesus says, and this has caused many to scratch their head, in verse 30: 'Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place'. Now, what generation is He talking about? Surely it's not the generation of the people He was speaking to, for they are all dead! I believe it's the generation who see this abomination of desolation in verse 14, the generation that sees this will be 3.5 years away from the coming of Jesus Christ. But, incidentally, you've got to remember that this abomination of desolation performed by the antichrist is in order to exterminate the Jewish race - and we know that Mark has actually used this word 'generation' of the Jews in his gospel, and Jesus used it of the Jewish people. So it could mean the ethnicity of the Jewish race, and what Jesus is saying is that they will survive despite the attempts of antichrist, the false prophet, and Satan to eradicate them from this Earth - they
will survive, as a testament to what? As a testament to God and His promises, that when God makes a covenant as He did with Israel in the Old Testament, when God makes a promise with you, my friend, He keeps it! Through hell and high water He keeps it!

Verse 31 is testament to this: 'Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away' - 'I will fulfil my words'. You see, we as believers do not depend upon signs, we depend upon the unchanging word of God, 'a more sure word of prophecy', that's what Peter said. Jesus will fulfil His word. Now, whilst this fig tree parable appears to apply to the Tribulation, the next parable, the parable of the porter in verses 32 to the end of the chapter could apply directly to us, and everyone in any age. Look at it, verse 32: 'But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Take heed, watch and pray; for you do not know when the time is. It is like a man going to a far country, who left his house and gave authority to his servants, and to each his work, and commanded the doorkeeper to watch. Watch therefore, for you do not know when the master of the house is coming; in the evening, at midnight, at the crowing of the rooster, or in the morning; lest, coming suddenly, he find you sleeping. And what I say to you, I say to all: Watch!'.

He urges watchfulness. Three times in this small parable at the end of the chapter He uses the word 'Watch'. He is saying: 'Be ready!'. Are you ready? Are you ready for the rapture, believer? We don't look for signs, for it could happen at any moment. Are you ready if the Lord should take you home? Are you ready spiritually, are you the way that you would like to be when Jesus comes? Is your life in order, for He could come at any moment for His people? It's urging watchfulness. Are things right with others in your life? Are your affairs right? Is your business right? Is your marriage right? Is your relationship with your children, and your parents, and your neighbours, and your work colleagues, your brothers and sisters in Christ in your fellowship - is it right, that when the Saviour comes you're watching, because you're watching yourself because you're watching for Him? John says: 'Whoever has this hope within him purifies himself, even as Christ is pure'. You see, if you're looking for Jesus coming, and you're watching and you're ready, it will bring holiness into your heart. We are to be watching, and we're to be labouring - not sitting about just waiting, we're to be up and doing because the day is far spent. We are to redeem the time and make the most of what we have.

Now, I know verse 32 causes a bit of consternation and debate, for here the Lord Jesus says 'of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven' - well, we can live with that - 'nor the Son, but only the Father'. People say: 'Well, this is proof that Jesus was not divine' - no it's not! Neither does it show that Jesus set aside His divine attributes when He came to the Earth, what it speaks of is His servanthood. Mark's gospel is the gospel of the Suffering Servant of Jehovah, and if you look at Philippians 2 you will see that whilst Christ is divine, and in coming to earth remained divine, He took the form of a Servant, and thought it not something to be grasped at to walk around proving Himself to be God. He was God, but He didn't grasp at the use of His own divine attributes which were rightfully His. So, in other words, for the Son of God as the Servant of Jehovah at this point in time, this knowledge was only given to the Father. In fact, in Acts chapter 1 the Lord Jesus said to His disciples again: 'It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority'. This is something the Father knows. The point is: you don't know, and I don't know. The terrible fact is: most of us live as if it were a fairy-tale. Most Christians in the 21st-century West are living as if Jesus was never going to come. We are practical atheists. We need to watch.

Jesus said in this discourse that you need to take heed that you're not deceived. Many Christians are being deceived by false prophets and false teaching on every hand. That will
increase and wax worse and worse as we come near the return of the Lord. Take heed that you do not be discouraged and quit, that's what the Lord says: 'Endure, keep going'. So many Christians have just thrown in the towel. It's not easy, it was never easy being a Christian - how would you like to be fed to lions like the Apostles and early Christians were? - but it's not getting any easier, in our generation it's getting harder. It's caused many a one to just say: 'That's it, I can't handle it any more, I'm giving up'. Jesus says: 'Look, if you're watching for Me, if you believe I'm coming, you will endure to the end. Keep persevering, take heed that you don't get discouraged and quit'. Then He says in these final verses: 'Take heed that you watch and pray'. Are you watching and praying?

Do you know that Mark wrote his gospel for Gentile Romans who very soon - and we know this from 1 Peter 4 - they were going to face the worst persecutions that Christians have ever known? It must have brought them comfort to know that the greatest tribulation that would ever be, that has never been seen since the creation of the universe, that Christ is able to make people endure even through that - those who believe in Him during that period of time. So, if He's able to strengthen them through the Great Tribulation, surely He will strengthen His saints through any fiery trial that may come upon them? There is an encouragement there for you today, for some of you are going through fiery trials, aren't you? You're in the crucible, you're in the furnace! You feel consumed, you feel at the end of your tether! Be encouraged: Jesus is able to keep these dear people in the midst of all wrath being poured out on the earth, He is able to keep them unto the end without stumbling, and present them faultless unto their Father in heaven.

Did Jesus say all of us would face some trial or tribulation or another? In John 16:33 He said: 'In the world you will suffer persecution', in the world you will have tribulation, 'but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world'. Hallelujah! I love that statement, I know it's a bit of a cliche, but: 'I've read the back of the book, and we win!'. There's a lot between now and then, mind you - but it doesn't change the outcome. The Christian reading this may be encouraged to look up, for their redemption draws near. I'm not dogmatic on any of these things, but I believe we are coming very close to the return of our Lord - but for unbelievers, that's you here if you've never trusted Christ and been born-again, repented of your sins and believed the Gospel, for you: you're going to have to face all this if you don't come to Jesus. You don't know when He will come, so you must come to Him now!

Let us pray. Now, I know this teaching has been in-depth - but I hope that you have gleaned something from it, and I hope it has reached your heart not just your head. As we come to the Lord's Table, we do this only till He come. Jesus, when He instituted this Supper, as we will see next week probably, He told them that He would not drink of the fruit of the vine until He did in His kingdom. Now this is all relevant to what we're going to do now in the Breaking of Bread. It looks back to Calvary, it looks inward to yourself, asking yourself 'Are you right with God?' - and it looks forward to His return when we shall sit at the table with Him. Now, look, there's no better place to get your life right before God than round the Table of the Lord. Examine yourselves. Why not even do it now, just before we come to this point in our worship - come to the Lord and say: 'Lord, here I am, I didn't realise it was as late in the day as it is'. Sure you can see, if you have two eyeballs in your head, that things are getting very bad in our world? Say: 'Lord, You have my life, for whatever's left, whether You call me, or whether You come, You've got it all'.

Father, we thank You for the bluntness of our Saviour - full of grace, and yet full of truth. Lord, we know that there has been a lot of truth this morning, and we pray that You would help us not to tread where angels fear to in saying this is that - but, Lord, we certainly have
got the message that we don't know the day or the hour. We all must be ready, and may every soul in this place - young and old, saved and unsaved - may they get ready, and may we look forward now as we even break bread, as we remember Calvary, may we look forward to the day when we will see the Lamb slain in the midst of the Throne, when we will see the One who died for us and worship Him in person. We will throw our crowns at His feet - if we have any - and we will worship the Lamb that was slain before the foundation of the world. We will sing praise unto Him, who alone is worthy of our honour. May that risen, exalted, glorified Jesus, who once was slain, be revealed to us now in the Breaking of Bread as He was to the two on the Road to Emmaus. For His glory we pray, and our good, Amen.

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Transcribed by Andrew Watkins, Preach The Word – February 2011
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Now we're looking at chapter 14 of Mark's gospel, and we're beginning to read at verse 1: "After two days it was the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. And the chief priests and the scribes sought how they might take Him", that is, Jesus, "by trickery and put Him to death. But they said, 'Not during the feast, lest there be an uproar of the people'. And being in Bethany at the house of Simon the leper, as He sat at the table, a woman came having an alabaster flask of very costly oil of spikenard. Then she broke the flask and poured it on His head. But there were some who were indignant among themselves, and said, 'Why was this fragrant oil wasted? For it might have been sold for more than three hundred denarii and given to the poor'. And they criticized her sharply. But Jesus said, 'Let her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a good work for Me. For you have the poor with you always, and whenever you wish you may do them good; but Me you do not have always. She has done what she could. She has come beforehand to anoint My body for burial. Assuredly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be told as a memorial to her'. Then Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve, went to the chief priests to betray Him to them. And when they heard it, they were glad, and promised to give him money. So he sought how he might conveniently betray Him".

Let us all pray. As all of our heads are bowed, I would ask you to come to the Lord now in prayer - and, whatever your need is, that you might ask Him to meet your need. If you're here tonight and are not a believer in the Lord Jesus - I mean by that that you're not born-again, you're not converted - that you would even open your heart to the Lord. What have you got to lose? Open your heart to the Lord, and say: 'Lord, if You have anything to say to me, speak to me now' - and I believe He will answer that prayer, I really do. But there are many believers, and they haven't heard the voice of God for a long time, maybe they haven't been able to hear it - well, why not bring yourself, before we even preach tonight, why not bring yourself initially to that point of saying: 'Lord, I just want now to be ready to hear from You'.

Father, we thank You for the wonder of the Lord Jesus. He truly is Wonderful, Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. We are lost in wonder, love and praise when we gaze upon Him. Lord, we know that it is the ministry of the Holy Spirit to come and to testify, to take of the things of Christ and show them to us. Lord, I pray now that the Holy Spirit of God, who has been given to His church, that, Lord, He will come and He will minister Christ to every heart. Lord, we would see Jesus, we thank You for your word - but beyond the sacred page, we seek Thee Lord. Our spirits pant for Thee, the Living Word. We don't want to go away, Lord, knowing a little bit more about You; we want to go away knowing You more, personally and intimately. I bring before You tonight the needs of this congregation. You know them, Lord, I don't - but we pray that the Spirit who is the Lord, who searches the hearts, will uncover the secret things and minister to every soul gathered here tonight. Lord, there are needy people, there are unbelieving people, there are hard-hearted people perhaps, there are
discouraged people. Lord, we bring these needs to You, and we pray that in the name of the Lord Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit, that You will meet every need in this place. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

If this is your first occasion with this, I started last week here in Ards Evangelical, last Sunday morning, a series which I have really entitled 'The Final Countdown to Calvary'. What we're looking at is the final week in the life and ministry of Jesus. We have covered some ground already, last Sunday morning we looked at the Sunday of that week, which was Palm Sunday, the Triumphal Entry of the Lord Jesus into Jerusalem - as the King of the Jews He presents Himself to them in fulfilment of prophecy. Then we saw that on Monday, the next day in Jesus' week, He cursed a fig tree - which was significant because it spoke of the nation of Israel who were God's chosen vessel to bear fruit and to witness to the world. He cursed this tree, signifying - because it had no fruit and it was taking up room but wasn't serving any purpose - just like the nation at that particular time. Then He went into the Temple that same day, Monday, and He cleansed the Temple of those who were buying and selling, and using what should have been a house of prayer unto God as a den, a hiding place, for thieves and robbers. Then on Tuesday, we saw last Sunday night, that on the Tuesday of the final week of Jesus He was questioned by the Sanhedrin, the Jewish religious council, in the precincts of the Temple. This morning we saw that it's probably about Wednesday in the week, we can't be too dogmatic about it, but He gives what we know as the 'Olivet Discourse', and we read that in chapter 13 and studied it in some detail.

Now, verses 1 and 2 are speaking of the 'Feast of Unleavened Bread', the Passover, and the chief priests and the scribes seeking how they might take Jesus by trickery and put Him to death - this is probably still Wednesday of the week. By the time we get down to verses 10 and 11, where Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve, goes to the chief priests to betray Jesus, it is most likely the early hours of Thursday morning. So, we're following the Lord Jesus along this week. Now, there's a bit of a discussion about verses 3 to 9, this anointing of the head and feet of Jesus by Mary of Bethany - there's a bit of discussion about when this actually took place. Although it is placed here by Mark and other gospel writers, Matthew, at this juncture; we know from John, in John chapter 12 and verse 1, in his account of this incident, he says this took place six days before Passover. So we're going out of chronological sequence a little in Mark's gospel - so this is more than likely Saturday night, the night before Sunday, the Palm Sunday, the Triumphal Entry. So we're going back in time a little.

Now, you might ask: 'Well, why do Matthew and Mark place it here?' - well, probably for thematic reasons. It says here, of course, in verse 8 that Jesus confesses that Mary has anointed Him beforehand, anointed His body specifically, for His burial. It certainly fits in with this gospel of the cross of Mark's. But I think there's more to it than that: what Mark, and I believe the Holy Spirit behind Mark, wants to do is contrast Mary's devotion with Judas' betrayal - that's why it's here. He wants to contrast what I have called 'A Miserable Betrayer', Judas, with 'An Extravagant Worshipper', Mary of Bethany.

So, let's look at both these characters in order. Now we see that Judas solves the problem of the chief priests and scribes in verses 1 and 2. They want to kill the Lord Jesus, but they don't want to do it during this religious feast and festival of Passover and Unleavened Bread - verse 2 gives the reason: 'Lest there be an uproar of the people'. You see, the Lord Jesus was popular among the common people, and there were so many Jewish people - as we saw last week - coming into the holy city during Passover time that it was a tinderbox for trouble. They didn't want in any way to court some kind of unrest. But we see that Judas solves their problem, because in verses 10 and 11 he agrees to secretly hand Jesus over to the
authorities. He goes to the chief priests, 'And when they heard it, they were glad, and promised to give him money. So he sought how he might conveniently betray Him'.

Now let's look at Judas. I want you to understand something: to betray someone is not the same as being their enemy. Now, think about that for a moment: to betray someone is not the same as being their enemy. You see, the essence of betrayal, even to death, is that you have to show affection towards the one that you are betraying. Betrayal comes from the hand of a friend. If you like, a betrayer is one who embraces you with one arm, and stabs you in the back with the other. Here we have Judas, the greatest betrayer of all time, who was the friend to the greatest Man of all time. Now please note this, because it's vital, and may well be even essential to your eternal well-being that you realise that the betrayer of Christ professed to be one of His greatest friends. He was one of the twelve disciples that followed Jesus for three and a half years of His ministry. Incidentally, the greatest betrayers of Christ today are still those who profess to be His friends. You see, you can be affectionate towards Jesus, but ultimately be betraying Him. I wonder is that anyone here tonight?

Let me be more specific: perhaps you would call yourself a 'Christian'. Perhaps you go to a Christian place of worship, your religious creed is one that belongs to Christendom. You pray, perhaps, to Jesus. Perhaps you have been baptised as an infant in the name of Jesus. Perhaps you have done things in His name - but that does not make you a Christian. Even if you are affectionate towards Him - and I would vouch to say that, though the whole world is not Christian, most people have some kind of a reverence for the character and person of Jesus, most people do - but just because you have an affection towards Him does not mean that you belong to Him, and you could even, ultimately, be betraying Him even though you feel predisposed toward Him. Now, that's frightening - because it was someone exactly like this who betrayed the Lord Jesus to death for the price of a slave.

I want you to consider tonight, before we look at Mary, looking at this miserable betrayer: first, to see the privileges that this man had. One of the great privileges he enjoyed was that he heard Christ's words. Please think about this for a moment: Judas was there on the Mount when Jesus gave His famous Sermon, we read it in Matthew 5, 6 and 7, and the Beatitudes - 'Blessed are the poor in spirit', 'Blessed are the meek', 'Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled'. He heard Jesus say the first time: 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto yourself', the 'golden rule' as they call it. Judas heard the first time: 'Turn the other cheek. Love them that hate you and despitefully use you'. Judas was there when the Lord Jesus Christ taught the parable of the Good Samaritan - the whole world knows about it, but he was there when He first taught it. He was there when He told the greatest story in the English language, it has been called by Charles Dickens - we know better than him that it's the greatest story, because we have experienced it in our lives - the story of the Prodigal Son. Judas was there when it was first told. Judas was there when Jesus said to His questioning disciples: 'Pray therefore in this manner: Our Father which art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name...' - and you know the rest. Judas was there the first time that was ever recited.

He sat on the edge of the crowd when Jesus taught the multitudes, and he also was in the private teaching school in the waysides at the twilight hours when the disciples were being instructed in the deeper things and mysteries of God's kingdom. He was there, and yet he never truly believed. That's staggering. He knew Christ intimately, but he did not know Christ by faith. He knew Christ personally, but he did not know Christ savingly - and that can happen. I'm telling you, it's happening this very day, the Lord's Day, right across Ulster, right across the United Kingdom. I know church attendances are depleting, but nevertheless there
are people who have been in Christian places of worship today, and they know Christ in a sense, they have an affection towards Christ, but though they know Him in some personal way - who He is, what He did - and they appreciate it, they do not know Him savingly, they do not know Him by faith. They have never repented of their sins, had a conversion experience, and believed in the Lord Jesus Christ alone for salvation - have you?

Now this is vital: not only did he hear the words of Christ, he saw the miracles of Christ. This is remarkable. He was there when Jesus fed the 5000 with five loaves and two fish. He was there when He fed the 4000 as well. He was on the boat when the storm arose, when Jesus stood and said: 'Be muzzled', and the storm was stayed - he was there and he saw it. I could go on and on and on. He saw great miracles: people who were blind given their eyesight; people who were lame given ability to move, and to walk, and to leap; people who had withered, atrophied arms, he saw them grow and take on muscle and be restored before his very eyes. He saw Jesus walk on water and raise dead people - this is a man that saw Christ's miracles, yet he never experienced the greatest miracle of all in his heart, he was never born-again! Now, I believe there are people and they have seen miracles, even experienced miracles in their own life - and maybe you're one of them. Sometimes, when our backs are against the wall, even the atheists among us pray and ask God's help, and sometimes God comes through. Now I know there's a question mark, and you think: 'Was that God or was that chance, or what was it?' - but you have been there, and maybe have seen something that is indisputable happen in your life in answer to coming in prayer to God. You have maybe experienced a miracle, or know someone who has, and it's irrefutable - and yet you yourself have never allowed God to birth the miracle of salvation in your own heart.

He saw Christ's miracles as well as hearing Christ's teaching - something else: he saw Christ save other people. Judas was there when Jesus took a detour to Samaria to meet one woman at a well at 12 noon, the hottest point of the day, and they were all bamboozled about why Jesus was going this route that no-one ever went, and why He spoke to this woman (which wasn't the done thing in the middle of the day, and especially a Samaritan woman, for the Jews had no dealings with Samaritans). He saw the barriers that Jesus went over in order to reach one woman, who was an immoral woman, who was married five times and was living with a guy - and Judas saw this woman converted at a well, having been given living water by Jesus so that she would never thirst again. Judas saw her go into her hometown in Samaria, and Judas heard about how the whole town had been converted to Jesus, he saw them all converted and yet he was never saved. It's remarkable.

He saw the wee man Zacchaeus come down from his tree, and Jesus said: 'Salvation must come to your house today'. He went to the house along with the rest of them, and he heard the repentance, confessing from the mouth of Zacchaeus when he said: 'I will repay fourfold all that I have stolen, and half my goods I will give to the poor'. He saw it, yet he never repented. He was there on the hills of Gadara, among the tombs, where there was a demoniac possessed with a legion of devils - which could be anything over a thousand devils. He saw this madman running around naked, wailing and cutting himself, he was possessed - and then he fell at the feet of Jesus, and Jesus delivered him and sent the demons into swine, and the swine went headlong into the water. Here was this madman that no one could tame, sitting at the feet of Jesus clothed and in his right mind - and yet Judas remained unchanged.

I wonder have you seen people's lives changed by Jesus, but He hasn't changed you yet because you won't let Him? He was a very privileged man, wasn't he? Hearing the teaching of Christ, seeing the miracles of Christ, seeing Christ save other people - but something else, and this is the most terrifying of all to me: he did the work of Christ. Yes, he did! In Luke's
Gospel chapter 10 we read that he was sent out by Jesus to spread the word of the Gospel of the kingdom. The Lord divided 70 of His disciples into twos, and they went out preaching the kingdom - and when they returned, do you know what they said? You can read it yourself, they said: 'Even the demons are subject to us in Your name'. Now, do you know what that means? Judas was casting out devils in Jesus' name. Judas was doing mighty works, we might call them miracles, in the name of Jesus - yet Judas rejected God's work in his own heart. He was engaged in a work in Christ's name, and a work of Christ had never been done in his heart!

How many ministers have been in pulpits of our land this day believing they are doing the work of Christ, and a work of grace has never been done in their hearts? How many Sunday School teachers have gathered a little brood of children around them, teaching them the Bible, doing the work of God, they think? We could go on and on, couldn't we? You can be a member in this church and not be saved. You can be, you know! I want you to look into your heart and ask yourself: are you truly born-again? I'm not asking you do you tick the little box of assent to 'He was born of the virgin, He was the Son of God, He died under Pontius Pilate and was buried and rose again the third day, and is ascended to heaven, and is coming' - I'm not asking do you intellectually assent to those things. I'm asking you: have you had the supernatural miracle of the new birth in your heart?

John Wesley went in 1735 as a missionary to Georgia, a colony in the United States, and after two years of work as a missionary among them, he said: 'I went out to convert the Indians, but, O God, who shall convert me?'. He went out to convert the Indians, and he wasn't saved himself - and he knew it! Do you know it? Do you know, there is an evangelical problem, a serious problem, and that is false profession. People who have been told they are saved, they may believe they are saved, and they are not saved. There is general agreement right across denominational divides and theological dispositions that this is a serious problem. Let me give you examples: Bill Bright of Campus Crusade for Christ says 'Many who call themselves Christians are not really biblical Christians at all. Although they may be religious people who attend church regularly, they have never experienced the new birth and a personal relationship with Jesus Christ'. Dr Rod Bell, the president of the Fundamentalist Baptist Fellowship of America, believes that 50% of people that go to church are lost. The evangelist, Luis Palau, said that of 80% of Americans who claim to be Christians, few live any differently from pagans or atheists, as though God has no claim on their lives. Dr James Dobson of Focus on the Family admitted: 'The majority of Americans are dabbling in religious expression that has no substance'. A.W. Tozer said: 'Probably less than 1 out of 10 evangelicals knows anything experientially about the new birth'.

Are you born-again? I'm not asking you did you utter some prayer, like 'abracadabra', that meant nothing to you and probably meant nothing to God. I'm asking you: have you got the assurance in your heart, given by the Spirit of God, that you are a son or a daughter of God? Are you born-again, and do you know that you're born-again?

Now, I know that Judas was ordained to this role, and I'm not going to get into this big debate tonight. God was sovereign in the way, and this was prophesied, but one thing I am sure of: I believe in no form of God's sovereignty that nullifies man's responsibility. Let me repeat that: I believe in no view of God's sovereignty that nullifies man's responsibility. What I mean by that is: Judas was guilty, and Judas was complicit in the betrayal of the Lord Jesus Christ. He was responsible. He made choices in his life - and I don't believe for one moment that he woke up one day and he decided: 'I'm going to betray Jesus Christ'. I believe that it happened in a process of decline, an inward decline in his life. Added to that, he was acquiring a taste
for a secret sin - do you know what that was? Covetousness. We know this from the scriptures. He was given the job right at the beginning of being the treasurer of the twelve, he was in charge of the kitty. We read from the start that he had his hand in the bag, from the beginning he was a thief - and that's why he objects (now it doesn't say specifically Judas, it says some among them objected) to this very expensive ointment being broken and poured out upon Jesus. They're saying: 'This could have been sold and the money given to the poor' - but we know from the other Gospel writers that Judas was the ringleader of this objection. He wasn't worried about the poor, he was worried about the money - he had his hand in the bag, and that was money he could have had.

But what I want you to see tonight is that it was his secret sin that caused him to eventually betray the Lord. Many people are not saved because they cannot, are not willing to, let go of their secret sin. Now don't misunderstand what I'm saying: you cannot overcome sin without the power of God. Repentance is not cleaning yourself up and then coming to Jesus, no! Repentance is a change of mind about your sin, which means you understand the damage it is doing to you and you're willing to be changed by the power of God. But one thing is certain: you cannot put one hand out to God, and hold tightly your sin with the other hand! Maybe some of you have been trying to do that: eventually your secret sin will cause you to betray the Lord. Believers, that applies to you as well: if you're dabbling in secret sin, it eventually will completely cut you off from God. I'm not saying you'll be lost forever, all I'm saying is: you will be at a point of almost no return if you don't cease and repent. What is your secret sin? J.C. Ryle, the Bishop of Liverpool, said many years ago: 'Open sin has killed its thousands, but secret sin its tens of thousands'.

Hence we read in verse 11: 'When they heard it', that he was willing to betray Jesus for money, 'they were glad, and promised to give him money. So he sought how he might conveniently betray Him'. How are you conveniently betraying Him? It's convenient for you because of your sin. But let me ask you a question: what is the memory that we have of Judas? Well, his name has become synonymous with betrayal, the miserable betrayer.

Now, in contrast to Judas, the Holy Spirit comes and reveals a woman whose name we have come to know as synonymous with devotion and worship. Now she is unnamed here, but in John chapter 12 we read that it was Mary of Bethany, the sister of Martha and Lazarus who Jesus raised from the dead. It's very, very instructive to know that three times in the gospel records we find Mary of Bethany at the feet of Jesus. That is beautiful. First of all when Martha, her sister, is cumbered about with much serving in the kitchen, Mary is at the school of Christ, at the Saviour's feet learning from Him. Then we find that when her brother dies, Lazarus, and Jesus delays in coming that He might raise him from the dead to glorify God, she falls at His feet and pleads for the life of her brother - there she is at His feet again. Here we see her again at Jesus' feet, this time anointing His feet with this very expensive ointment. Now, this account should not be confused with Luke chapter 7, and it often is. In Luke chapter 7 we read of a sinner woman who anointed the feet of Jesus in Simon the Pharisee's house - but this is not Simon the Pharisee's house, this is Simon the leper's house. Here Mary is, John 12 testifies, Mary anoints both the head and the feet of Jesus. We see the reason why in verse 8, Jesus says: 'She has come beforehand to anoint My body for burial'. Now this is sweet. When you read the gospel record and come to the end, after Jesus has been crucified and buried, we find that other women came to the tomb - and we read that the reason why they came was to anoint the body of Jesus after His burial. But here was a woman so devoted to Christ, whose spirit was so surrendered and in touch with the Spirit of God, that she knew - when the disciples did not understand, and you remember I showed you last week that time
Now, you say: 'Well, why did she do it before?'. So that He would be encouraged by her love, and He was. This was precious to Jesus. What worship! Now, David, the Old Testament King of Israel, was one of the greatest worshippers in the Bible. In fact, he is called 'a man after God's own heart'. I know he committed adultery and he murdered, and he did many other things, but nevertheless God looks at a contrite heart and a broken spirit - and David had that. He knew what it was to worship the Lord, and he knew what it was to give sacrificially in worship to the Lord. There is an occasion, I'll not go into all the details, you find it in 2 Samuel 24, where he is going to purchase a field. That field is going to be a place where sacrificial offerings would be made, and eventually the Temple would be built there as well. The man who owned the field was going to give it to him for nothing, because he's the King and he wants it for God. David spoke these words for time immemorial, that illustrate sacrificial offering - he said: 'I will not offer burnt offerings to the Lord my God with that which cost me nothing'. This is something precious in the sight of God, when He receives from our hearts costly, devoted, sacrificial worship.

Now don't misunderstand what I'm saying: I'm not saying you can buy your way to heaven. Salvation is by grace, through faith - it's a free gift, you just accept it by simple faith for the taking. But what I am saying is: when we understand and know and love God, there is nothing that delights His heart more than when we give Him what Hebrews talks about as 'The sacrifice of praise'. Do you know that believers are required to give sacrifices and offerings in this present dispensation? Not lambs or goats, but the sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving from our hearts - that's what Hebrews 13 and 15 says: 'Therefore by Him', by Christ, 'let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name'.

Now Mary certainly did not offer to the Lord that which cost her nothing. She offered a very expensive offering. Look at the verse, verse 4, verse 3 first of all: 'A woman', this is Mary of Bethany again, 'came having an alabaster flask of very costly oil of spikenard', or 'pure nard', the margin might say, 'Then she broke the flask and poured it on His head'. Now this spikenard was imported from India, and that was no mean feat in these days in which Jesus lived. We know from this context that a whole jar that she poured over Jesus' feet was worth one year's salary for a common labourer, because 300 denarii - that's the price that Judas and his objectors say could have been accrued through the selling of this ointment - that's a year's salary for the average man. What's your year's salary?

She was not inhibited in showing her love to the Lord openly. She did not just do it lovingly, but she did it lavishly. It was costly, it was extravagant - and do you know what John records in John 12, in his account? He says that the fragrance filled the whole house - that's what happens when you worship Christ like this! That's what happens when you give costly, sacrificial devotion to the Son of God - it fills the whole house! But not only was there a positive reaction, there was also a negative one - and can I say to you tonight: there always will be a negative reaction from some people when there is open, extravagant, loving and lavish devotion to Jesus in worship. The act of her devotion brought joy from the heart of Jesus, but equally drew malice from the heart of Judas and the others, whoever they were, who were objecting to this expensive sacrifice.
We see in verse 4, Judas and some viewed this as waste: 'Why was this fragrant oil wasted?'. They didn't see it as worship, they saw it as a waste! In verse 5: "It might have been sold for more than three hundred denarii and given to the poor'. And they criticized her sharply', and my margin says 'they scolded her sharply'. Imagine, in the presence of Christ, these guys rose up and scolded her! Can I say something to you: the flesh and carnal people, even carnal believers, cannot appreciate what is done only for the love of Jesus. Let me turn the tables on you: do you think it would be a waste to spend one year's salary on Jesus? Or, put it another way, do you think it would be a waste to spend one year on Jesus? I wonder is God calling some of you to spend a year for Jesus somewhere? To take a year out from your studies or from your career? Maybe there is a little voice niggling at the back of your consciousness, saying: 'But, it's a bit of a waste you know. I could get to where I need to be all the quicker if I didn't take that year, if I didn't give it to God' - but can I say something to you? Jesus wants more than a year, He wants your life. If you think it's a waste to give Him a year, a year's worth of money, or a year's worth of time, what's the chance then of you giving your life to Him?

Great demonstrations of worship are often misunderstood. Now don't misunderstand me here, I'm not talking about self-centred ostentatious pretension that we often see sometimes in churches, where people just get on in a way that just portrays, 'Look at me!' - that's not what we're talking about. You might say: 'Well then, how do you tell the difference between someone who is really openly, lovingly, and lavishly worshipping the Lord, and someone who's just doing it for self-centred reasons? How can you tell the difference?'. Well, the answer is: you can't! The difference is down here in the heart, and the only One who can tell the difference is God. So it's not for you to judge, it's for God to see and accept that which is true. But one thing I am sure of is that even when you are exercising exuberant, extravagant worship, openly, lovingly, and lavishly towards Jesus, even in a way that to others might seem embarrassing, if it is in spirit and in truth you lose self-consciousness somewhere. What I mean by that is: you couldn't care less what anybody thinks!

David, the great worshipper, is an example of this. He was misunderstood for it in 2 Samuel chapter 6, David danced, we read, before the Ark half naked - and his wife, Michal, looked out of her window and she saw him parading himself before the Ark. It says he was leaping and whirling before the Ark, and as Michal looked down upon this scene she despised him, the Bible says, from her heart - and later, when she got the opportunity, she mocked him sarcastically for his behaviour. Yet what he did, he said he did it unto God. Now, can I ask you: are you inhibited in your praise towards the Lord? Sometimes it's to do with our backgrounds and the way we believe we ought to behave ourselves - and, believe me, I'm not in favour of chaotic behaviour in the presence of God. There is a need, at times, for silence and sanctity, and a hush of holiness in our gatherings - but often we are inhibited in our praise, and all it is is fear of others. Fear of people like Judas and these naysayers, their scorn, their sarcastic remarks, that they are looking at us and what are they going to think of us? What does it matter! Maybe what you need to do here this evening, some of you who feel this in your heart, you have a devotion and a love towards the Lord just wanting to bubble up, but you suppress it because of what others will think of you - or maybe even a self-consciousness in yourself, do you know what you need to do? You need to break the alabaster box! In other words you need to break whatever is confining your praise and your worship, you need to shatter it and let it out!

The Lord quickly comes to the defence of His extravagant worshipper, He loves them. In verse 6 Jesus said to these people: 'Let her alone', I love that. Is that a word for someone here
tonight? 'Leave her alone', 'Leave him alone', 'Why do you trouble her? She has done a good work for Me'. Now if you mark your Bible, that would be a good two words to ring, 'for Me'. 'It was for Me, Judas. It was for Me, disciples' - here's something we continually need to ask ourselves: is what we're doing for Christ, truly for Him, is it for Him? What are you engaged in in the work of God, in church or whatever, I don't know - but is it for Him? Now listen, no matter what anyone thinks of us, no matter what anyone says of us, the only thing that matters is: is it for Him? Are we pleasing Him? Wait till I tell you: if I'm doing it for Him, and I'm pleasing Him, I don't care who I'm displeasing, I don't care! Sometimes it may annoy me a little bit when people are annoyed with me, and I don't like going out of my way to offend people of course, and I like to have friends and not enemies - but at the end of the day, if it is for Him, what else does anything matter?

You see, the most important thing for God is worship. God desires worshippers. In verse 7 Jesus makes this plain, He said about this issue of selling it and giving the money to the poor: 'You have the poor with you always, and whenever you wish you may do them good; but Me you do not have always'. The most important thing is worship, all else is secondary. It's not that we're not meant to give to the poor, it's not that we're not meant to preach the Gospel, it's not that we're not meant to do the things that we do that Christians do - but we're meant to realise the order of priority, the most important thing is devotion and worship to Jesus! That's the most important thing! Now have you ever discovered that? I know Christians who are running around like the proverbial bluebottle, for want of a better statement, and they're not in touch with God! They're doing things for God, and they're doing things from a heart of affection and devotion towards Him, and they're sincere - but they're not worshippers, they're not intimates, they're not people who have been in the Holiest Place of All and know what it is to gaze on the face of Christ in the spirit. If you're that person, you have missed the first and elementary lesson that Jesus taught these disciples.

Turn back with me to Mark 3 please, and this is important, verse 14 of chapter 3 - now watch this please, verse 13: 'He went up on the mountain and called to Him those He Himself wanted'. So He's calling the twelve Apostles, 'And they came to Him'. Now watch this verse, mark it if you can: 'Then He appointed twelve', why did He appoint them? 'That they might be with Him and that He might send them out to preach'. The first thing that He called them to be was 'with Him' - do you understand? - and then to go out and preach. The order is: we need to spend time with Christ, worshipping Christ, and then move out to others. The tragedy is: if we're not dependent on Him, and we're not intimate with Him, we will be no use in going out to others!

Judas wasn't interested in the poor, as we said, he wanted what was given to Jesus, the price of the ointment. Now, here we come down to the crux of the matter: sometimes our problem is we want what should be given to Jesus. We want the time, we want that half hour in the morning or in the evening, rather than giving it to God, or whatever time. We want the money, we want the selfish things, the delights, the passions, the pleasures, the sins, or the besetting things that maybe are not sins but they drag us down and keep us from God. Unless we surrender self, and allow it to be crucified, we're never going to have victory. Judas wanted what was given to Jesus, and it was betrayed in a bitter, begrudging spirit. You know, bitter, begrudging people cannot worship Christ. Stingy people, people who are stingy with money, their heart is not right with God - do you believe that? Now I know I'm causing some of you husbands a real headache now - but seriously speaking: miserliness is a sign of a bitter and stunted spirit - it is, and I can prove that to you from the word of God - but extravagance is a sign of a free spirit liberated by the grace of God.
Now let me ask you on verse 8, Jesus said: 'She has done what she could' - could that be said of you? Now, please, I'm not saying have you done what you could in the Sunday School, I'm not asking you have you done what you could in setting out the chairs, doing the door-to-door work - I'm not asking you that. I'm asking in the realm of worship, that's the context we are in now: have you done what you could? Even when you come into the church, this morning around the Table, this evening as you sing the songs - have you done what you could as you sing them, or are you just singing them? As we pray, as we offer up thanks and praise to God, are we doing what we could or are we just passing the time? As we give of our substance to God, are we doing what we could, are we giving sacrificially until it hurts a little bit, or are we just ticking the boxes?

It was fitting that Jesus should be anointed in this place, Bethany, it was His retreat, it was where He resorted to rest among His friends - because Jesus felt at home in Bethany, and because He felt at home in Bethany He abode there. You see, when He feels at home in your heart, when there is fragrant, sacrificial, extravagant, costly worship, He will abide with you.

There's something else that I want to leave you with here, and the Lord taught me this this week and it has been a blessing to me. It says in verse 9: 'Assuredly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be told as a memorial to her'. Now, do you know what that means? When you bless the heart of Jesus, you will bless the whole world. I sincerely believe this! If you can get intimate with Jesus in the secret place, in prayer and devotion and extravagant worship, you can change the world! I believe that! Whether as an intercessor, or in whatever capacity God has called you - because this fragrance didn't just fill the whole house, what Jesus is now telling us is that it filled the whole world, it filled the whole of history from this moment right to this very day!

Do you want blessings from God? Well, who doesn't? Well, the greatest blessings you can get from God are when you give the greatest blessings to God! Mary in this room in Bethany started a wave of blessing that has been memorialised, Jesus said that wherever the Gospel would be preached, her name and this story would be recounted - and we know that from Matthew, and from Mark, and from John. It's memorialised in the Gospels. This is really what I'm getting at: churches today are banging their heads together, brainstorming as to how we can most impact the world for Christ on the mission field and in our locality. How can we reach our neighbours and friends and our work colleagues? They decide: 'Well, we need more of this, and we need more of that, and we need this type of programme, and this type of regime' - listen to what I'm saying, God revealed this to me, I believe, from this verse this week: a devotional intimacy with Jesus will give you a universally powerful and impacting Gospel witness.

Let me repeat that: a devotional intimacy with Jesus will give you a universally powerful and impacting Gospel witness, because that's what it did for Mary of Bethany! That's what He'll do for you, dear, in your prayer closet, if you give your heart sacrificially to Him. He'll change the world through you, or some part of the world! What legacy are you going to leave? Judas' legacy, the miserable betrayer; or one like Mary of Bethany, the extravagant worshipper? Will it be said of you - I hope it's said of me at my funeral, if the Lord doesn't come before, I hope it's said: 'He did what he could in worship'.

Let us pray. Now in the quietness - and, by the way, one way that you can discern the presence of God in a gathering is quietness. I know I've been encouraging exuberant praise, and there is a place for that, but often what happens when the presence of God falls upon a gathering, and the power of God is evident in the preaching of the word, is that there is an
unusual stillness. I believe that that stillness is here, it's a sign of His presence. It's important, I believe - and you know I don't rush at any point - but it's important now not to rush when God is here. Just be still for a moment in His presence. He has been saying something to some of you, hasn't He? May I remind you that at the beginning you prayed for God to speak to you, I hope you didn't do it in a matter-of-fact way - and now He has said something to you, and you're going to try and plug your ears. You asked Him to speak to you and He has.

Unbeliever, He has spoken to you. You're going to be in danger of committing the mistake Judas did, and you will go to your own place as he did - he was lost forever in despair and regret and torment for what he had done - and you will be also, my friend, if you do not repent and believe in Christ. Will you be saved tonight? Young person, older person, will you, tonight, say - maybe someone who is under some illusion that they are a Christian, it doesn't matter if you hold a position in this church, who cares if your eternal soul is in jeopardy! - will you say tonight: 'I will be saved, and I will make sure I am saved'. If you're not sure, make sure!

But all of us believers have a debt to God - not our salvation, we could never repay that - but we have a debt of thanks, of gratitude and praise that He is worthy of for what He has done in our lives. How are we paying Him? Is there an alabaster box that needs to be smashed tonight? We all worship God in our own way, according to our own temperament and personality, we can't do it the same way as everybody else - but we need to be free. Where the Spirit of the Lord is there is liberty - are you free in your worship of God? You need to be, He wants you to be - not just in corporate gatherings like this, but intimately in the closet. Let me say to you: you have no idea the impact that your worship in the secret place will have openly to the world if you do what Mary did.

Now, I'm going to close in prayer, and I'm not going to say 'Don't talk', but just be aware that some people might be dealing with God, and aware that some people might be enjoying the sense of God. Don't take that away from them. If you want to talk, certainly talk, but just keep in mind, please, that some people might be really dealing with God.

Father, we thank You that there is a sense of the fragrance tonight of what that worship meant to Jesus just as He was going to Calvary - that there should be one heart that really understood, one heart that really wanted to say 'I love You Lord, for what You're about to do'. Lord, we often say of our loved ones down here, why don't we tell them we love them more while we have them with us - but this is on a different scale altogether. We pray that while we are in our bodies, and while we're living to praise You, that we will do it with all our might Lord - in our homes as well as in church. Let us not parade ourselves in public, but be dead at home. O God, if we do not praise You, the stones will cry out - so help us to learn even from the stones, but let us not be stones Lord, help us and teach us to be worshippers in spirit and in truth. We know that if we are true worshippers, we will present our bodies living sacrifices, wholly acceptable unto God, which is our expected worship. We will not be conformed to this world, but we will be transformed by the renewing of our minds, that we may be able to do what is that good, perfect, and acceptable will of God. Give grace, Lord, tonight, for the needy, for the unsaved, for the backslider, for the struggling Christian, for the person who is in the balance tonight. Let the transaction be enacted tonight, for the glory of Jesus we pray, Amen.

Transcribed by Andrew Watkins, Preach The Word – February 2011
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Well good morning to you all, it's good to be back with you again for the third week here at Ards. It's hard to believe how the time goes in, isn't it? After today just one more week with you. I've really enjoyed fellowship with you all, and I trust that the Lord has been blessing and speaking, and doing the work that only He can do. Thank you for the encouragement that some of you have been giving. Having said that... what's coming next!? The first week I was here there was one glass of water. The next week there were two glasses which I thought was a message, because I preached that long - and this week there is no water! So the message is coming loud and clear: you want me to dry up, don't you!? Someone has just gone to get me a glass, which I appreciate.

Now, we're turning to Mark 14. Now, if you haven't been with us any of these weeks, we're doing what could be entitled 'The Final Countdown to Calvary' - the last week in the life of the Lord Jesus' ministry. On Sunday, the first day of that week, we looked - here it comes, if you give a glass of water in His name you'll not lose your reward! Thank you. Palm Sunday, the Lord Jesus rode into Jerusalem in fulfilment of prophecy as the promised King of the Jews, the Messiah of Israel. Then we saw on Monday, the next day of that week, that the Lord Jesus cursed the fig tree, which was symbolic of the nation of Israel - how they were taking up space. They were intended by God to be a fruit-bearing people that would witness to the Gentile nations, but though they were taking up space they were fruitless, they were not living for the purpose for which God chose them. Then that same day, Monday, He went into the Temple and cleansed it - which was equally symbolic of the same truth: that God had finished, at that particular time, with their empty religious ritual without truth and meaning.

Then on Tuesday, we saw that the Lord Jesus in the Temple precinct was questioned by the Sanhedrin. We saw four questions in particular that they put His direction. Then, probably - we say probably because we can't be too dogmatic about each of these days - but probably on Wednesday, we looked last Sunday morning at how the Lord gave the Olivet Discourse, which you can also read in Matthew 24 and 25 and Luke 21. We read about it here, the signs of the times, the signs of the end of the age and those things that will precede the second coming of the Lord Jesus. We saw last Sunday night, the anointing of Bethany seems, in the chronological order of this passage, to come on Wednesday - but we saw, according to John chapter 12 and verse 1, this actually happened six days before Passover. So, I'm trying not to confuse you, but that means it was probably Saturday, the night before Palm Sunday. Yet it would appear to be Wednesday here in Mark's gospel, but we saw that this is a thematic thing that Mark is doing, and other gospel writers have placed this just where Judas is about to betray the Lord in order to contrast the heart of Judas - his wicked, miserable, betraying heart - with the devoted worshipping heart of extravagant love of Mary of Bethany as she anoints the head and the feet of the Lord Jesus in preparation for His burial.

Now, we saw verses 10 and 11 of chapter 14 were probably the early hours of Thursday morning when Judas goes out to meet the chief priests and tells them that he's going to betray Christ. Then we see that the verses we're considering today, verse 12, the Last Supper essentially, is also Thursday of that final week of the life of the Lord Jesus. So we will read
from verse 12 then, and we are reading through to verse 26: "Now on the first day of Unleavened Bread, when they killed the Passover lamb, His disciples said to Him, 'Where do You want us to go and prepare, that You may eat the Passover?'. And He sent out two of His disciples and said to them, 'Go into the city, and a man will meet you carrying a pitcher of water; follow him. Wherever he goes in, say to the master of the house, 'The Teacher says, 'Where is the guest room in which I may eat the Passover with My disciples?''. Then he will show you a large upper room, furnished and prepared; there make ready for us'. So His disciples went out, and came into the city, and found it just as He had said to them; and they prepared the Passover. In the evening He came with the twelve. Now as they sat and ate, Jesus said, 'Assuredly, I say to you, one of you who eats with Me will betray Me'. And they began to be sorrowful, and to say to Him one by one, 'Is it I?'. And another said, 'Is it I?'. He answered and said to them, 'It is one of the twelve, who dips with Me in the dish. The Son of Man indeed goes just as it is written of Him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been good for that man if he had never been born'. And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them and said, 'Take, eat; this is My body'. Then He took the cup, and when He had given thanks He gave it to them, and they all drank from it. And He said to them, 'This is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many. Assuredly, I say to you, I will no longer drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God'. And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives”.

Perhaps we could pray for a moment. I have invited you on previous occasions to come to the Lord with your need. I hope there is no one here that thinks they don't have any need, it's a terrible predicament to be in. The Laodicean church in the Bible was a church that was rich, and felt they had need of nothing, but didn't realise that they were poor, wretched, blind and miserable. So it's a great thing to know your need, and as you come to the Lord now with your need, whatever it is, ask Him to speak to you. Now, we've been having a lot of practical ministry over these weeks, and it has been challenging as has been reported to you - this morning we will also, I'm sure, have challenges, but primarily what you're going to see this morning and this evening is Jesus. I'm not going to do much more this morning and this evening other than present to you the Lord Jesus. Your reaction to that is whatever it will be, I can't do anything about that - but I pray that as you have Christ revealed to you, you pray now, that you will have Him minister to you personally in your life. So let us pray to that end - whatever your need is, whether you're a Christian or not, or you're not walking right with God, ask Him to minister Christ to you in a very living and real way.

Father, Abba Father, we come to You in the name of the Lord Jesus, and we need You. I need You, I feel my great need of You this morning. O God, we thank You that for this we have Jesus. We thank You that You have promised: 'My God shall supply all your need, according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus' - and there can be no greater measure of riches than Christ. We thank You, Lord, that in Him we are immeasurably rich; without Him we are immeasurably poor - but Lord, we thank You that those of us who have trusted in Jesus, repented of our sins and believe the gospel, that we have Christ and we have everything. But Lord, so often we are not living in the wealth of our riches, so often we're not seeing Jesus, the Author and Finisher of our faith, who, for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross. So often, Lord, a bit like the fog that has been these last couple of days, we can't see Him because things have clouded Him out and got in the way. So, Lord, I pray now by the power of the Holy Spirit that You will breathe a fresh breath of the wind of Your Spirit and clear the fog, clear the cloud. Whatever barriers there might be between us and seeing Christ in all of His wonder and glory and splendour and majesty, and all of His beauty, Lord may we see Him now on this Thursday of the final week of His life, as He gives us this supper, and as
we later on eat of that supper may we know the presence of Christ in such a fullness as we have never known before that we are overwhelmed. Lord, we want to be overwhelmed with Jesus. Hear us we pray, in His wonderful name, Amen.

Verse 12 tells us that this was the first day of Unleavened Bread when they killed the Passover lamb. Little did the disciples realise that this Passover that the Lord Jesus was about to instruct them to go and find a room in which to celebrate would be the Passover of all Passovers. This would be the fulfilment and the climax to all Passovers that had ever been celebrated, because this Passover would bring the Lamb that would take away the sins of the world to the ultimate sacrifice, one sacrifice for sins forever that would never have to be repeated. Is it any wonder that the theme of heaven at this very moment is: 'Worthy is the Lamb that was slain and has redeemed us to God by His blood out of every tribe, tongue and people and nation' - and that will forever be the theme of heaven. There is a Lamb, as if freshly slain, in the midst of the throne, and all the throngs of glory around the glassy sea, the blood-bought redeemed, are singing praise unto this Lamb - and this is what we're seeing now in time on this final week, the Lamb being delivered to be slain at the final Passover of significance.

Now, again in verse 13, just as a bit of a digression - those of you who were here in our first study will see that there are lessons to be learned about how the Lord directs His disciples, and equally how He directs us in our lives as Christians. We see Him again directing the disciples on an errand, verse 13, He sends out two disciples and says to them: 'Go into the city, and a man will meet you carrying a pitcher of water; follow him'. You remember in chapter 11, if you weren't here with us let me just fill you in, chapter 11 and verse 2 - just before the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem on the Sunday of this week - the Lord Jesus said to them in verse 2: 'Go into the village opposite you; and as soon as you have entered it you will find a colt tied, on which no one has sat. Loose it and bring it'. You remember that they had to follow the Lord through in all this, believing Him that what He said was true. There was a great risk in this, because they could have been construed as being thieves. But in the same sense we see that the Lord is operating here and giving all knowledge to the disciples - how else could He have known that this was going to happen, that they would go into the city, chapter 14:13, and they would find a man carrying a pitcher of water?

There is the lesson again for us: when we are seeking direction from God we ought to know that He is the all-knowing sovereign Lord, and we can trust Him. Whatever He says to us, we can trust it. Often what He says to us is in specified detail - if you look at this, it really is fascinating. Verse 14 as well: 'Wherever he goes in, say to the master of the house, 'The Teacher says, 'Where is the guest room in which I may eat the Passover with My disciples?'. Then he will show you a large upper room, furnished and prepared; there make ready for us'. It's all specified in intricate detail! So the disciples had to have faith in the word of Jesus that He wasn't sending them down a blind alley.

Do you ever feel, when you're being directed to do certain things by God, that He's sending you down a blind alley? Or at least the fear is there: 'What if it is? What if I hit a cul-de-sac?'. You need not fear! Though sometimes He asks us to do things that are unusual - we saw that the last time when He was guiding them to go and get the colt tied up, and it was owned by someone, it was a very strange thing to do - but equally so this is strange, because ordinarily only women carried water on their head, but the Lord directed them that a man would meet them carrying a pitcher of water: 'Follow him'. Now, they took bold faith, they stood upon the word of God, and they exercised obedience. Look at verse 16, just to encourage your heart if you're being asked to do something for God that might seem to be unusual: 'So His disciples
went out, and came into the city, and found it just as He had said to them' - and that will always be the case. You will find that whatever the Lord is directing you to do, if you do it, and you're obedient, and you trust His word, that you will find it exactly as He has said it to you.

Here's the reason why, look at chapter 13 and verse 31: 'Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away'. This is the sovereign Lord who is giving us direction - I want you to grasp this, please, because I'm conscious that many of us are looking for guidance and direction in our lives for various situations. You can trust the sovereign Lord Jesus Christ with your life! You can trust Him. You can trust Him with your decisions, you can trust Him with your plans! He's even sovereign over beasts - an ass, a donkey. He's even sovereign over property - He tells them: 'There is a house, and you're going to go to the Upper Room, and there is a specific room that is prepared and just ideal for the Passover'. He's sovereign over property - maybe you're in a property situation at the moment, many people are. Well, He's sovereign. Do you know He's sovereign over economics? He's sovereign, He's in control, don't you worry, the Lord knows all about it, for He is Lord! But the great question is this: does He have the key to every room of your property, your house?

This man, whoever he was, some people think he was John Mark, the author's, father - I don't know, but whoever he was he surrendered this room to Lord. The Lord asks us to surrender our rooms, our property, the things that we own, our possessions to the Lord - but more than that: the Lord wants more than simply houses or land, the Lord wants our hearts. As C.T. Studd once asked F.B. Meyer: does God have the key to every room of your heart? Every room? Can I say to you this morning: you will never know God's direction in your life until He possesses all the keys. If there is a part of your life, a compartment where you say: 'No, Lord, that's my territory and I'll look after that, I don't want You fiddling in those affairs', you will never know the direction of God in your life. You've got to give it over completely.

Now, between verse 17 and verse 18 - and I'm just filling you in on the context - we read in verse 17: 'In the evening He came with the twelve', and then in between this and verse 18, 'Now as they sat to eat', John teaches us that it was at that point that Jesus washed the disciples feet, before the Lord's Supper. That, of course, was a lesson in humility and service. He was teaching them that He was about to serve them, just as He had served them washing their feet, He was about to serve them by dying on the cross to wash them completely of their sins. Now after this, it says in verse 18, 'they sat and ate, Jesus said, 'Assuredly, I say to you, one of you who eats with Me will betray Me". He becomes downcast and sad as He announces that one of them whose feet He has just washed, who He is now eating with, one of them is going to betray Him.

Now we looked at Judas last Sunday night, but I want to emphasise again: what the Lord was doing here by announcing this was giving Judas an opportunity, another opportunity to confess his sin. That shows us that Judas was responsible for what he did and, though his decision was, of course, prophesied even in the Old Testament, Judas made his choice. Can I challenge you here this morning: there are some people walking around, and I've heard of them, and they're unbelievers, they're non-Christians, and they've got sort of some kind of half-doctrine of God's sovereignty and predestination - they maybe don't even understand it all, but they think that you can only get saved if God zaps you. Now I know that salvation and the new birth is a supernatural thing, but I'll tell you this: you are responsible to repent of your sins and to believe the Gospel. Your side to get worried about is not God's sovereignty, the part you should get concerned about is your responsibility to repent of your sin and to
believe the Gospel.

Judas had choice, and I believe all the way through this the Lord was showing that He was giving him an opportunity, and anything he was going to do he was going to do of his own volition. Imagine the grace of the Lord Jesus. He says: 'There's one among you who is going to betray me', and a couple of seconds ago He had just washed the feet of His betrayer. He knew who he was. Imagine the depravity of Judas: he had just had his feet washed by his Lord, and yet we know - as we saw last week - that he was looking for an opportunity how he might conveniently betray the Lord Jesus. As Jesus spoke in verse 18, Judas knew he was the one, he knew he was the one.

Then in verse 19 we see the rest of the disciples were aghast: 'And they began to be sorrowful, and to say to Him one by one, 'Is it I?' And another said, 'Is it I?''. Now please note that it wasn't because they doubted themselves, and they were thinking: 'I wonder if it's me? I wonder if I'm the traitor?'. Remember it wasn't that long ago in chapter 10 that they were arguing with one another who was the greatest! These were guys who hadn't a problem with their self-image, their problem was: they had an ego trip often, and they wanted to be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven and sit at the right hand of the Lord Jesus. But now the Lord Jesus has dropped this bombshell on them, that one of these people was going to betray Him, and they're asking: 'Is it I?' - and the sense is, 'Surely not me, Lord! Surely it couldn't be me, not me!'. Was there ever a greater commentary on Jeremiah 17:20, that the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked, who can know it? They didn't realise the depravity of their own heart, and how low any of them could go.

Then in verse 20 it says: 'He answered and said to them, 'It is one of the twelve, who dips with Me in the dish". Now what that simply means is: all of them were dipping in the dish with sops of bread at the Passover, and the Lord was basically saying, 'Not only is it one of you, but it's one of you who is having fellowship with Me'. To break bread in the Middle East was a token of fellowship, it was a very deep pact of friendship, you were entering into a mutual trust and tryst with one who had become your friend. To break that fellowship was to be seen as the deepest, most wicked treachery. So the Lord is saying: 'Not only is it one of you, but one of you at this moment who I am now fellowshipping with in the most intimate friendship, you're going to betray Me'. Now, even this was a fulfilment of prophecy, for in Psalm 41 verse 9 we read: 'Even my own familiar friend in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, Has lifted up his heel against me'.

Now let's pause for a moment: imagine how those disciples felt. After three and a half years of discipleship with Jesus Christ, the Son of God and the Son of Man, and He says to them: 'One of you is going to betray Me to death'. But move on from that, and ask yourself: how did Jesus feel? We can never know that, but it's worth contemplating isn't it? How did He feel, that one of His friends would betray Him? Then we read in verse 21: 'The Son of Man indeed goes just as it is written of Him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been good for that man if he had never been born'. When Judas received the bread dipped in the bitter herbs, we read from John's Gospel that Satan entered into him, and then Judas left to notify the chief priests where Jesus could be found - setting off a chain of events that would eventually lead to the crucifixion of our Lord. Again showing that the Lord is in complete control here, He knows what He's doing - in fact, He is driving the matter on, He is forcing the matter in hand because He has come into this world to bleed and to die, to be our sacrifice. In fact, He said to Judas, we read in John 13: 'What you are doing, do it quickly'. What a wonderful Saviour!
Judas having left, the Lord now institutes the Supper with His disciples. Now you've got to understand that the Last Supper, the Lord's Table, the Lord's Supper, was originally the Passover feast. They had met, hadn't they, to celebrate Passover? In Exodus chapter 12 we read that on the 9th of Nisan - that's around March or April - the Passover lamb would be selected, and then it would be slain on the 14th day of the month. The supper of the Passover had to be eaten in Jerusalem, it was a memorial of the Exodus where God delivered His people, Israel, from Egyptian bondage, and took them into the wilderness eventually to enter into the Promised Land. The original Passover consisted of a roasted lamb, unleavened bread, and a dish of bitter herbs. Now the lamb, of course, reminded them of the blood of the lamb that was shed and then applied to the door posts of their homes in Egypt, so that the death angel would pass over them and they would be delivered. The bread, if you read Exodus 12:39, the unleavened bread symbolised the haste at which they left Egypt - in other words, they hadn't time to leaven the bread because they were in a hurry. The bitter herbs, of course, speak very graphically of their suffering in Egypt as slaves under the iron hand of Pharaoh. Of course there are other things involved: there's saltwater which speaks of the tears of the people in Egyptian bondage. Now at some stage, we're not sure when, during the centuries from the original Exodus as they celebrated this Passover, the Jews introduced the drinking of four cups of wine to the Passover feast - these cups would be diluted with water.

So that's the Passover, and the Lord comes to celebrate the Passover with His disciples, and He uses certain elements of this Passover feast to institute His Supper: the feast not now in memorial of the Exodus from Egypt, but now in memorial of His death. How did He do it? Well, we know, we read that, verse 22: 'as they were eating, Jesus took bread', this unleavened bread, 'He blessed and broke it, and gave it to them and said, 'Take, eat; this is My body'". He takes one of the pieces of unleavened bread, He blesses it and He breaks it - and, incidentally, when you break unleavened bread there is a 'crack', you don't hear it when you break the bread that we have, but when you break unleavened bread there is a 'crack'. He broke it as a symbol of His body. Then He takes the Passover cup in verse 23: 'He took the cup, and when He had given thanks He gave it to them, and they all drank from it'. He took the cup.

Now, you should now be asking the question - are you asking it? No? - which cup? How many cups did I say there were in the Passover feast? Four. Which cup did He take? Now there's a little clue about which cup it was given in Luke's Gospel, you don't need to turn to it - but it's found, if you want to look it up later, in Luke 22 verse 20. It says that it was 'the cup after supper' He took, 'saying, 'This is My blood'". Now 'the cup after supper', we know, was the third cup of the Passover feast, the third of the four Passover cups. The first cup that was taken is the cup of sanctification. The second cup is the cup of remembrance. Significantly, the third cup of the Passover is the cup of salvation, the cup of redemption. It was when He took up the cup of salvation and redemption that He said in verse 24: 'This is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many'. So the Lord Jesus was entering in, in the institution of the Lord's Supper, to a new covenant with His disciples which was signified in this third cup.

Now let's look at this phrase 'new covenant' for a moment. The new covenant was represented in these earthly tokens, but what you've got to understand about biblical covenants: they weren't made - that's the language we use - a covenant, basically, is an agreement, and we say 'We have made a covenant', or 'We have made an agreement'. But in the Old Testament Hebrew language, to make a covenant actually explicitly means 'to cut a covenant'. You 'cut' a covenant in the Old Testament. Let me show you this, please, and it's important that we know this, and I believe it will really enhance our understanding of this new covenant, and indeed what we will do later on around the Lord's Table.
Turn with me to Genesis chapter 15, and here we have what is called 'The Abrahamic Covenant', where God makes a covenant with Abram - it's made in other places, Genesis 12 and even 17 - but here we read that the covenant was cut. Verse 18 of Genesis 15: 'On the same day the LORD made a covenant' - and literally in Hebrew the phrase is 'the LORD cut a covenant with Abram, saying'. Now even this cutting of the covenant is very significant, let's read how it was instigated. Verse 8 of chapter 15 of Genesis: 'Abram said, 'Lord GOD, how shall I know that I will inherit it?' - Inherit what? Well, inherit the land is part of what is promised here, there are many other promises, but this is what he's talking about specifically. He's saying: 'How will I know that I will inherit it?'. 'So He said to him', the LORD said to him, "Bring Me a threeyearold heifer". Now this is significant, because what Abraham is saying is: 'Lord, I'm not sure' - now, he's not being as explicit as this, but he's basically saying 'I'm not sure I can trust You'. In other words, 'How can I know that this is going to happen?'. The LORD says: 'Right, here's how you'll know: take' - there it is in verse 9 - 'Bring Me a threeyearold heifer, a threeyearold female goat, a threeyearold ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon'. Then he brought all these to Him and cut them in two', there's the cutting, 'cut them in two down the middle, and placed each piece opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds in two. And when the vultures came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away. Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, horror and great darkness fell upon him. Then He said to Abram', God said to him, "Know certainly that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs", that's Egypt, "and will serve them, and they will afflict them four hundred years. And also the nation whom they serve I will judge; afterward they shall come out with great possessions. Now as for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried at a good old age. But in the fourth generation they shall return here, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete'. And it came to pass, when the sun went down and it was dark, that behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a burning torch that passed between those pieces'.

Now, I don't want to go into the detail of this, but that was Shekinah glory, a visible manifestation of the invisible God walking between the pieces, signifying that this was a unilateral agreement that God was taking upon Himself. It had nothing to do with Abram, it had all to do with God: 'On the same day the LORD cut a covenant with Abram, saying: 'To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates; the Kenites, the Kenezzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites'. Now, this is the way agreements were made, I want you really to understand this, even secular agreements would have been made by cutting a covenant, even cutting beasts in two. Men who were having a deal with one another would have walked down a carriageway of riven carcasses, blood and gore, to say to one another - and this is what it meant - 'May what has been done to these beasts be done to me, if I do not keep my word', that's what they were saying! Do you understand?

Now, what was Abram asking God for in verse 8: 'How can I know? How can I know that this agreement You're entering into with me, I can trust and know that You're going to fulfil?' - and this is basically what the Lord is saying, 'Right, Abram, let's sign a contract today. Let's sign an agreement and settle this once and for all, and if I do not honour My word, may I be rent asunder just like these beasts'. Now, the animals in themselves were prophetic, look back at them please in verse 9 of chapter 15 of Genesis, God says: 'Bring Me', in other words the sacrifice is for God, it's for His benefit, and there are three animals that are named here - can I just draw your attention to the fact, if you think about it for a moment: they are all tame animals. So these were not animals that Abram had to go around chasing and catching,
but they are tame animals - in other words, willing servants of man, meeting his need.

Now, each of these animals foreshadows a distinctive aspect of Christ's person and Christ's work. There is a heifer here, a three-year-old heifer, and a heifer seems to indicate energy - this beast of burden and work. The Lord Jesus Christ was the Servant, we know this from Mark, from Isaiah, the Suffering Servant who came to do the Father's will. Then you're to take a three-year-old goat, the goat in the Old Testament is the sin offering, the Lord Jesus was coming to be a sin offering. Then they're to take a three-year-old ram, and the ram in the Levitical offerings was connected with consecration, and Jesus is coming and consecrating Himself, surrendering Himself to the Father's will, which meant the cross. Then there are these birds, 'a turtledove, and a young pigeon'. Now birds come from heaven, the first heaven, and I believe this is signifying the Lord Jesus Christ as the Holy One from heaven.

Now, maybe you think this is pushing things, but let me ask you: how old were each of these animals, each of them? Three times it is repeated: 'three years old', and the Lord Jesus Christ offered Himself after three years of service as the Servant of the Lord.

Now in verse 11, we don't have time to go into this too much, but in verse 11 we see: 'When the vultures came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away'. Now that implies, to me at least, that Abram knew that this was a way of two men entering into an agreement with one another. What would happen was: once the carriageway of carcasses was made, the two signatories to the agreement would walk, arm in arm together, down the middle to say that they were agreeing with one another. Abram's waiting on God showing up, he's chasing the birds away from the carcasses, he's waiting on God turning up to walk down the middle with him - and what does God do? God comes in and puts him asleep, and what's that saying? 'Abram, this is going to have nothing to do with you, this is a unilateral, unconditional covenant that God is going to keep in spite of man's cooperation'. He's going to honour His word, and for that reason, when Abram was asleep probably, he saw this vision of the burning Shekinah light moving down on its own, God moving down the middle, saying 'I'm going to do this for Myself and for My glory'. I do think that perhaps Abram's sleep is significant when we think of the death and resurrection of the Lord, and you can see that picture even in Adam and Eve when God was taking Eve out of Adam - what did He do with Adam? He put Him asleep, and right throughout Scripture we see death and resurrection through covenants cut, there is death and resurrection - and what is it all signifying? It's all pointing forward to that great Passover Lamb. It's all telling us that, out of the greatest suffering imaginable, there is going to be the greatest salvation: the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, that's a prototype cutting of a covenant that's important biblically to understand the New Covenant that Jesus was cutting with His disciples. But the New Covenant is actually specifically mentioned in Jeremiah 31, so turn there with me to that please. Now this is vital, because we run around at times talking about ourselves as 'New Covenant Christians', and we don't have the first notion what the New Covenant is! Some people just think of the New Covenant as being New Testament - and I know they're the same word, but that is not everything that it means, just to be a New Testament Christian. For to the Jews, in Jeremiah's day, to the Jews God speaks by His Spirit, verse 31 of Jeremiah 31, concerning a new covenant - this is a promise: 'Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah; not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt', that was the Mosaic covenant, which they broke, which is now null and void through the death of the Lord Jesus, 'My covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their
hearts'. You see, the problem that the Jews had, and we all have, with law, is that we can't keep it because we are depraved in our hearts. But this new covenant would be different, because God would write it on our hearts so that we would be able to live righteously before God: 'And I will be their God, and they shall be My people. "No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more'.

Now there are many things promised in the New Covenant, not least the spiritual and national regeneration of Israel. They will be restored nationally to the land, the first stage of which has already happened in 1948, the birth of the nation of Israel; but they will be restored spiritually also - God will restore the Jews. There will be complete justification, verse 34, their sins and iniquities will be remembered no more; and there will be the personal ministry of the Holy Spirit indwelling - in other words, God would write His law on people's hearts, and they'll not need teachers to show them the way, the Holy Spirit Himself will show them the way.

Now, in Jeremiah 31 the New Covenant was being promised as a far prospect in the future. Now when we come to the Last Supper, back to Mark 14, we find that the New Covenant is now being promised as a near prospect. Remember the verse, 24? 'This is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many'. The New Covenant - now stay with me please - is about to be cut, cut, where? At Calvary. Imagine Him pouring the wine into the cup - some believe they only had one cup but they poured it four times for the four cups of the Passover. Imagine Him pouring, it's graphic because, in the Temple sacrificial system, the blood of the animal would be poured out as a drink offering. All their Jewish psyche would be running ahead of themselves with all of this pictorial, graphic instruction concerning the voluntary sacrifice of the Lord Jesus. The symbolism is just incredible. Here is Jesus, and He's doing this for them, He is the benefactor of this covenant and He's going to be cut by a voluntary sacrifice. It's a unilateral covenant, in other words it's all of God - they don't have to agree to it necessarily, it's wholly established by the means of the obedience of the Lamb who, Philippians 2 says, humbled Himself, became a servant, even unto death, even the death of the cross. Remember, in a few moments the disciples are all going to flee and forsake Him anyway - they're not even entering into this covenant in the sense of a person who has the weight of responsibility of fulfilling what's being asked of them!

This is all of God and all of Jesus, and yet the beneficiaries are these disciples who are representative of the house of Israel and Judah - for this is a covenant made, Jeremiah 31, with the Jews - and yet we find out later that we, Romans 9, 10 and 11, as wild Gentile olive branches, are ingrafted into the vine of Israel. In other words, we have become partakers of these blessings of the New Covenant now through grace in the Lord Jesus. But what I want you to see is Jesus, when He says New Covenant - there's so much meaning in it! He's going to Calvary to be cut at Calvary as a Covenant. When you think of Genesis 15, and this Abrahamic Covenant, I believe what God was saying to Abraham as He promised that his children, not just his ethnic children of the Jews but his spiritual children, that they would be as many as the stars of the sky and the sand of the seashore, that God was going to have to be the sacrifice, that the Son of God was going to have to be ripped apart, cut apart at Calvary, so that God might walk through His corpse to be reconciled with men. Is that not what the Bible means when Paul says: 'God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself' at the cross?

Are you seeing it? Is it all coming together? How does Isaiah put it? Literally the Hebrew reads: 'He was pierced through for our transgressions, and crushed for our iniquities'. The
New Covenant was being cut at Calvary. Jesus is enacting this Last Supper to point towards it. At the Abrahamic Covenant the animals were cut. At the Mosaic Covenant, do you remember what was cut then? What was cut then? Tablets of stone, and animals were cut, and the shedding of blood, and the blood was sprinkled on the people - but this New Covenant will not be engraved on tablets of stone, but will be engraved on men's and women's hearts. This is being cut with the shedding of the blood of the only Begotten Son of the Eternal God!

Now, if you're not marvelling in awe and wonder, maybe it's my fault I'm not getting it across - but please get to that point of realising what was going on at Calvary! God was cutting a covenant for you on the flesh of His own Son. That's why, in Isaiah 49, we read: 'I have inscribed you', cut you, 'on the palms of my hands'.

Turn to Hebrews 9 to see the New Testament commentary on these things please, Hebrews 9 verse 13: 'For if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?'. I say 'Hallelujah!' for that! What the Mosaic Covenant could not do - it could not change the heart, it could not cleanse the conscience - the New Covenant has done by the shedding of the blood of Christ. Do you know you can have a clear and clean conscience? Have you? That is your blood-right in Jesus! Unsaved person here today, tortured by skeletons in the cupboard that you're hiding from loved ones and from God, you think, you can be set free through the blood of Jesus! Cleanse your conscience, and not only cleansed from sin, but from dead works. Under the Mosaic Covenant the Jews were trying to earn 'tick' with God and favour with God by legalistically following rituals - and most Christians, I say it again, most Christians are trying to live the Christian life like that! They don't realise that's why Jesus died, to set us free from the dead works of the flesh, and to clear our conscience from knowing that we're not meeting the mark - because, no matter what your rule is, or your ethic is, you'll never meet it because we're all failures!

'For this reason He is the Mediator of the new covenant, by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant, that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance'. One of the promises of that New Covenant is the Holy Spirit to live in your heart to enable you to live as you ought to live, a thing that the Old Testament Jew could never do! The blood of Messiah is the basis of salvation in the New Covenant. The blood ratified, signified and sealed the New Covenant - and if you want to read more about that, read all the way through from Hebrews 8 right to Hebrews 10. So this is what Jesus is going to do, this is the climax and pinnacle of His whole life: He is the Passover Lamb who will carry away the sins of the world forever, never needing another sacrifice again! He gives them this Supper to enter into this agreement with them.

Now, it's interesting how the Lord based the Last Supper, the Lord's Supper, on the Passover practice - but it's also equally interesting the things that He didn't use. You see He only used the unleavened bread and the third cup, which is the cup of salvation - but please, here's something I noticed for the first time: in all the gospel records of the institution of the Lord's Supper, there is no Paschal lamb mentioned. Was there a lamb there? I don't know, but certainly the disciples were not instructed to go and get the lamb, were they? There was no lamb there, and whether there was one and it's just not mentioned, or whether there wasn't one - surely the emphasis of the Holy Spirit in the gospel narratives is this: He is the Lamb! This is the Passover Lamb of God that all the other lambs, and all the other rivers of blood in the Old Testament economy pointed forward to. He is the Lamb! See Him! Do you see Him? Will you see Him this morning as we break the bread and drink the cup?
There's something else also that is left out, as far as we know the Lord appears not to have drunk the fourth cup of the Passover meal. Do you know what the fourth cup signifies? It is called the 'Hallel' cup, which means 'the cup of praise'. By the way, after the Jews drink this cup of Hallel, the cup of praise, do you know what they say to one another? 'Next year in Jerusalem', they celebrated this feast in Jerusalem, and they were saying: 'Next year in Jerusalem'. The Lord didn't drink this cup, instead He says to them in verse 25: 'Assuredly, I say to you, I will no longer drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God'. In other words, He wouldn't be there next year in Jerusalem, He was going out today - and the next time He would drink of the fruit of the vine would be in His kingdom, a future day that is yet to be.

Now we know that on His way to the Mount of Olives He taught them many truths that aren't recorded in Mark's gospel, and if you want to read them - and they're precious - read John 14: 'Let not your heart be troubled', John 15 about the vine, John 16 about the Holy Spirit, John 17, His great High Priestly prayer, all at this juncture. The final thing our Lord did with His disciples before leaving the Upper Room and going to the Mount of Olives was to sing the traditional Passover hymn - that's what it says, isn't it? Verse 26: 'When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives'. Do you know what the Passover hymn was? It was based on the great Hallel, which is Psalm 113 through to Psalm 118. We don't have time to study it of course, but read it! Psalm 113 through to Psalm 118, they most likely would have taken excerpts from those Psalms - and it's a most wonderful commentary on Calvary!

Now I want you to picture this, please picture it - I'm almost finished - before we break bread please picture this: the Lord has enacted a ceremony agreeing to covenant and to cut Himself to be the instigator and the benefactor of the New Covenant. Now He stands and sings the great Hallel, listen to some of the verses: 'The pains of death surrounded me, and the pangs of Sheol', the grave, 'laid hold of me; I found trouble and sorrow. Then I called upon the name of the LORD: 'O LORD, I implore You, deliver my soul!' - that's Psalm 116. The same Psalm: 'For You have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, and my feet from falling. I will walk before the LORD In the land of the living'. Psalm 116 again: 'I will take up the cup of salvation, and call upon the name of the LORD. I will pay my vows to the LORD now in the presence of all His people. Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of His saints for where there is a testament, there must also of necessity be the death of the testator'. Psalm 117: 'Praise the LORD, all you Gentiles! Laud Him, all you peoples!'. Psalm 118: 'You pushed me violently, that I might fall, but the LORD helped me. The LORD is my strength and song, and He has become my salvation'. Psalm 118 as well: 'I shall not die, but live, and declare the works of the LORD. The LORD has chastened me severely, but He has not given me over to death. Open to me the gates of righteousness; I will go through them, and I will praise the LORD'. Another: 'The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This was the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes'. One for the last, and there are many more, Psalm 118 again: 'God is the LORD, and He has given us light' - listen to this one! - 'Bind the sacrifice with cords to the horns of the altar. You are my God, and I will praise You; You are my God, I will exalt You'.

Imagine our Lord singing these words, imagine Him even singing before the cross, and singing these words perhaps: 'Bind the sacrifice with cords to the horns of the altar. You are my God, and I will praise You; You are my God, I will exalt You'. All I can say is:

'Bearing shame and scoffing rude,
In my place condemned He stood;
Sealed my pardon', and covenant, 'with His blood.
Hallelujah! What a Saviour!'.

Let us pray. Tonight we will be, God willing, following our Lord to the Garden of Gethsemane. Father, these things are too wonderful for me, and I apologise to You Lord and confess that I just can't do it, I can't make this the way it should be, so that people would really understand what Jesus was entering into with His disciples, the significance of it to their minds - and the anticipation of Calvary, what it meant for You, Father, to cut Your own Son, that it should please You to bruise Him, that You might give Your word in agreement to those who believe in it, You're covenanting to take them as Your children and never let them go. Lord, I pray, if there's any soul here this morning who has never entered into the good of the New Covenant by faith - it's not by anything we can do only taking it, receiving it at the giving by grace - we pray that this morning they would enter in, they would see by the Holy Spirit's power the magnitude of what Jesus has done. What we're about to do shows forth His death, and even if there are unbelievers in our midst we believe it is a graphic description of what He was to do, and what He has now done and finished. Lord, we pray for all of us as believers, O God, lift the scales from off our eyes, let us see Jesus in His passion for us, in His steadfast endurance to go to the cross. As this wine is taken by us, and this bread is broken, let us not lose the symbolism. We know, Lord, that this is not just bread and wine in the sense that it symbolises something more, but we know, Father, that we must, by faith, eat of His flesh and drink of His blood. We pray that, Lord, we would know what it is to feed on Christ, who is our life; and that we will truly meet the Lord now as we meet around this board, in Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Transcribed by Andrew Watkins, Preach The Word – February 2011
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It's good to be back with you, and welcome to those of you who are new - there are some faces I haven't seen before over the last couple of weeks, and we really do welcome you. We trust that you enjoy our time tonight, and are challenged through the word of God, and encouraged as we seek to just gaze upon the Lord Jesus in this last week of His earthly life and ministry.

We're turning to Mark's gospel chapter 14, we've been there for a while now - last Sunday evening in particular, and this morning. Just to fill you in, those of you who are here for the first time, and to recollect for those who have been before: we're looking at 'The Final Countdown to Calvary', the last week in the life of Jesus as He makes His way towards the cross. We started a couple of weeks ago on Sunday morning looking at Palm Sunday, which was the Sunday of that final week, as Jesus rode into Jerusalem as the promised Messiah, the King of the Jews. Then we moved to Monday where He cursed the fig tree which represented Israel, who were taking up space but not bearing fruit for God. Then, attached to that, He then, on the same day, Monday, went into the Temple, and you know that He cleansed it, He turned the tables of the moneychangers upside down, and that was His pronouncement of judgement on the place - that it was no longer fit for purpose: it was meant to be a house of prayer, God had said, but it had now become a hiding place for thieves and robbers.

Then we moved to Tuesday, and Tuesday was the time when Jesus, in the temple courts and precincts, was questioned by the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling body. Then, probably on Wednesday, He spoke of signs to come concerning His second coming, how we could know that He was going to come soon, and He was teaching His disciples about that on Wednesday. Then last Sunday evening we looked at the anointing of Jesus by Mary of Bethany, and we saw that chronologically that actually didn't fit in there, but John tells us this happened six days before Passover, which would put it on Saturday evening just before Palm Sunday. But we know that for thematic reasons, Mark put it in here because he wanted to contrast Judas, the miserable betrayer, with Mary of Bethany, her heart which was that of an extravagant worshipper. This morning we looked at the Last Supper, which was Thursday evening of this final week; and now we're going to look at Jesus resorting to the Garden of Gethsemane - which is late Thursday evening - and we're also going to move into His betrayal in that garden, Judas bringing the guards of the Temple along to hand Him over, and betraying Him with a kiss, and that's probably the early hours of Friday morning.

So what we're looking at now is late Thursday evening and the early hours of Friday morning, and we're going to begin reading at verse 27, and we are reading right down to verse 52: "Then Jesus said to them, 'All of you will be made to stumble', fall away, "because of Me this night, for it is written: 'I will strike the Shepherd, And the sheep will be scattered'. But after I have been raised, I will go before you to Galilee'. Peter said to Him, 'Even if all are made to stumble, yet I will not be'. Jesus said to him, 'Assuredly, I say to you that today, even this night, before the rooster crows twice, you will deny Me three times'. But he spoke more vehemently, 'If I have to die with You, I will not deny You!' And they all said likewise. Then they came to a place which was named Gethsemane; and He said to His disciples, 'Sit here
while I pray'. And He took Peter, James, and John with Him, and He began to be troubled and deeply distressed. Then He said to them, 'My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death. Stay here and watch'. He went a little farther, and fell on the ground, and prayed that if it were possible, the hour might pass from Him. And He said, 'Abba, Father, all things are possible for You. Take this cup away from Me; nevertheless, not what I will, but what You will'. Then He came and found them sleeping, and said to Peter, 'Simon, are you sleeping? Could you not watch one hour? Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak'. Again He went away and prayed, and spoke the same words. And when He returned, He found them asleep again, for their eyes were heavy; and they did not know what to answer Him. Then He came the third time and said to them, 'Are you still sleeping and resting? It is enough! The hour has come; behold, the Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us be going. See, My betrayer is at hand'. And immediately, while He was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, with a great multitude with swords and clubs, came from the chief priests and the scribes and the elders. Now His betrayer had given them a signal, saying, 'Whomever I kiss, He is the One; seize Him and lead Him away safely'. As soon as He had come, immediately he went up to Him and said to Him, 'Rabbi, Rabbi!' and kissed Him. Then they laid their hands on Him and took Him. And one of those who stood by drew his sword and struck the servant of the high priest, and cut off his ear. Then Jesus answered and said to them, 'Have you come out, as against a robber, with swords and clubs to take Me? I was daily with you in the temple teaching, and you did not seize Me. But the Scriptures must be fulfilled'. Then they all forsook Him and fled. Now a certain young man followed Him, having a linen cloth thrown around his naked body. And the young men laid hold of him, and he left the linen cloth and fled from them naked".

Let's pray together and, as I've said before, as I come now and pray, really you ought to be praying with me. Those of you who know the Lord, and desire to know Him more, why don't you come now and say: 'Lord, I want You to really open my heart and make me receptive to the word. I want to be receptive to the word, I want to hear from You'. Are you here tonight and you've real longing in your heart to hear from God? I hope you have, and I believe if you have, and you come to Him, that He will meet you through the word. Maybe you're not even a Christian, or maybe you're a long way from God, not as close as you used to be, well why not even say to the Lord: 'Lord, I want You to draw near to me now, and I want You to reveal Yourself'. Pray that to God now as we come to Him.

Father, we use the term our Lord Jesus used to You, 'Abba'. We know that all things are possible for You. Lord, we come to You, and we really do feel that we ought to take our shoes off our feet, for we're standing on holy ground as we see the Lord Jesus in the agony of Gethsemane. We really don't know hardly what to say, or what to think, 'tis mystery all. Yet, Lord, we have been given Your word, and these things are imparted to us for our benefit, and all Scripture is profitable. We pray, Lord, that You will take these words and these deep, eternal truths and make them profitable to every mind and heart in this place tonight, irrespective of their circumstances. Lord, we need You, we need the Holy Spirit who was promised to testify of the things of Christ, to take of His things and witness them to us. Lord, there are unsaved people here tonight, young people, middle aged people, older people who need to have Christ witnessed to them - and yet the Holy Spirit has also been sent that Christ may be conformed in us. Lord, we pray that we would have that happen as we see Jesus in the Garden. Lord Jesus, we would even address You, and reverence You at this moment for what You saw in the Garden. Lord, we don't have a clue, but we pray that You will help us tonight to understand a little bit more, Lord, of what You did for us. Lord Jesus, open our minds and open our hearts to You this evening, that our love for You, and our surrender to You would be greater than ever after this evening as we listen to Your voice. In Jesus' name,
Now, after instituting the Lord's Supper - and we saw that this morning - they sang a hymn and they went out towards the Mount of Olives. I told you that the teaching that we find in John is not in any of the other synoptics, Matthew, Mark and Luke - you can read John 14 through to 17, and somewhere around here is when the Lord imparted these wonderful truths: 'Let not your heart be troubled', about going to prepare dwellingplaces for us in heaven, about being the Vine, about the Holy Spirit coming in His ministry and how it was needful that He would come, and then His great High Priestly prayer to His Father. But Mark, of course, is going at breakneck speed to get through this week, and he brings us from the Upper Room, the Last Supper, straight to Gethsemane. But before that, on the way, the Lord warns the disciples that they would all forsake Him - verse 27: 'All of you will be made to stumble', fall away, 'because of Me this night, for it is written' - and He quotes from Zechariah 13 verse 7, the Old Testament prophet - "I will strike the Shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered".

Now, it has been hard enough for them, if you were with us this morning, for them to take in that one of them who was with Him fellowshipping around the table would betray Him - but now He is imparting to them that all of them would forsake Him, and it would be a fulfilment of Zechariah 13:7. But essentially this quotation of this Old Testament prophet was not in order to condemn the disciples for forsaking Him, it was rather to demonstrate - as we have seen right throughout this whole last week of the Lord's life - Jesus was showing that He was in complete and absolute control of what was happening here. This was no accident, things were not spinning out of control, but the Lord Jesus step-by-step - and we have seen Him do it, and we will see Him do it again and again - is fulfilling hundreds-year-old prophecies with His life, and particularly this last week of His ministry. He's in control of the situation, and that's encouraging - and I know that every other situation pales into insignificance in comparison with this last week, but let me tell you tonight, wherever you are and whatever you're going through, He's in control of your situation. You might feel that you're in chaos, the world is crumbling around you and the roof falling around your ears, but He is in control - trust Him, believe that He is behind the scenes, even if you can't see Him.

The disciples found it very hard to believe, especially when He was telling them that they were going to fall away. But then in verse 28, just to show He's in control He actually talks about meeting them after the resurrection! Staggering, isn't it? Verse 28: 'After I have been raised, I will go before you to Galilee'. It shows that He's already looking beyond the cross - what faith is that! In fact, we read in Hebrews chapter 12 and verse 2 that we are to look 'unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross' - that's how He got through the agony of Gethsemane and the sacrifice of Calvary: He was looking beyond it! He had an eternal perspective, the joy that was set before Him endured the cross' - that's how He got through the agony of Gethsemane and the sacrifice of Calvary: He was looking beyond it! He had an eternal perspective, the joy that was set before Him - and you were part of that joy - to have a redeemed people purchased by His own precious blood, and to have an eternal future with His church. It's marvellous, isn't it?

There's something very personal that He was also saying to the disciples when He was saying, 'Look, after I've been raised, I will go before you into Galilee'. He had just told them that they were all going to fall away and forsake Him. So effectively what He was saying was: 'Though you disown Me, I will not disown you' - is that a word from the Lord directly to someone here tonight? You've been disowning Christ. You once knew Him, and you once loved Him, but His message to you is just like these fickle disciples: 'Though you disown Me, I will not disown you, I will be there for you, I'm waiting for you'. Paul said it to Timothy: 'Though we are faithless and unbelieving, He remains faithful for He cannot deny Himself'. Isn't He wonderful?
All of us have to confess how unfaithful we are to Him so much of the time.

Now, of course, on previous occasions the Lord Jesus spoke of His resurrection. Didn't I show you? Chapter 8 and verse 31, He tells them the Son of Man must be betrayed into the hands of sinners, be slain, and three days later rise again. He tells them in chapter 9 and verse 31, He tells them it again in chapter 10 and verse 32, He's been talking non-stop about it - and yet still they don't understand, even here when He says to them: 'I'm going to be raised, and I will go before you into Galilee'. Three days later after He said this, they were doubting reports of His resurrection! Do you see how hard their heads were? It just wouldn't go through.

Now verse 29 shows us that Peter was indignant about this suggestion and prediction that they would all fall away and stumble: 'Peter said to Him, 'Even if all are made to stumble, yet I will not be". In other words, he says: 'The rest might desert You, but not me, never!'. William MacDonald, the Bible commentator, says that very quickly Jesus turned that 'never' into a 'soon'. Jesus maybe didn't let him down too gently, but faced him with the fact in verse 30: 'Assuredly, I say to you that today, even this night, before the rooster crows twice, you will deny Me three times'. Three times, Peter! Yet still, verse 31, Peter protests, he says the more vehemently: 'If I have to die with You, I will not deny You!' - and they all said likewise. Peter was saying: 'That's preposterous, I would rather die than deny You, Lord! Do You not know that?'.

We're so hard on Peter, aren't we? I think I'm going to have to apologise many many times to Peter when I get to heaven! A lot of preachers are! I believe Peter is one of the most humble and meekest of men. He had to be, for the Lord to put so much bad stuff in the Bible about him. By the way, we believe that Peter fed Mark the information about this gospel, we believe that. He was a self-effacing man, and yet he wasn't alone in his brashness of saying that 'I'll go to die for You' - look at the end of verse 31: 'They all said likewise'. Now, what does that show us? I'll tell you what it shows us: Peter and the others were not aware of their weakness, they were not aware of their Achilles heel. Peter's self-apparent strength was his courage and his boldness, but he didn't realise that his self-apparent strength was actually his greatest weakness. There is a lesson, if ever there was one, for any of us: so much so that in a few hours this man, around a campfire, would be intimidated by a mere slave girl. Bold Peter who wanted to die for Him, would deny that he even knew Him with oaths and curses.

Now Peter and the rest of them made two mistakes, and we are in great danger of making them if we're not careful. The first is: we overestimate ourselves, as he did. When we overestimate ourselves we set ourselves up for a great fall - what does Paul say in 1 Corinthians 10 and verse 12: 'Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall'. Do not overestimate yourself spiritually! Now let me diagnose whether or not you are over estimating yourself. A question: do you think you are beyond the reach of certain sins? Do you? Or do you believe the depravity, even if it be hidden secret depravity, of your heart, if the circumstances were right, you could delve down to any depth imaginatively known to men? That's what I believe. Never overestimate yourself, because if you do you're in for a big surprise!

Not only did Peter and the rest overestimate themselves, they underestimated the Lord's knowledge of them. In other words, He knew them better than they knew themselves. He was in control of the situation, He was able to predict to them what was going to happen, but they wouldn't listen to Him! 'Oh, no! No! We're not going to do that, we would never do that! We will go to our deaths after You! We will never deny, no, no! That's preposterous!' - this is the
Lord talking to them. The only way that we will not overestimate ourselves or underestimate
His knowledge of us is if we listen to Him, listen to what He teaches in the word about the
heart, about our susceptibility to sin and temptation, and be realistic. The best of men and
women are those who know their weaknesses, face their weaknesses, and know their Achilles
heel, and know the chink in the armour that the devil can capitalise on, and deal with it before
God.

You see the Lord, remember in verse 27 He quoted Zechariah 13 verse 7 to them: 'I will
strike the Shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered'. Now, the reason why He quoted that
was not only to show that this was a fulfilment of prophetic Scripture, but He was showing
them what they ought to do when the Shepherd was struck. When the Shepherd is struck,
what is meant to happen to the sheep? They will be scattered. Now, had they listened to that
prophecy and heeded what the Lord Jesus was saying, had they believed it, they would have
saved themselves from a great deal of anxiety - and, who knows, Peter may not have denied
the Lord. Now in John chapter 18, in his account of this event in the Garden, we see that
when the soldiers come to take Jesus away, Jesus said: 'Let these disciples go their way’ -
and that was tantamount to the Lord saying, 'Boys, run! Now is your time to scatter'.

Warren Weirsbe says on this very point: 'I have read many eloquent sermons blaming Peter
for following afar off' - you've heard them as well - 'but they completely miss the point. He
was not supposed to follow at all. Had he obeyed the Lord, he would not have attacked a man
with his sword, or denied the Lord three times'. Now you may debate with me on that one,
but nevertheless the fact remains that the sheep were to scatter, they were meant to scatter
because the Lord knew their weakness! He knew Peter's weakness - but they didn't listen to
the Lord. Would you listen to the Lord! If you don't want to overestimate yourself or
underestimate His knowledge of you, He knows you better than you know yourself, so listen
to Him!

But, you see, if you're going to listen to Him, that requires the brokenness of the will. You
see, Peter had to be converted on that score - and through betraying the Lord he was broken.
Are you broken here tonight? Have you finally got broken, because you realise that you're not
what you thought you were? None of us are. You've overestimated yourself, and it has just
set you up time after time after time again for a fall. Maybe other people have overestimated
you, and you haven't really listened to what God says in His word? Well, brokenness of the
will is the secret to going on with God. It's not people who think they're all that, it's people
who know that they are nothing without God, and nothing without Christ - and if they go for a
moment without His dependence and His fellowship, they are in big trouble.

We often quote Romans 12 verses 1 and 2, but if you read verses 1, 2 and 3 you will read
this: 'I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies
a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be
conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may
prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God'. Listen to verse 3: 'For I say,
through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more
highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of
faith'. You can't be the sacrifice you need to be for God if you think too highly of yourself. It's
a constant battle for all of us, because many of us have an inflated opinion of self, and God
has to deal with that.

Now in verse 32 they have now arrived at Gethsemane. Now, if you've never been to
Jerusalem, you need to know that Gethsemane is just east of the Temple Mount area in
Jerusalem, across the Kidron Valley. So you go out of Jerusalem, down the Kidron Valley, and up the slopes of the Mount of Olives, and just at the beginning of the slope of the Mount of Olives is this Garden filled with ancient olive trees. It's a mighty sight if you've ever been there. But 'Gethsemane' means 'oil press', it was the place where the olives were crushed for oil - and now we're going to see the Son of God being crushed here with the weight of the anticipation of Calvary before Him.

Now in verse 33, at the beginning, verse 32: 'They came to a place which was named Gethsemane; and He said to His disciples, 'Sit here while I pray'. And He took Peter, James, and John with Him, and He began to be troubled and deeply distressed'. Now, it was perfectly human of the Lord to desire this - and you know, He was perfectly human, He was 100% man though He was 100% God. He was everything it was to be a man, except sinful. We, as human beings, desire company, especially in our most tragic hours. Here He faces His greatest challenge, and He takes the disciples - eight of them stay around the gate area, and then He takes three along with him, Peter, James and John, the intimate inner circle. Now it's very interesting, and Warren Weirsbe points this out, and I think it's beautiful: Peter, James and John were with Jesus when He went into Jairus' house to raise his only daughter. You know that story? The rest of the disciples were left outside, and Peter, James and John went in. Then He brought them up the Mount of Transfiguration, when He was transfigured and His Shekinah glory burst forth, His majestic divine majesty came out of Him there, they were there and they saw it! Witnesses of His majesty, Peter, James and John! Now here they are and they are given the privilege of being at Gethsemane.

In Philippians 3 and verse 10 we read this, Paul desired that he might know Him - those three got to know Him on the Mount of Transfiguration, who He really is. He's more than this miracle man, He is God's Son, He has the manifest glory of Divinity dwelling within Him, and it shot forth on that mountaintop. 'That I might know Him', that's the Mount of Transfiguration, 'the power of His resurrection', that's Jairus' house - He raised the little lamb, He said 'Little lamb, talithacum, little girl arise!'. They knew Him on the Mount of Transfiguration, they knew Him in the resurrection in Jairus' home - and how does the verse finish? 'That I might know Him, the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings' - and now the same three go into the Garden of Gethsemane to fellowship with Him in His sufferings.

Let us read about it again, verse 33: 'He began to be troubled and deeply distressed. Then He said to them, 'My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death. Stay here and watch'. He went a little farther, and fell on the ground, and prayed that if it were possible, the hour might pass from Him. And He said, 'Abba, Father, all things are possible for You. Take this cup away from Me; nevertheless, not what I will, but what You will'". Now, let me give you a warning here: we are on holy ground. We must be careful what we say about Gethsemane, and we must be careful what we say in many of the respects of Calvary. Ecclesiastes 5:2 would be wise to take note of: 'Do not be rash with your mouth, and let not your heart utter anything hastily before God'.

It says here that Jesus, verse 35, went a little farther. Now picture the scene, OK? He leaves the disciples around about somewhere near the gate or the entrance to the Garden. He takes the inner intimate three, Peter, James and John, in with Him - but then it implies that He leaves even them behind to watch and pray, and He goes a little farther. Do you know what that tells me? He goes to a place that He must go alone, and when He goes there He leaves us behind - that simply means that we cannot enter in to what He endured in the agony of Gethsemane and the wonder of Calvary. Now we can understand a lot of things about it, but
there is much where we are just left behind.

Yet we cannot avoid the greatest question of all here regarding Gethsemane, and it's this: if Jesus knew what the Father's will was, what was the agony for? Have you ever asked that question? He knew what the will of God was and He was resigned to it, the Bible says, from before He was born in Bethlehem - the Eternal Son came to do the will of the Father. Yet here we read, Luke testifies that He sweat, as it were, great drops of blood falling to the ground. So, if He knew what God's will was, what was the agony for? And also, why did He pray as He did pray in verses 35 and 36, that if it were possible the hour might pass and that this cup would pass from Him?

Now this is a very valid question. Listen to some scriptures that outline the fact that Jesus knew what He was heading for, and He had resigned His will to it. Luke chapter 9 and verse 51: 'It came to pass, when the time had come for Him to be received up, that He steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem'. There were no qualms about this journey to Mount Calvary. Luke chapter 9 and verse 62, Jesus Himself said: 'No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God'. Now, how could He say that if He was now looking back from the will of God? Hebrews 10 and verse 38, the writer to the Hebrews says: 'Now the just shall live by faith; but if anyone draws back, My soul has no pleasure in him' - so if Jesus was drawing back from the will of God, how could it be? Then we read in John 18, in his account of Gethsemane, after this agony, and the soldiers come and Peter draws his sword, Jesus said: 'Put your sword into the sheath. Shall I not drink the cup which My Father has given Me?'.

Now let me just say categorically: I cannot accept, as some teach, that the Lord was having second thoughts about the will of God. I cannot accept that. The cross was the Father's will, and the cross was the reason why Jesus came into the world - but note please, you might think this is hairsplitting, but it's not on the holy ground where we are: it was not the Father's will that Jesus was wrestling with in the Garden of Gethsemane, but rather what He was wrestling with was what the Father's will would entail. Let me repeat that: it was not the Father's will per se, it was not being obedient to God that He was wrestling with, it was what the Father's will would entail. What would the will of God entail?

Well, turn with me to Galatians 3 please and verse 13 quickly. We read there: 'Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree')'. Now, that was the penalty for a rebellious son, to be hanged on a tree - in Deuteronomy we read that. To break the law of God, the holy law of God encapsulated in the Ten Commandments and the Torah, Moses' first five books of the Bible, was to be accursed of God. Jesus knew, and now He is contemplating in the hours before Calvary how He Himself, the holy, sinless, spotless Son, would be treated like a rebellious son. He had never broken a law, never sinned a sin in thought, word or deed, but He would be treated as if He was the greatest lawbreaker in the universe. That was the weight, surely, that was upon Him.

Another verse, 2 Corinthians 5 verse 21, it's important that you look at these verses - if you have a Bible, please turn to them. Second Corinthians 5 and verse 21, Paul says: 'For He', that is God, 'made Him', that is Jesus, 'who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him'. You see, Jesus, knowing what was ahead of Him - that's the very point, He knew what was ahead of Him. Now He's in the Garden, in the hours before Calvary, grappling with this: that His holy Soul would be made sin in order that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him. Now that doesn't mean He became sinful,
but He was treated as if He was a sinner - guilty of our sins - that we might go free. Now, we can never enter into what that would have been for Him, the abhorrence of the thought to become sin, to be made sin, to be dealt with as a sinner though He knew no sin.

Harry Ironside says: 'His holy Soul shrank from the awfulness of being made sin upon the tree. It was not death that He was shrinking from' - and I add to that, it was not the Father's will that He was shrinking from - 'but it was the Divine anger against sin' - God, His Father. It was the imputation to Him of all our iniquities, your iniquities, that filled His Soul with horror. There was no conflict of wills, but you've got to understand the cataclysmic collision here of two worlds: the holy Son of God, spotless, pure, divine in human flesh, now contemplating what it would be to take upon Him our wickedness as if it were His own, and be cursed from God for it.

Are you understanding a wee bit more about what this is about? It's not that He's shrinking from doing God will, He's just starting now to contemplate, in anticipation, what this would mean. It wasn't the Father's will, but the contemplation of being the sin offering, becoming the object of God's holy wrath - and remember, He knew what God's holy wrath was, He was God. It was the contemplation of being forsaken by God. In chapter 15 of this gospel, verse 34, we read that He cried from the cross: 'Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?' - 'My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?'.

In Hebrews chapter 5 we get a commentary of this event, turn with me to it please, verse 7. It's speaking about how Jesus has a priesthood according to Melchizedek's - that means that it never ends, because He now lives in the power of an endless life, He has risen from the dead never to die again. In verse 7 it says: 'Who, in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear, though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered'. Now you try and understand that: though He was the Son of God, in His humanity He learned obedience to the will of God through the things that He suffered. I believe verse 7 in particular is specifically referring to Gethsemane. He's coming as a human being who is God, but in His humanity He's grappling now with all that it means to go to Calvary, and He's surrendering His will completely to God. It's not saying here that He was saved from death, in other words that God saved Him from Calvary, or He was asking for that, but it literally means 'He was saved out of death'. In other words, after He died, was buried, God raised Him again and granted this request - now He can be a priest in the order of Melchizedek. Do you understand?

Back to Mark, He addresses God again, and He calls Him - and it's touching to hear Him address God - verse 36: 'Abba, Father'. That was a term, an Aramaic term, that was like 'Dada', then it evolved into a term more like our 'Daddy', and it became a respectful term but a very intimate term, and Jesus characteristically used it of His Father, and gave it to us in the Lord's prayer to use of our Heavenly Father. The relationship was intact, do you understand? He's going through all this agony, He's grappling with not the will of God but what the will of God would entail at Calvary, but His relationship with the Father was intact. Then in verse 36 He asks: 'All things are possible for You. Take this cup away from Me; nevertheless, not what I will, but what You will'.

Now what is this cup that He's asking to be taken away from Him? Well, it's not the will of God, I think we've covered that. He's not asking for the will of God to be changed, in the sense of 'He's not going to do it'. The Old Testament gives us some clues as to what this cup is, turn with me to Psalm 75. Psalm 75, please, verse 8 reads: 'For in the hand of the LORD
there is a cup, and the wine is red; It is fully mixed, and He pours it out; Surely its dregs shall all the wicked of the earth drain and drink down'. What is in this cup? The wrath of God that the wicked deserve. Turn with me again to Isaiah 51 to show you that this is the case, Isaiah 51 please and verse 17: 'Awake, awake! Stand up, O Jerusalem, you who have drunk at the hand of the LORD the cup of His fury; you have drunk the dregs of the cup of trembling, and drained it out'. The cup of God's fury, His anger towards sin. Turn with me again, just one more, to Jeremiah, just to prove this categorically to you - chapter 25 of Jeremiah and verse 15: 'For thus says the LORD God of Israel to me: 'Take this wine cup of fury from My hand, and cause all the nations, to whom I send you, to drink it'.

What was in this cup? The wrath of God towards sin, something that was completely foreign to Christ's character and nature. He didn't know what sin was, and He certainly didn't know the anger of God toward Him because of sin - and yet this is what He's about to drink. Think of that for a moment. The hymn writer put it like this:

'Death and the curse were in the cup;
O Christ, 'twas full for thee!
But thou hast drained the last dark drop,
'Tis empty now for me;
That bitter cup, love drank it up,
Now blessings draw from Thee'.

You see, He drank a cup of wrath without mercy that we, as believers in the New Covenant, we were seeing that this morning, might drink a cup of mercy without wrath! But you're saying to me: 'But He's asking that God would take it away from Him'. Well, what He's asking, I think, is that if it was possible, seeing the horror of what Calvary would mean - for Him to be made sin, and cursed as sin, become the object of God's wrath and be forsaken of God - contemplating that, He's asking God if it's possible that He could righteously redeem and justify men any other way, that it would be done. But the heaven was silent, and He knew there was no other way. So He says: 'Not My will, but Thine be done'.

Can I tell you tonight, if you're not a Christian - and in this pluralistic, multicultural, religious fudge age - that there is salvation in none other, only Jesus Christ. God's Son said: 'If there is any other way...', and there was a silent heaven. You can't be saved through Buddha, you can't be saved through Mohammed, you can't be saved through Joseph Smith, you can't be saved through the Virgin Mary, you can't be saved through Saint Patrick, you can't be saved through King Billy, you can only be saved through Jesus Christ, God's Son, and His sacrifice on the cross - it's the only way! If it wasn't the only way, do you think God would have sent Jesus through Gethsemane and on to Calvary?

Three times Jesus prays about the matter. Twice we read He prayed the same words. Sometimes we hear it said that it's bad to say the same prayers over again - well, sometimes it is, if it's ad nauseam, particularly in the prayer meeting - but it's not wrong to keep praying the same things to the Lord, our Lord did it. In verses 37 through to 42 the disciples who, a while ago, were confessing that they would die for Jesus, couldn't even keep awake for an hour. Look at it, verse 37, 'He came and found them sleeping' - imagine how He felt. The hour of His greatest need, and His disciples are sleeping. He said to Peter, 'Simon, are you sleeping? Could you not watch one hour? Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak'.

Again He went away, and He came back again and found them, verse 40, asleep again - their
eyes heavy, they didn't know what to answer Him. Then in verse 41 He comes again the third time, and they're still sleeping - now what is that telling us? In His greatest hour of need, He must go alone. We know that, He said it, didn't He in Zechariah? 'The sheep will be scattered', He must face this hour alone. What a warning He gives to the disciples in verse 38: 'Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak'. Be alert! Be in prayer, disciples! Because we have an enemy, and if you don't watch and pray the likelihood is that you will be overcome by the evil one, irrespective of the best wishes that you might have!

Peter: 'I'll go and die for You'. All of them said: 'We'll go and die with You'. They go into the garden, Jesus needed them, and they fall asleep. Jesus says: 'Look, if you can't even watch and pray, your chances of overcoming the evil one are nil'. Maybe you're here, a professing Christian, maybe not walking with God too much, and you wonder why you're continually overcome by evil. Listen to the words of Jesus: 'Watch and pray' - are you watching? Are you alert about what's coming into your life? Where you're going, what you're doing? Are you alert about your lifestyle? Are you alert about your habits? Are you praying about everything, spreading everything before God? Are you drawing from God in prayer and fellowship? Because the spirit is willing - oh, you want it, don't you? You want to be right with God, you want to go on with God! You want to do your best, you want to excel and you want to be like some of those Christians you know! But the flesh is weak, the flesh is weak - and the only way the flesh can be dealt with is by watching and praying.

Verses 41 and 42, at that moment Judas and the Temple guards arrived to arrest Jesus. In verses 43 to 46 we read it: 'Immediately, while He was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, with a great multitude with swords and clubs, came from the chief priests and the scribes and the elders. Now His betrayer had given them a signal, saying, 'Whomever I kiss, He is the One; seize Him and lead Him away safely'. As soon as He had come, immediately he went up to Him', imagine it, 'and said to Him, 'Rabbi, Rabbi!' and kissed Him' - and I'm led to believe that's emphatic, which means, perhaps, that he kept on kissing Him - 'Then they laid their hands on Him and took Him'.

In verse 47 here we have Peter again, we know this from the other gospels: 'One of those who stood by drew his sword' - what should he have done when the Shepherd was taken? Fled! But he took his sword, and he struck the servant of the high priest, and cut off his ear. Now we know from John 18 and verse 10 that Jesus healed this man - it's just as well He did, or there might have been four crosses on Calvary, one of them Peter's! Peter's reaction was natural, wasn't it? Many of us would have reacted in the same way, but it was not spiritual. What Peter was trying to do was use carnal weapons in a spiritual battle, and that's what a lot of Christians are trying to do today, that's what a lot of churches are trying to do today: using fleshly weapons to battle spiritual fights. Someone says he used the wrong weapon at the wrong time for the wrong purpose on the wrong motive.

Finally we read in verse 48 to the end: 'Then Jesus answered and said to them, 'Have you come out, as against a robber, with swords and clubs to take Me?' - this proves that it was His time, He was in control. They could have taken Him at any time: 'I was daily with you in the temple teaching, and you did not seize Me. But the Scriptures must be fulfilled', that's why it's happening now, Jesus is saying! Here it is, verse 50: 'Then they all forsook Him and fled'. Finally the disciples forsook Him and fled, and so did this young man in verse 51 in a linen cloth, many believe it to be Mark himself - only Mark's Gospel contains that record. But this is the point, the word of verse 27 is fulfilled: the Shepherd has been struck, and the sheep have been scattered.
We have been to a very holy place tonight, haven’t we? We have gazed upon a Saviour prostrate. He went a little farther and fell on His face on the ground. Gethsemane, the place of the olive press, the Son of God being crushed by the burden of the anticipation of our sin, and the judgement thereof. Does that mean anything to you? He hasn’t even gone to Calvary, He hasn’t done anything yet to take away our sins in the truest sense - but does it even mean anything to you that He was near the point of physically expiring, exceeding sorrowful even unto death? Unsaved one, does it not mean anything to you that the Son of God loved you in such a manner, and gave Himself for you in such a manner as this? Believer, maybe like these disciples you’ve forsaken Him? Well, you’ve been given a fresh glimpse of Him tonight, is it nothing to you that He went alone? Believer who is sleeping, would it not waken you up?

I read a beautiful poem about Gethsemane with which I will finish tonight, and it makes it very personal. Listen to it:

‘Wake my soul, the hour is late,  
Hour of darkness and of fate;  
Jesus to the Garden goes,  
There to taste sin’s bitter woes;  
Wake my soul, for 'tis for thee  
Jesus seeks Gethsemane.

See the Saviour prostrate now,  
Sweat of blood upon His brow!  
Hear my soul the piercing cry,  
Cleaving thrice the silent sky!  
Sorer anguish cannot be  
Than thy pains, Gethsemane.

Gaze, my soul, with wonder gaze,  
'Tis thy Saviour weeps and prays!  
Treads the winepress all alone,  
Makes us sharers of His throne,  
Boundless love, and all for me,  
Wonderful Gethsemane!

None may tell, for none may know  
Why the Saviour suffered so;  
Depth of agony and pain  
None can measure or explain;  
But I know they were for me,  
Sorrows of Gethsemane!

Lo the fight is fought and won!  
'Not My will, but Thine be done',  
And the angels swift of wing  
To the garden sweep and sing.  
Sing my soul, for 'tis for thee,  
Dread, but dear Gethsemane!'
presence of God is so real. Let us ponder and just savour His presence with us. I believe the risen Lord Jesus, believe it with all my heart, because of the preciousness of this moment to Him in the garden, I believe He has drawn strangely near, and He is meeting with us. He is speaking to you, you know He is. There is something for you to do - what is that? What He did, say: 'Not my will, but Thine be done'. Now you will be saying it in a different sense than He, because He had no sin, He had no falling away. He was just in His final hours, coming to that place in time of complete and utter surrender to what was ahead of Him. But, my friend, Jesus asks you - and this is the dilution of the gospel that is now preached - Jesus asks you to follow Him. There's an old hymn that says: 'Though He leads me, I will follow', and one of the verses says 'Though He leads me through the Garden, I will follow, follow Him'.

Are there ones here tonight that need to pray - yes, in a different manner than He - need to pray: 'Not my will, but Thine be done'? A soul that needs saved? A backslider that needs restored? A Christian that needs revived and filled with the Holy Spirit? A person that needs a fresh start? A decision that you have been grappling with and struggling with against the will of God, and tonight you need to surrender? Deal with God in the quiet moments now, deal with Him now. While He is near, call upon Him, seek Him while He may be found. I'm just going to close in prayer, but I would ask you - and I know you want to chat and fellowship, and that's fine - but I would ask you please to just be aware, all of you, that folk are dealing with God. God is at work in this place, and just be conscious not to do anything that might quench or grieve the Spirit.

Abba Father, if ever we knew that there was no other way, we know it tonight, when Your Holy Son - willing to do whatever was in Your will for Him - His holy Soul contemplating being the sin offering and bearing Your wrath, Lord, when you caused Him in complete fellowship to know Your will, and He resigned to it, that it was the only way. Lord, may everyone here tonight know it, and may those who know it appreciate it - may I appreciate it. Yet we see that He has still to go to Calvary. Lord, I can't say much more, just deal with everyone here and my own heart - that all of us would be completely surrendered to Your will, whatever that might mean. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Transcribed by Andrew Watkins, Preach The Word – February 2011
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Now we're turning in our Bibles this morning to Mark 14 again, and we're looking this morning at the trial and Peter's denial of the Lord Jesus. Let me just say that, if you haven't been with us these last weeks, we've been really following 'The Final Countdown to Calvary', the last week in the life of our Lord Jesus. Probably it started for Him on Saturday, where Mary of Bethany anointed Him, His head and His feet, for burial - broke that alabaster box of spikenard ointment - although we came to that later on in the gospel record, but that's how the week started. Then the next day, Sunday, He entered Jerusalem as the King of the Jews, Palm Sunday we know it as, the Triumphal Entry. Then, Monday we saw He cursed a fig tree and cleansed the Temple, that was a picture of Israel and how they had lost their effectiveness as the chosen people of God. Then on Tuesday we saw Him questioned in the Temple precincts by the Sanhedrin, the ruling religious council of the Jews. Then on Wednesday, what some believe to be a silent day, I think on Wednesday He gave the Olivet Discourse about His second coming and the signs of when that will be. Then Thursday evening, we saw last Sunday morning, He celebrated the Passover and instituted the Lord's Supper. Then later on that evening He entered Gethsemane, we saw that last Sunday evening, and was in great agony as He anticipated drinking the cup of Calvary. Then, of course, from Gethsemane He was betrayed by Judas to the soldiers, and that is most likely the early hours of Friday morning.

We're still in the early hours of Friday morning for our reading here today, verse 53 of chapter 14 of Mark: "And they led Jesus away to the high priest; and with him were assembled all the chief priests, the elders, and the scribes. But Peter followed Him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest. And he sat with the servants and warmed himself at the fire. Now the chief priests and all the council sought testimony against Jesus to put Him to death, but found none. For many bore false witness against Him, but their testimonies did not agree. Then some rose up and bore false witness against Him, saying, 'We heard Him say, 'I will destroy this temple made with hands, and with in three days I will build another made without hands''. But not even then did their testimony agree. And the high priest stood up in the midst and asked Jesus, saying, 'Do You answer nothing? What is it these men testify against You?'. But He kept silent and answered nothing. Again the high priest asked Him, saying to Him, 'Are You the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?'. Jesus said, 'I am. And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven'. Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, 'What further need do we have of witnesses? You have heard the blasphemy! What do you think?'. And they all condemned Him to be deserving of death. Then some began to spit on Him, and to blindfold Him, and to beat Him, and to say to Him, 'Prophesy!' And the officers struck Him with the palms of their hands. Now as Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the servant girls of the high priest came. And when she saw Peter warming himself, she looked at him and said, 'You also were with Jesus of Nazareth'. But he denied it, saying, 'I neither know nor understand what you are saying'. And he went out on the porch, and a rooster crowed. And the servant girl saw him again, and began to say to those who stood by, 'This is one of them'. But he denied it again. And a little later those who stood by said to Peter again, 'Surely you are one of them; for you are a Galilean, and your speech shows it'. Then he began to curse and swear, 'I do not know this Man of whom
you speak!'. A second time the rooster crowed. Then Peter called to mind the word that Jesus had said to him, 'Before the rooster crows twice, you will deny Me three times'. And when he thought about it, he wept".

"Immediately, in the morning, the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council; and they bound Jesus, led Him away, and delivered Him to Pilate. Then Pilate asked Him, 'Are You the King of the Jews?'. He answered and said to him, 'It is as you say'. And the chief priests accused Him of many things, but He answered nothing. Then Pilate asked Him again, saying, 'Do You answer nothing? See how many things they testify against You'. But Jesus still answered nothing, so that Pilate marveled. Now at the feast he was accustomed to releasing one prisoner to them, whomever they requested. And there was one named Barabbas, who was chained with his fellow rebels; they had committed murder in the rebellion. Then the multitude, crying aloud, began to ask him to do just as he had always done for them. But Pilate answered them, saying, 'Do you want me to release to you the King of the Jews?'. For he knew that the chief priests had handed Him over because of envy. But the chief priests stirred up the crowd, so that he should rather release Barabbas to them. Pilate answered and said to them again, 'What then do you want me to do with Him whom you call the King of the Jews?'. So they cried out again, 'Crucify Him!'. Then Pilate said to them, 'Why, what evil has He done?'. But they cried out all the more, 'Crucify Him!'. So Pilate, wanting to gratify the crowd, released Barabbas to them; and he delivered Jesus, after he had scourged Him, to be crucified. Then the soldiers led Him away into the hall called Praetorium, and they called together the whole garrison. And they clothed Him with purple; and they twisted a crown of thorns, put it on His head, and began to salute Him, 'Hail, King of the Jews!'. Then they struck Him on the head with a reed and spat on Him; and bowing the knee, they worshiped Him. And when they had mocked Him, they took the purple off Him, put His own clothes on Him, and led Him out to crucify Him".

Let us pray please. Now I said it last week and I'll say it again: all I'm going to do for you this morning and this evening is exposit the Scripture, and present to you what it says, and Jesus. Very elementary, but I believe that as I do that, verse by verse, you will encounter the living Christ. I want you now to be ready for that. I want you to be prepared to see Jesus in all of His ignominy and agony. So come now to the Lord and offer yourself, offer your heart to Him and ask Him to truly, by the eyes of your spirit, to reveal Himself to you.

Father, I feel so small and so inadequate now coming to this portion of Scripture. It is just insurmountable in its grandeur, and in the depth of its meaning it is unfathomable. Yet we know that we ourselves cannot embellish what is before us, but we know that the Holy Spirit can take of these great truths and make them live, and make them applicable to our lives, and do a work of eternal value and virtue in our souls through this truth. So that's what I'm asking Lord, I'm not going to say anything new, I'm not going to bring, I don't think, any great revelations to this so often spoken story - and yet I believe that something new, something lasting will take place this morning for just having gazed upon Christ as Your Suffering Servant. Lord Jesus, we would see You. Reveal Yourself to us now in all Your dying love, we pray, Amen.

I did say to you at the beginning of the studies that, in order to get the full grasp of everything that went on during this last week of the life of the Lord, we need to take all of the Gospels together. We haven't had time to do that, we've been dipping in a little bit to the other Gospels, but when we put them all together concerning the trials of the Lord Jesus you find that there are really six trials, or maybe better to say six stages to His trials. There were three stages to His trials before the Jewish religious authorities, and then there were three
STUDIES IN MARK

Let's just follow them through for your benefit. The first trial that He had really opened a preliminary hearing before Annas, who is described in John 18 as the High Priest, and yet it's a little bit confusing because then Caiaphas is later described as the High Priest. There was only one High Priest, and yet it appears that Annas was the former High Priest - he was Caiaphas' father-in-law - but just as a retired general can still be called 'General', or the President of the United States is still called 'the President', Annas still retained this title of 'High Priest'. So it appears that Jesus was there first before Annas, and then He moved to a full council to hear witnesses against Him. We do read this in our reading, verses 53 to 65: He stands before Caiaphas now, and these witnesses are brought as a testimony against Him. Then he moves from Caiaphas' hearing to an early morning session that we read of in chapter 15 and verse 1, where this ruling body of the Jews take a final vote of condemnation upon the Lord Jesus. Essentially this is His trial before the Sanhedrin, the ruling council of the Jews.

Now it is from there that the Lord Jesus is then sent for His first hearing before Pontius Pilate, and we read of that in verses 1 to 5 of chapter 15, and in John 18 as well. Having had that first hearing before Pilate, Pilate then sent Him on to Herod - Herod Antipas. In Luke 23 you can read about that, and He stands before this tetrarch of the Empire, and this half-Jew who even the Jews despised. Then Herod, after mocking Him, sends Him back to Pilate, and we read about that in verses 6 through to 15, and He has His final hearing before Pilate - and from there Pilate consented to the cry of the crowd, and crucifies the Lord of glory. So you see six stages, three stages before the Jewish ruling religious body, and three stages before the Roman authority, the imperial power.

Now Mark breaks in at the scene where Annas, the former High Priest, has sent Jesus to Caiaphas, his son-in-law, the current High Priest. In verse 53, we read that He is before the Pharisees, the Scribes, and the elders of the people - that is the Sanhedrin: 'They led Jesus away to the high priest; and with him were assembled all the chief priests, the elders, and the scribes', and they are there to condemn Him. Now let me say categorically to you right away: this was absolutely, without a shadow of a doubt, an illegal trial. Now let me give you the reasons why this was an illegal trial: simply because the Jews disregarded their own rules under which they operated. There are at least five reasons why this was illegal: one, they weren't supposed to meet together as the Sanhedrin at night time, and here they were met at night; two, they were not to meet during any of the Jewish feasts, and you will remember that this was at the time of Passover; three, they were not permitted to bribe false witnesses to commit perjury, and we can see clearly from this record that that's exactly what they did do; four, a death verdict was not to be carried out until one night had elapsed from the judgement, and we can clearly see that one night had not elapsed since they had judged that Jesus was guilty of death; and five, unless they met in the hall of the hewn stone in the Temple area, it was said that all their verdicts, though they were the Sanhedrin, were not binding because they had not met in that place.

So you can see that in their eagerness to do away with Jesus, they broke their own laws. Now you remember this is the crowd that was continually looking at Jesus and scrutinising Him through His life and ministry for broken laws, for breaking their tradition - and yet now, in their venom and vitriol to put Him to death, they break practically all the laws of the book. It was an illegal trial, and yet they are trying to create a semblance of legality. In verse 55 we see that: 'the chief priests and all the council sought testimony against Jesus to put Him to death, but found none'. Now Deuteronomy 17 and verse 6 reads: 'Whoever is deserving of death shall be put to death on the testimony of two or three witnesses; he shall not be put to
death on the testimony of one witness'. So it was necessary to get at least two witnesses to pronounce Jesus guilty and condemn Him to death - but we see in verse 55 that they couldn't even get two - remarkable! So, in a frantic rush to devise fabricated and trumped up charges against Jesus, they assembled together false witnesses, people who were willing to lie, but even that didn't work out because the liars' testimonies would not agree! We see in verse 56: 'For many false witness against Him, but their testimonies did not agree'.

Then in verses 57 through to 59 we hear some of these testimonies: 'Some rose up and bore false witness against Him, saying, 'We heard Him say, 'I will destroy this temple made with hands, and within three days I will build another made without hands'' - and they misquote Him. What Jesus actually said in John 2 and verse 19 was: 'Destroy this temple', speaking of His body, 'and in three days I will raise it up', He did not say 'Destroy this temple made with hands', as these liars accused Him of in verse 58. But we, in our day and age, don't really grasp the import of this accusation against Jesus. To put it in contemporary terms: they were accusing Him of terrorism - that's right! They were accusing Him of an attempt, or at least an intent, to destroy the Temple which meant so much to them as Jews. Throughout the Greco-Roman world, the destruction or desecration of places of worship was regarded as a capital offence worthy of death. So you can see how they're trying to get evidence that would condemn Jesus to death.

This is remarkable, look at verse 60 please and 61: 'The high priest stood up in the midst and asked Jesus, saying, 'Do You answer nothing? What is it these men testify against You?'. But He kept silent and answered nothing'. Throughout all this false accusation, as they are firing lies at Him left right and centre, as they are misquoting Him, He says nothing in fulfilment of Isaiah 53:7: 'He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth; He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so He opened not His mouth'. How would you fare if a crowd was around you firing lies, blatant lies? Think for a moment: sometimes the mud sticks with us, doesn't it? Sometimes people have reason to accuse us - but imagine the evidence that the Lord Jesus could have cited in His own defence against these false accusations! My mind went immediately to what He told His disciples to tell John the Baptist when he was locked up in prison and he was starting to doubt whether or not Jesus was He who was promised to come, and what was the explanation Jesus gave to His identity? He said: 'Tell John: the blind see, the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me'. He could have said that, but He said nothing. He didn't open His mouth.

That's a lesson to us, it's a lesson to us of how we react when we are accused, when we are lied about, when we are tempted to run to our own defence. We're all the same. Turn with me quickly, and I'll not have an awful lot of application practically speaking this morning, but to 1 Peter please - because there is a great application that Peter gives of this very incident. First Peter chapter 2 and verse 21: 'For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps' - how? "Who committed no sin, Nor was deceit found in His mouth'; who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously'. How do you cope when people lie about you? When people accuse you to your face of things that are blatant untruths? Here's how Jesus coped: He committed everything - we say 'take it on the chin', He didn't take it on the chin and absorb it - He committed all those wrongs that were done to Him to His Heavenly Father who judges righteously. He knew what the Scripture teaches: 'Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord, I will repay' - that's the only way to cope when you're accused of false accusations, when you're lied about, it's the only way to cope. I, like
the rest of you, am the best at running to my own defence when I hear a lie that has been
told about me - but I remember years ago reading a little pamphlet by A.W. Tozer, I think it
was called 'Five Steps to Spiritual Power', and it was really about how to maintain being filled
with the Holy Spirit. One of those steps was: 'Never defend yourself'. It's worth thinking
about, particularly in the light of our blessed Lord here.

But you might think there's a bit of a contradiction here in verse 61, the second half, it says:
'Again the high priest asked Him, saying to Him, 'Are You the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?'
- and then Jesus answered. Now, we have to bring in Matthew's Gospel here, because we
know from his gospel, chapter 26 verse 33, that it was at this point that the High Priest,
Caiaphas, put Jesus under oath. Just where it says there in verse 61, 'Again the high priest' -
I have it circled in my Bible, and a little annotation saying, 'Here he puts Jesus under oath'.
Now what that simply meant was: Jesus had no choice but to reply to the High Priest, or else
He would have been breaking the Old Testament law. You see in Leviticus 5 and verse 1 we
read there, and this is a paraphrase, 'If any of the people are called to testify', that simply
means to testify under oath, 'about something they have witnessed, but they refuse to testify,
they will be held responsible and be subject to punishment'. In other words, they will be
sinning if they know about a matter, they are put under oath in a trial, and they don't answer.
Jesus knew this, He could not sin, He could not break God's law, and so He answers. Caiaphas
had to draw Him out under oath, which indicates that he didn't have enough evidence to
convict Him - in fact, there wasn't any at all!

But he asks Jesus, if you look at verse 61, he asks Him: 'Are You the Messiah, the Son of the
Blessed?'. Now, if you have any doubt about the identity of Jesus Christ - and I don't know if
there's any doubters here or unbelievers - you need to hear it from His own mouth. Some
people tell me: 'Oh, you can read all the Gospels and Jesus never claims to be God, or He
never claims to be equal with God or the Son of God' - well, you look very carefully at what
Jesus says. It clears it all up. Jesus said: 'I am. And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the
right hand of the Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven' - and that was a blatant claim
to come with the power of God, and the High Priest understood, even if we don't understand,
what He was meaning. The High Priest understood, and he knew that Jesus was claiming to
be a manifestation of God, and that when He returned He would return as God to judge the
world.

But actually what the Lord Jesus was saying, in a roundabout term, to Caiaphas was: 'Today
you are standing in judgement of Me, but you're going to see the day when I will come to
judge you'. I wonder does that apply to anyone here today? An unbeliever or a doubter, and
you're judging Christ, you're judging this book, you're judging the authenticity of the gospel
record, and its message, and its effectiveness in people's lives. Well, I want to say to you:
hear the word of God, there is a day coming when this One whom you are judging is going to
judge you! Caiaphas understood it, and in fact it wasn't Jesus under trial at all here, it was the
nation of Israel under trial - what they would do with Jesus, who is called Christ. Caiaphas
was under trial, Annas was under trial - but when He comes again, Jesus was saying, His
identity will not be veiled, it would be clear to everyone who He was. He was claiming to be
God in the flesh there and then, and He's saying: 'And you're going to know it for sure when I
come back again to judge the world'.

Now this was blasphemy to the Jews, for a man to claim to be God and equal with God. So we
see in verse 63: 'The high priest', at these words, 'tore his clothes and said, 'What further
need do we have of witnesses? You have heard the blasphemy!'', verse 64, ''What do you
think?' And they all condemned Him to be deserving of death'. Now it's interesting, because if
you were to read Leviticus chapter 10 and verse 6, you would see that for the High Priest to rend his garments made himself liable to death! In the heat of the moment, condemning Christ to death, the High Priest was condemning himself to death. We see that the entire Sanhedrin agreed and condemned Him to death. Now we don't think Nicodemus was here, he was probably a member of the Sanhedrin, nor Joseph of Arimathea - we'll see him later tonight - they probably weren't of the number at this time, because they were predisposed towards Jesus.

Then verse 65, and this is a remarkable verse: 'Some began', these religious men, 'to spit on Him, and to blindfold Him, and to beat Him, and to say to Him, 'Prophesy!'. And the officers struck Him with the palms of their hands'. Can I say to you: this is what the world does to God when given an opportunity. I don't for one minute believe that it would be any different today. Even religious people do this, even people who were waiting on Christ - that's what the Jews were doing, they were waiting on Christ - the true Christ, they beat, blindfolded, mocked, and spat upon. You might be a person that calls yourself 'Christian', but you're not prepared to face the true Christ - not the Christ of established Christendom, not the Christ of the cults, not the Christ of legalism, but the Christ of the word of God, the living Christ. You've got to face Him, or you're no different than these people! C.H. Spurgeon said: 'Be astonished, O heavens, and be horribly afraid. His face is the light of the universe, His person is the glory of heaven, and they 'began to spit on Him'. Alas, my God, that man should be so base!'. If anyone ever doubted the depravity of the human soul, all they need to do is read verse 65.

Now, as this abuse of the Son of God takes place, Peter is hiding in the courtyard below. Verse 66: 'Below in the courtyard, one of the servant girls of the high priest came'. Now, let me remind you that if he had listened to the Lord's warning in verse 27, that the Shepherd would be struck and the sheep would be scattered, he would be far away by now and he would not be denying the Lord Jesus three times. You remember what I shared with you, I think it was last Sunday morning: you need to make sure you don't, like Peter, overestimate yourself - he overestimated himself many, many times - because you'll set yourself up for a fall if you do that. Secondly you've also got to make sure you don't underestimate His knowledge of you: the Lord knew the weakness of the disciples, He knew that all of them, bar John, needed to disappear, and so He advised them to do that.

Now let me remind you that Mark was written for Roman Christians who were about to endure some of the fiercest persecution that the church has ever known then in the Roman Empire. What Mark through the Holy Spirit, and Peter, we believe, feeding Mark his information, what they are warning these Roman Christians to do is: be faithful to the Lord, but do not be foolish or foolhardy! Don't overestimate yourself, and don't underestimate God's knowledge of you. It's a worthy message, and Peter knew it well. Look at his denial, verse 67, warming himself, this little girl, or this young woman 'looked at him and said, 'You also were with Jesus of Nazareth'. But he denied it, saying, 'I neither know nor understand what you are saying". He's warming himself by the world's fire, and more than that: some people believe that in verse 65, the word for 'officers' there, and the word for 'servants' in verse 54, in the courtyard that Peter is warming himself beside the fire in, that's the same ancient Greek word - and because that same word is used of both groups, many believe that Peter was sitting at the fire with the same characters that struck the Lord Jesus, spat upon Him, blindfolded Him, and mocked Him. In other words, he was associating with Christ-beaters! How have the mighty fallen.

In verse 68 this statement he speaks to the little girl: 'I neither know nor understand what
you are saying', the commentator William Lane says that that denial used the form that was common in rabbinical law for a formal legal denial. This would be commonly said in cases: 'I neither know nor understand what you are saying' - it was a formal, legal denial of Christ: 'I don't know this Man at all'. Then, he doesn't leave it there, we read that he begins to curse and swear and protest: 'I don't know this Man!'. The cock crows the second time, fulfilling the Lord's prophecy way back in verse 30. You remember what He said: 'Assuredly, I say to you', Peter, 'that today, even this night, before the rooster crows twice, you will deny Me three times'. In an instant, in an instant at the cock crowing, Peter realised what had happened and he broke down - and we read that he wept. Verse 72: 'A second time the rooster crowed. Then Peter called to mind the word that Jesus had said to him, 'Before the rooster crows twice, you will deny Me three times'. And when he thought about it, he wept' - but we learn from Matthew and Luke that he wept bitterly.

This is an occurrence that all four gospel writers record: Peter wept bitterly. Mark says: 'When he remembered the word of the Lord', but do you know what Luke tells us? It wasn't just the memory of Jesus' word, we read in Luke 22:61 that as Peter was at the fire, and as he has just finished denying the Lord with oaths and curses, that Jesus is brought out and He passes by Peter, and He looks toward Peter - and it stabs him to his very soul! Then he went out and he wept bitterly! Can you imagine what that look of Christ must have been like?

Well, how often do we deny the Lord? Come on now: I'll be honest, I've denied Him - perhaps not with my words, but with my actions, with my behaviour; with omission, things that I leave undone; and commission, things that I do that I ought not to do. I believe this look from the Lord Jesus that broke Peter was not a look of condemnation, nor a look of disappointment or disdain, I believe it was a look of love. I believe that, because if you look at John's gospel chapter 13 you see that the Lord tells them what's going to happen before He goes to Gethsemane. You see that He tells Peter that he's going to deny Him, and the next thing that Jesus says to Peter is found in John 14 verse 1 - and He says it to them all, I know - but this is what Peter would have heard after being told he would deny Jesus, he hears these words: 'Let not your heart be troubled'. You look at it, the chapter divisions have been put in by men: 'Let not your heart be troubled'. You remember Jesus told him: 'Simon Peter, Satan has desired to sift you, he wants to have you and sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you'. Oh, that has brought me so much encouragement many times in my life! I know my own weakness, I know my propensity to let the Lord down and deny Him and to disown Him - but to know that even though I might be in the darkest temptation and trial of life, that Jesus is praying for me!

Then he went on to say: 'Peter, when you're converted, when we've sorted this whole matter out, everything will be alright' - this is before he denied Him. Isn't He a wonderful Saviour? If you're here this morning and you have denied Him, you have let Him down, you need to see this look of love. If you could only see Him in His love toward you, even in your backslidden state, even in the sins that you're dabbling with - you're so far away, maybe as far away as Peter, cursing and swearing against Christ! It's hard to imagine a person could be saved, doing that, isn't it? But if you could only see His look of love, I believe it would melt you.

We're so hard on Peter sometimes. Warren Weirsbe says: 'Before we judge Peter too severely, we need to examine our own lives. Think of Peter, how many times have we denied the Lord, and lost opportunities to share the Gospel with others? Do we, like Peter, talk when we should listen? Do we argue when we should obey? Do we sleep when we should pray? Do we fight when we should submit?'. If Israel was on trial, and Annas was on trial, and Caiaphas was on trial, Peter was on trial as well! We're all on trial in relation to Christ, every one of us.
Unsaved people are on trial in relation to Christ rejection, but we as believers are on trial in relation to Christ denial. Peter appears to fail, doesn't he? You've got to think good of Peter for giving this information to Mark! He has bad PR, Peter, doesn't he? But he's a humble and meek man, that's the way God made him, and we know that from his epistles. You've got to admire his willingness to let this information go forth as it did - but notice: Peter's failure was not final, and I believe it's set in parallel in the Gospels with Judas and his denial, which was final, but Peter's wasn't.

Now listen this morning: there's a way back! Wherever you've been, whatever you've done - and I don't care what you've done - there is a way back! This Saviour still looks upon you in love. In fact, Peter was brought, after he was forgiven and converted and restored by grace, he was brought to an even greater place - that's marvellous! God's grace is like that: greater than all our sin.

But we've got to move on to this official morning meeting of the Sanhedrin, verse 1 of chapter 15, this was to validate what had been decided on the illegal night of trial - do you understand? This was the rubber stamp on it all, and from there we read: 'They bound Jesus, led Him away, and delivered Him to Pilate' - Pontius Pilate, the governor of Palestine. Now, up until now Jesus had been before religious leaders on the charge of blasphemy, that's clear, isn't it? But now, as He stands before the civil court, He is being tried for the charge of treason. Before the religious Jews the charge was blasphemy, now before the Romans it's treason - and the Jews knew that Pilate wasn't interested in religious matters. He despised the Jews, so he wouldn't be interested in their charge of blasphemy, so they had to feed Pilate with the fear that there was going to be a rebellion, led by this man Jesus, to overthrow the Roman Imperial power - treason!

So that's why, in verse 2, Pilate asked Jesus: 'Are You the King of the Jews?'. He wants to know is He setting himself up as a leader of the Jewish nation in competition to Caesar. Now the Jews took Him to Pilate, I believe, for this very reason: they believed that Pilate would quench and quash any rebellion very severely. They knew that he would take the charge of treason with great seriousness. But also the Jews had lost their authority to impose the death penalty, the Romans had taken it away from them. So if Jesus was going to be put to death, the Romans would have to give the say-so for it. Now the Jews, they thought this was a fait accompli, it was going to happen: 'This man hates insurrection, and we have got Him on the charge of treason!'.

You would think, knowing from secular history the character and personality of Pontius Pilate, that it was a fait accompli - because we're told that he was a cruel, ruthless man, and he was insensitive to the moral feelings of others - but the Jews classically underestimated Pilate. It appears, to me at least, that he shows suspicion towards the Jews. In other words, he realises they are up to something. The reason why I feel that is in verse 3, the chief priests accused Jesus of many things, but He answered nothing. This was after Pilate asked: 'Are You the King of the Jews?', Jesus says 'It is as you say' - and I can almost see a smirk on the face of Pilate as he looks towards the Jews, and thinks 'They're up to something!'. When they see the smirk, they all erupt and start throwing more dirt at the Lord Jesus because they feel: 'Hold on a minute, he's not swallowing this!'. Yet, in the midst of all this accusation, what is Jesus doing again? What is He doing? He's silent.

Verse 4: 'Pilate asked Him again, saying, 'Do You answer nothing? See how many things they testify against You!'. But Jesus still answered nothing, so that Pilate marveled'. Now remember who Jesus is before here, He's before a Governor, a Judge, who is used to men
groveling like little children in tears at his feet, pleading for their lives. Yet here is a Man that
even Pilate realises is falsely accused, and He stands with His head high as a Man, but
answers not a word. This Man was different, even Pilate could see it. Now, we know from
the other Gospels that Pilate, several times, even stated: 'I find no fault in this Man' - but Pilate,
as the politician that he was, rather than doing what was right he did what he thought was
politically expedient. Can I say to you: beware of politics in the church and outside of the
church. I'm not saying Christians can't have an influence in politics, but politics is a thing of
compromise - and Christians cannot compromise on their principles, that's why it's difficult, or
it ought to be. But even in churches we engage in church politics, and we compromise for the
sake of the crowd - beware!

But before he compromised, Pilate tried to pass the buck and he sent Jesus to Herod Antipas,
the ruler of Galilee. But after mocking Jesus, Herod sent Him back to Pilate - and then Pilate
came up with another ingenious plan. At this time of year he was in the custom of releasing a
prisoner, it was like a political sop to the Jews, particularly at Passover where all the national
fervour was intense and they were looking and waiting for the Messiah, he would release a
prisoner to them. So he offered to release this man called Barabbas - Barabbas was a
murderer and a rebel - or he could release to them Jesus, the Preacher of peace and the
worker of miracles. As far as Pilate was concerned, this was a no-brainer. Who would choose a
wicked murderer over the Lord Jesus?

But it's at this point that Pilate underestimated the chief priests, look at verse 11 - you see,
they had stirred up the crowd: 'so that he should rather release Barabbas to them. Pilate
answered and said to them again, 'What then do you want me to do with Him whom you call
the King of the Jews?' So they cried out again, 'Crucify Him!'. Then Pilate said to them, 'Why,
what evil has He done?'. But they cried out all the more, 'Crucify Him!'. It appears to me that
the crowd was primed to cry for Jesus' blood. Now think of this for a moment: these Jews,
who were bringing Jesus to Pilate with a charge of treason against Caesar hanging over Him,
were now asking for the release of a man who actually was guilty of treason against Rome -
but they didn't care, for they wanted Him dead at any cost, by any means.

We read in verse 15: 'Pilate, wanting to gratify the crowd, released Barabbas to them; and he
delivered Jesus, after he had scourged Him, to be crucified'. He conceded to the crowd, I say
it again: beware of compromising to the cry of the crowd. It doesn't matter what the world is
doing, it doesn't matter what most of the Christian church is doing, it doesn't matter if it's not
what God's telling you to do! But you know, in the midst of all this betrayal and lies and filth,
scheming and diabolical planning, there is a beautiful picture of our redemption: the guiltless
One, Jesus, delivered to die in order that the guilty one, Barabbas, might go free. In the midst
of all of this seeming moral chaos, God is working, God is shining a light of revelation. Even in
the choice of a wicked crowd, a wicked governor, to release Barabbas - God is in control! Who
knows what Barabbas thought of this in years to come?

It's assumed that in verse 14 Pilate used the conventional term for: 'You shall mount the
cross', 'Ibi in crucem', or 'I consign You to the cross', 'Abi in crucem'. Then we read these
tragic words, verse 16: 'Then the soldiers led Him away into the hall called Praetorium, and
they called together the whole garrison', they brought Jesus into the hall, that's Pilate the
governor's residence, his great hall, and they assembled the whole Roman garrison to scourge
Him. That scourging was to bring a person almost to the point of death, and then they staged
a mock coronation - verse 17: 'They clothed Him with purple', other Gospels say scarlet, and
it probably was purple and scarlet, the colours of royalty, 'and they twisted a crown of thorns,
put it on His head, and began to salute Him, 'Hail, King of the Jews!''. Then they struck Him on
the head with a reed and spat on Him; and bowing the knee, they worshiped Him'.

They bowed the knee, the normal homage paid to a member of royalty. They crowned Him with a crown of Jerusalem thorns, inches long. They gave Him a sceptre, a reed. Instead of kissing Him as royalty oft would be kissed, they spat on Him. In fact, the translation is better 'they kept spitting on Him'. Little did they know that the One they clothed with purple was the Son of God. The One they crowned with thorns was the Creator of the universe. Spurgeon says of this: 'See, above all, that crown upon His head. It has rubies in it, but the rubies are composed of His own blood, forced from His blessed temples by the cruel thorns. See, they pay Him homage; but the homage is their own filthy spittle which runs down His cheeks'.

I wonder is there anyone here this morning who is on trial concerning what you will do with this Man. The Sanhedrin, Annas, Caiaphas, Pilate, Antipas, the crowd were all trying Him - but every single one of them were under trial concerning what they would do with Jesus, who is called Christ. What will you do, my friend? Will you wait until the day when He will come as Judge and He will try you, or will you be saved today and bow the knee to Him truly, and confess Him as Saviour and Lord? Believer, are you denying Him with your inaction, with your silence? When He stood for you, and opened not His mouth for you - it was for you! - and you won't take your stand for Him?

I want to finish by quoting to you an old hymn. I love the new hymns by the way, I really do, and I love the praise - but some of the old hymns are tremendous. There's one that goes like this, listen carefully:

'Jesus is standing in Pilate's hall,  
Friendless, forsaken, betrayed by all;  
Hearken! What meaneth the sudden call?  
What will you do with Jesus?

Jesus is standing on trial still,  
You can be false to Him if you will,  
You can be faithful through good or ill:  
What will you do with Jesus?

Will you evade Him as Pilate tried?  
Or will you choose Him, whate'er betide?  
Vainly you struggle from Him to hide:  
What will you do with Jesus?

Will you, like Peter, your Lord deny?  
Or will you scorn from His foes to fly,  
Daring for Jesus to live or die?  
What will you do with Jesus?'.

Here's the chorus:

'What will you do with Jesus?  
Neutral you cannot be;  
Some day your heart will be asking,  
'What will He do with me?".'
Let us pray. Now let's take time, we're going to break bread soon. What has God been saying to you? Now come on. If there's one thing I get weary of, it's when we preach and it makes no difference. Now, I know I have to get used to that, because the prophets of old were told: 'Go you and tell them, and even if they don't listen, go and tell them, and I'm preparing you for the fact that they won't even listen' - so I have to try and grapple with that. But it is frustrating to present this crucified, loving, and now living Lord, and great truths like this just mean nothing - it's like water off a duck's back. Like a favourite tune that you know from your youth, you've heard it all before so many times, you can whistle it as well as me - but it doesn't impact your heart. I have stuck very close to Scripture, and I just wanted to bring Jesus to you that it might impact your heart, and for some of you it ain't - and it's tragic to me. How all the more tragic is it to Jesus?

Lord, I just pray - and I'm not setting myself up here, as You know me, as some kind of epitome of devotion and boldness for Christ: I am not. I ask You to forgive me for the times when I've been silent, when I have not taken my stand for Jesus, when I have not gone outside the camp bearing His reproach; where I have opened my mouth to defend myself, even when I was in the wrong. Lord, I pray that all of us here today, believer and unbeliever alike, will not do what Pilate did, will not do what Annas and Caiaphas did, and will not do what Peter did - but Lord that they will bow the knee truthfully, genuinely, and crown You, Lord Jesus, Lord of all. For Your glory we pray, Amen.

Transcribed by Andrew Watkins, Preach The Word – February 2011
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So Mark chapter 15, and we're beginning to read at verse 21, and we'll read down to the end of the chapter now: "Then they compelled a certain man, Simon a Cyrenian, the father of Alexander and Rufus, as he was coming out of the country and passing by, to bear His cross. And they brought Him to the place Golgotha, which is translated, Place of a Skull. Then they gave Him wine mingled with myrrh to drink, but He did not take it. And when they crucified Him, they divided His garments, casting lots for them to determine what every man should take. Now it was the third hour, and they crucified Him. And the inscription of His accusation was written above: THE KING OF THE JEWS. With Him they also crucified two robbers, one on His right and the other on His left. So the Scripture was fulfilled which says, 'And He was numbered with the transgressors'. And those who passed by blasphemed Him, wagging their heads and saying, 'Aha! You who destroy the temple and build it in three days, save Yourself, and come down from the cross!'. Likewise the chief priests also, mocking among themselves with the scribes, said, 'He saved others; Himself He cannot save. Let the Christ, the King of Israel, descend now from the cross, that we may see and believe'. Even those who were crucified with Him reviled Him. Now when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, 'Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?' which is translated, 'My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?'. Some of those who stood by, when they heard that, said, 'Look, He is calling for Elijah!'. Then someone ran and filled a sponge full of sour wine, put it on a reed, and offered it to Him to drink, saying, 'Let Him alone; let us see if Elijah will come to take Him down'. And Jesus cried out with a loud voice, and breathed His last. Then the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. So when the centurion, who stood opposite Him, saw that He cried out like this and breathed His last, he said, 'Truly this Man was the Son of God!'. There were also women looking on from afar, among whom were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the Less and of Joses, and Salome, who also followed Him and ministered to Him when He was in Galilee, and many other women who came up with Him to Jerusalem. Now when evening had come, because it was the Preparation Day, that is, the day before the Sabbath, Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent council member, who was himself waiting for the kingdom of God, coming and taking courage, went in to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Pilate marveled that He was already dead; and summoning the centurion, he asked him if He had been dead for some time. So when he found out from the centurion, he granted the body to Joseph. Then he bought fine linen, took Him down, and wrapped Him in the linen. And he laid Him in a tomb which had been hewn out of the rock, and rolled a stone against the door of the tomb. And Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses observed where He was laid".

Could we pray for a moment? I have been asking you on each occasion, as we bow in prayer before coming to the word of God, to bring your heart to the Lord - to come and ask Him to minister to your need, whatever that may be. I don't know, He knows and you know, or maybe you don't even know yourself - but you know you have need, and every one of us have some sort of a need. So why not come to the Lord now, and say: 'Lord, here I am' - why not pray this prayer? - 'I really want to see Jesus. I really want to have a revelation of His glory and His Majesty'. There's no better place to see that, really, than the cross and the
resurrection - for the Lord, even when He prayed to His Heavenly Father, before He went to the cross, He said: 'Glorify Me'. This was His glorious hour.

Father, Abba Father, we come to You now in that name which is above every name, the matchless name of Jesus, the Lord and the Christ. Lord, we have been so blessed walking with Him in His last week of life on earth. Lord, we pray that we will not for one second take for granted the sights that we have gazed at, the sounds we have listened to, the taste of the bread and the wine. Lord, give us spiritual eyes to see even deeper tonight, to really understand what went on at that centre cross on Golgotha's hill. I pray for any unbelievers in this place tonight, that this would be the night when they would have a revelation of Jesus to their soul, given by the Spirit. We ask that the Holy Spirit, who would take of the things of Christ and show them to us, would do His work now - glorifying Jesus, shining the spotlight on Jesus. As we gaze upon Him, may the Holy Dove come down, for His glory we pray, Amen.

Now maybe this is your first night - it's unfortunate you should come really at the last night, but we're glad to see you nevertheless - but we have been following 'The Final Countdown to Calvary', the last week in the life of our Lord Jesus. Now I'll not recap all the days, as I have been doing, save to say that: traditionally speaking we have reached Friday, we have known it as 'Good Friday'. But having said that, and I have left this to the last night just to shoot it across your bow, there is a great debate over this final week of the life of the Lord, over the days of the week - particularly understanding how there are three days, and what is often said 'three days and three nights', just as Jonah was in the belly of the whale, so would the Son of Man be in the heart of the earth for three days and three nights, the Scripture says. Scholars, for ages, have tried to work out how you get three days and three nights between Friday and Sunday. Now, I have deliberately avoided this: one, because I'm not sure myself; and two - I have my thoughts on it mind you, but I wouldn't be dogmatic on it just yet - but two, particularly because I think you really miss the wood for the trees if you get bogged down in all that detail. Therefore I felt it was more necessary to concentrate on the subject matter, rather than the chronology, rather than the timescale.

The subject matter of this last week could be best summarised in the words of Jesus in John 17 and verse 4, in His High Priestly prayer, as we have come to know it. He said to His Father: 'I have glorified You on the earth, I have finished the work which You have given me to do'. That's what this last week was all about, that's why Mark - Mark's gospel is the gospel of the cross - he uses this disproportionate amount of his gospel, in comparison to the life of the Lord Jesus, to describe His walk to Calvary, the last week of His life - why? Because this was the work the Servant of Jehovah had come into the world to do, this was the reason He came to this earth - and, praise God, we can triumphantly proclaim tonight: He finished the work that God gave Him to do! Can I ask you tonight, believer: will you be able to say that at the end of your days? Whether you're like David's friend, who is 96, or whether you go early in life, will you be able to say: 'I finished the work that God gave me to do on this earth'? There's not many people can say that, primarily because some of them don't even know, even believers, what the work is that God has them here for - do you? Well, find it out, and do it with all your might - that you can say: 'I have finished the work'.

Cecil Rhodes devoted his life to the British expansion in South Africa, and he also made his fortune out of diamonds. He was not yet 50 years of age when he died, and his last words were these: 'So little done, so much to do'. So little done, so much to do - will you say that? Will I? Isn't it wonderful that Jesus cried: 'Tetelestai! It is finished! I have finished the work that You give me to do!'.
So we're going to see this finished work tonight. Having been betrayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, He is taken - we saw this morning - to face the Sanhedrin in trial. Then He moves from three trials, really, before the Jewish religious bodies, on to the Roman Imperial authorities. He faces Pilate, and then Pilate sends Him to Herod Antipas, and then Herod Antipas sends Him back to Pilate again, and Pilate sentences Him to crucifixion. We see Him in verse 20, we read it this morning, 'And they led Him out to crucify Him'. Now, traditionally, the victims of crucifixion had to bear the cross-bar of the cross. We have often seen the films and the portraits of Christ with the cross over His shoulder, but that may not be accurate. What they did was they put the cross-bar, that great beam of wood which was about 75-125 pounds, they strapped it and tied it with ropes to the arms of the victim. The upright of the cross, and all the uprights of crucifixion, were permanently fixed in the ground in visible places around the outside of the city walls of Jerusalem. Now this is a remarkable thought: it must have been the case, it just must have been, that many, many times Jesus passed those upright crosses - knowing in His heart that one day He would hang there.

In verses 20 and 21 we see that Jesus must have been very weak. This morning we saw Him being scourged, and the purpose of scourging was to weaken the victim in order that they would not last too long on the cross. However, the Romans wanted to keep the victim alive long enough for it to be a good advertisement for Roman justice. Any would-be rebels, as they walked by a cross and saw a man hanging on it, dying his last, what a warning not to transgress the Imperial laws! Now, for that reason, though Jesus must have been very weak, they implored Simon of Cyrene to take His cross. Cyrene was a Greek colony in the north of Africa. Some surmise that Simon may have been black, he might have been, he may have also been a Hellenistic Jew, he may have been Greek - certainly he was more than likely a Jew, being in Jerusalem at Passover. More than likely, coming from Cyrene in North Africa, he wouldn't have known who Jesus was - and all of a sudden he is accosted by a Roman soldier, and made to carry the cross-beam of this crucifix.

Now, I imagine Simon initially would have resisted and resented this humiliation. Yet I believe that in later life, I don't know how long, this would become one of the most precious moments for Simon of Cyrene in the whole of his life, when he eventually learned the significance of the cross of Jesus and the good news of the gospel story. Now, you say: 'You're reading a lot into Simon of Cyrene' - well, I'm not, look at verse 21: 'Then they compelled a certain man, Simon a Cyrenian, the father of Alexander and Rufus, as he was coming out of the country and passing by, to bear His cross'. The Holy Spirit does not put superfluous information into the word of God, He puts things in there for our attention. Why on earth would we be interested that this stranger to us, up until now, Simon of Cyrene, is the father of Alexander and Rufus - and who are they? Well, they certainly must have been known to the early church in Rome, to whom Mark was writing this gospel. In all likelihood, when you turn - you don't need to do it tonight - to Romans, the Epistle to the Roman Church, chapter 16 and verse 13, we read of a Rufus there - and more than likely this is the same Rufus. So it seems that initially here Simon the Cyrenian was compelled to take the cross of Jesus, but later in his life he chose - he chose - to take up the cross and follow Christ.

Probably his sons followed him in that direction, and they may well have become leaders in the early church of Rome - but it seems obvious that Simon became a well-known Christian. Maybe you're here tonight and the cross of Jesus means nothing to you. Maybe it is a source of humiliation to you, you resist it and you resent it - and preaching that you're hearing tonight even grates against your grain. But can I say to you tonight: if you could encounter the real Jesus Christ, and you could really understand in your mind and heart the wonderful good news of what He accomplished for us on that centre tree, your life would be changed
just like Simon's - transformed, revolutionised, and even your family would be turned upside down for Christ!

Well, while Simon Peter - we saw this this morning - who boasted that he would even go to his death following Jesus, while he had forsaken Him and was warming himself by the fires of the world with Christ-beaters, Simon of Cyrene, a stranger to Jesus who didn't even know Him, carried His cross. That must have been a rebuke to Peter, do you not think? But you know, Simon carrying the cross speaks to all of us of all of us. You see, Simon, really, is a representation of everyone. What I mean by that is simply that we are all guilty. Jesus was not guilty. He did no sin, He knew no sin, He was separate from sinners, He had no sin - but it's almost, as Jesus walks the Via Dolorosa, that we get a flash of reality here and the Holy Spirit breaks in and shows us: 'Look for a moment, this is the way it ought to have been, a sinner carrying the cross - not the spotless Saviour carrying the cross'. Let's be honest: all of us should have been carrying that cross.

In verse 22 we read: 'And they brought Him to the place Golgotha'. Now please note the difference, look at verse 20, it says first of all: 'They put His own clothes on Him', after scourging Him, 'and they led Him out to crucify Him' - they led Him out, He walked out of the Praetorium Himself. But now in verse 22: 'They brought Him'. It appears now that He can hardly walk, and they have to bear Him to Golgotha, the Place of a Skull. 'Golgotha' is an Aramaic word meaning 'Skull', the Latin name for this place is 'Calvary', and perhaps it was called 'The Place of a Skull' because of executions - some secular historians tell us that it was a place littered with the skulls of men. Some people believe it was called 'The Place of a Skull' because of the shape of the hill, and for that reason some think that Gordon's Calvary is the true Calvary - and there's a great debate about where that place actually is. But wherever the spot is, one thing is absolutely sure: it was a place outside the city walls, which spoke of a place of rejection. Hebrews testifies to this: 'Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered outside the gate. Therefore let us go forth to Him, outside the camp, bearing His reproach'.

Wherever the place was, Golgotha, there they took Him and they crucified Him. Verse 23 says: 'Then they gave Him wine mingled with myrrh to drink, but He did not take it'. Now tradition tells us that some respected women of Jerusalem provided a narcotic drink for people who were condemned to death by crucifixion. It was a sort of charitable, benevolent act. This was a drug to dull the pain, the excruciating pain of crucifixion. Now we have a precedent to this, at least in principle, in the book of Proverbs. We read there, Proverbs 31:6-7: 'Give strong drink to him who is perishing, and wine to those who are bitter of heart. Let him drink and forget his poverty, and remember his misery no more'. So this was given to the victim of crucifixion for anaesthetic purposes, but Jesus refused - look at the verse - He did not drink it. He refused a pain-dulling anaesthetic. Why? Now, please, this is remarkable, let it sink in: our Lord was determined, absolutely determined, to bear our sin in full consciousness. His faculties, hanging on that cross, must be unclouded. Someone put it like this: 'He refused the cup of sympathy, that He might drink the cup of iniquity'. He had to know everything that it was to bear our sins in His own body on the tree. That should mean something. It should mean everything.

When you think about it, and you understand what happened when He rose again and He ascended to heaven forty days later, and the book of Hebrews tells us all about His High Priestly ministry, that He has been made a perfect and merciful High Priest who is touched with the feelings of our infirmities because He was tested in all points as we are, apart from sin - how could He be a perfect, merciful High Priest if He shirked the sufferings of Calvary by
In verse 24 we read that: 'They divided His garments', in fulfilment of Psalm 22 and verse 18, 'casting lots for them to determine what every man should take' - and He was naked. Perhaps, being sensitive to Jewish sensibilities, they allowed Him a loincloth, we don't know - but imagine, the One who clothed the universe stripped bare and hanging on a cross. In verse 25 they said it was the third hour when they crucified Him. What does it mean to be crucified? Well, this was a method of execution that wasn't invented by the Romans, but it was popularised by them as a method of putting criminals to death. There was the scourging - Isaiah says His back was like a ploughed field. There were the nails, square, rusty Roman nails hammered through, most likely, the wrists - we read in Psalm 22: 'They pierced my hands and my feet'. Then, as those nails went in, the nerves were severed and there was a searing pain that went throughout the whole body. As the victim hung on the cross, bones were disjointed. The victim could die of various effects of crucifixion: massive blood loss, acute shock, dehydration in the Mediterranean sun, and even suffocation as they have to keep heaving themselves, pushing themselves against the nails in their feet, to get a breath. All of those could cause death. What a death crucifixion was. We get our English word 'excruciating' from the Roman term 'out of the cross'.

Mark's readers were familiar with crucifixion, that's why he doesn't go into an awful lot of detail here, they would have seen it on a regular basis. But I believe there is another reason why Mark, and indeed all the gospel writers, do not go into too much grotesque deaths in describing this most heinous and horrific of deaths. Simply because the Holy Spirit, God's Spirit who inspired these pages, was not concerned in giving us a blow-by-blow analysis of the death of the Lord Jesus, what He wanted to do was cause us to look beyond the physical and see the spiritual significance of why Jesus died this death. But let me say in passing, understanding a little bit of what crucifixion means, how heinous sin must be in God's eyes to require such a sacrifice of His Son.

In verse 25 we read that it was the third hour, that's nine o'clock our time, and in verse 26 we read that, as was the practice - victims often wore placards around their necks, perhaps indicating the crime for which they were paying - well, Pilate himself, or at least he gave the order for the sign to be written and placed on the cross above Jesus' head: 'THE KING OF THE JEWS'. Now, Mark does not give us the full quotation, we read it from the other Gospels: 'This is Jesus of Nazareth, THE KING OF THE JEWS' - and it was written, we are told, in Hebrew, and in Latin, and in Greek.

Then in verses 27 through to 32 He is ridiculed again, let's read it: 'With Him they also crucified two robbers, one on His right and the other on His left. So the Scripture was fulfilled which says, 'And He was numbered with the transgressors' - a fulfilment of Isaiah 53 and verse 12, associated with criminals in His death. Then we read: 'Those who passed by blasphemed Him, wagging their heads and saying, 'Aha! You who destroy the temple and build it in three days, save Yourself, and come down from the cross!''. Now I want you to notice that term in verse 29, 'those who passed by'. Passers-by in Jerusalem at Passover season were more than likely Jews who had come from all over the empire to worship the Lord at Passover season in the holy city. Here they are in the holy city to slay the lamb, to celebrate God's deliverance, and they are passing by mocking God's Paschal Lamb, the Lamb of God to take away the sin of the world. In verse 29, again they misquote Him saying that He claimed He would destroy the Temple and build it in three days - He didn't, He was talking about His body, and we saw that this morning from John chapter 2 and verse 19. But what is most staggering to me is verse 31: 'Likewise the chief priests also, mocking among
themselves with the scribes, said, 'He saved others; Himself He cannot save. Let the Christ, the King of Israel, descend now from the cross, that we may see and believe'. Even those who were crucified with Him reviled Him.

It says in verse 31 that the chief priests and the scribes, they mocked Him. Now understand the import of this: they were not just satisfied in driving Him to His death through an illegal trial, breaking all their own laws to do it, getting a traitor and an insurrectionist, Barabbas, released in the place of the Prince of Peace - that did not satisfy them. They had to follow Him all the way to Golgotha, how they must have hated Him! Not content just to drive Him to His death, they went out to Golgotha to mock Him! They mocked Him as prophet, verse 29, 'You said You'd destroy the Temple, and in three days You'd raise it again' - they mocked Him as prophet. They mocked Him as Saviour, verse 31; 'He saved others; Himself He cannot save'. They mocked Him as King in verse 32: 'Let the Christ, the King of Israel, descend now from the cross'. But as Christians, we believe that it's precisely because He did not descend from the cross that we have believed in Him, we have trusted Him, we have staked all upon Him because He didn't come down! He could have come down. He could have called 10,000 angels to destroy the world and set Him free, but He didn't come down because He loved us - but He did something far greater than coming down: He died and He rose again!

In one sense, the statement in verse 31 of the chief priests and the scribes was true: 'He saved others; Himself He cannot save'. He couldn't have saved anybody if He had saved Himself. That's not how they meant it, but it's a lovely way for us, who are saved now, because of His death and resurrection, to look upon it. If He had saved Himself, we could never have been saved. We read at the end of verse 32 that even the thieves who were crucified with Him reviled Him. But you know, it's wonderful - and Psalm 76 verse 10 tells us this - that God is able to make even the wrath of men to praise Him! And He did, because you know from the other Gospels, don't you, that one of these thieves who was mocking Him repented and believed, and Jesus turned to Him in His great grace and said: 'Today you will be with Me in Paradise'.

But more than even that, we read in Acts chapter 6 and verse 7, listen to this - the early church, after the ascension of the resurrected Christ and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, we read: 'The word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith'. A great many of the priests, these priests, believed in Jesus! I wonder were any of them those who vocally mocked Him - I don't know, but isn't God's grace great, isn't it? To save a thief who ridiculed the dying Lamb of God, to save religious hypocrites who were party to the crucifixion of His own Son, God is so great in His mercy and His grace, His lovingkindness. There is nothing like the grace of God, it is greater, insurmountably, eternally greater than all our sin - and what an example of this grace these characters are! A thief, and chief priests, mocking Jesus: 'He saved others; Himself He cannot save' - and that means this: you're not too hard for God tonight. Your sin is not too great for Him to forgive. Praise God, Jesus says: 'All manner of sin and blasphemy may be forgiven of men' - all! I love that word 'all'! We know now that the blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanses us from all sin. I say to you tonight - I might never preach to you again, I might never meet you on this earth again - I say to you, whatever your sin is, get it cleansed in the blood of Christ this very evening, for it can cleanse you!

Verse 33: 'When the sixth hour had come', the sixth hour in our time is twelve noon, 'there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour', that's three in the afternoon. A darkness shrouded the whole land, it was just like a shroud for the dying Son of God. Ancient
historians record an eclipse of the sun, several of them do, at this very time - but this was not a mere eclipse, this was a miracle. Here's the reason why we know this: because at Passover there was a full moon, and an eclipse of the sun is impossible when there is a full moon. This was God darkening out the sun, and I'm sure it reminded some of these religious Jews of the first Passover they were celebrating at this Passover season. During the ninth plague there was a three-day darkness that came upon all the land of Egypt - and do you know what followed that three-day darkness? The last plague: the death of the firstborn. God was shrouding the land in darkness, because His Firstborn Son, the Paschal, Passover Lamb of God, was giving up His life for sinners. The earth became black in mourning for her Creator's suffering. In those three hours of darkness, between noon and three in the afternoon, Jesus was bearing the full judgement of God against our sin.

Do you know that that's what the cross is? He was drinking the cup, we saw last Sunday night in Gethsemane what that cup was - it was the wrath of God against our sin, and no mortal mind can understand what happened when He was made sin for us. We read here in verse 34: 'And at the ninth hour', after those three hours of a divine transaction between God and Jesus, 'Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, 'Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" which is translated, 'My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?". Now those words are Aramaic, the spoken language of the Jews during Jesus' day. Now Jesus was quoting from Psalm 22 and verse 1, showing that He was fulfilling this prophetic Psalm in all of its minutiae. You read that Psalm, Psalm 22, the agony of Calvary and even the triumph of it.

We know from the other gospel writers that there were seven cries from the cross in total, but Jesus, we read in Mark, cried this out: 'Why have You forsaken Me?'. He had suffered so much mentally, emotionally, physically, but now what we are touching on in these three hours of darkness makes those other sufferings pale into insignificance: this was the spiritual suffering of Jesus. Now I want to just slow down here for a moment, lest anyone not be aware that we are on the holiest ground of all here when we witness Christ crying: 'Why have You forsaken Me?' - 'tis mystery all. I don't believe that you can fully understand this cry, I certainly can't. I have to say I have heard some disturbing and inadequate explanations of what went on when Jesus was forsaken. I'll just warn you, and I warn myself in saying this: we do well to say what Scripture says and say nothing more and nothing less. Some of the greatest names that have ever been have been completely bamboozled with this statement. Luther, who was no mean intellect, said: 'God forsaking God, who can understand it?'

It doesn't require our speculation, what it requires is our wonder and our worship. What we do know is that for our sakes, Christ in some way was forsaken of God that we might never be forsaken of God. That, surely, is enough: that during those three hours He was bearing our sin. We read it last week in 2 Corinthians 5:21: He was being made sin for us, He was being treated as if He were the sinner. Galatians chapter 3:13: He was being made a curse for us, because of the broken law we incurred a curse, but He was taking our place and taking the curse for us. It was in those senses that He was forsaken of God in that - being made sin, being cursed - in that He was being forsaken of God by bearing God's wrath. Isaiah prophesied it hundreds of years before the event: 'He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; The punishment for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way; but the LORD', Jehovah, 'laid on Him the iniquity of us all. Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise Him; He has put Him to grief. When You made His soul an offering for sin' - there it is! He's the sin offering, He's exhausting and enduring the wrath of the eternal God in our place. He's assuming the place of the sin bearer before the Holy Judge of heaven.
Maybe you're not understanding what this means, but let me explain it this way, and surely this should make sense. Stay with me now: whatever it means for every soul that has ever lived to suffer an eternal hell of God's wrath, that was compressed into three hours of darkness at Golgotha and laid upon Jesus. He was paying the penalty for identifying with you and identifying with me. That's why He was baptised, you know, not because He had any sin, but He wanted to identify with our sin - and He had a baptism at the cross in the wrath of God that He had to be baptised with, and that's why He went to Calvary.

Yet again, as He cries 'Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?', they misunderstand Him as crying out for Elijah. Then in verse 37 we read: 'Jesus cried out with a loud voice, and breathed His last'. Can I say to you: Jesus was not murdered. Well, on a human level murder was involved, but Jesus was not killed - oh yes, they put Him to death, the Bible even describes men as having slew Him - but what you've got to see is past all the physical realm of crucifixion to understand that Jesus was the willing Lamb of God, that's why He come into the world. He went there Himself. We read a sign of this in verse 37: 'He cried out with a loud voice, and breathed His last'. Luke put it like this in Luke 23: 'When Jesus had cried out with a loud voice, He said, 'Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit'. Having said this, He breathed His last'. He committed His Spirit to God first, and then He breathed His last. John, in John 19:30, put it like this: 'When Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, 'It is finished!'. And bowing His head, He gave up His spirit'. He cried out with a loud voice: 'Tetelestai! It is finished!'

But note: when any of us die, we will die and then we will bow our head - isn't that right? We will die, the life will go from us, and then our head will fall - but He bowed his head, in absolute control, and gave up the ghost. There was no involuntary collapse here, do you understand? We've seen this in the whole last week of the life of the Lord: He is orchestrating it, He is moving, God is in this, for God is in Christ reconciling the world to Himself! God is doing all this, it's for God to be reconciled to us - and Calvary, though it is for us, it is primarily for God so that He can turn round to sinners with open arms and say: 'Be reconciled to Me, for I am I reconciled to you!'. Oh, it's wonderful!

He had done what He came to do, and I love this bit: when He cried, 'Finished!', He did not hang on on the cross needlessly. It was time to go! He did what He came to do. Augustine said: 'He give up His life because He willed it, when He willed it, and as He willed it'. Jesus said: 'No man takes My life from Me, but I lay it down of Myself, and I take it again'. Now two remarkable things happened when He died. We read in Matthew 27 that there was a great earthquake, Mark doesn't record that, but he does record in verse 38: 'The veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom'. Now that's significant, it wasn't torn from the bottom to the top - this wasn't man's doing - it was from the top to the bottom. This was a curtain that ordinary men couldn't have torn, it was so strong - but God tore it, and showed it was Him by tearing it from the top right to the bottom, to show that there is now a new and living way via the blood of Jesus into the Holiest Place of All, where we can have intimate fellowship face-to-face with the living God through the living Christ because of Calvary. There was a new era of nearness to God that had never ever been, and will never be surpassed. If you want to read more about that, read Hebrews 10.

Then in verse 39, a wonderful testimony - and wouldn't this have meant so much to Romans reading this epistle? Incidentally, if you look at centurions in the word of God they are often, if not always, seen in a positive light - noble men. Verse 39: 'When the centurion, who stood opposite Him, saw that He cried out like this and breathed His last, he said, 'Truly this Man was the Son of God!' - that would have put him against the Romans, and it would have put
him against the Jews, but this man who had seen perhaps hundreds and even thousands of men die of crucifixion saw that this Man was different. This Man was unique, this Man was the Son of the Living God! Do you see Him as different tonight? Oh, I hope you do.

Verses 40 and 41, women be encouraged tonight for the women often outshine the men: 'There were also women looking on from afar, among whom were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the Less and of Joses, and Salome, who also followed Him and ministered to Him when He was in Galilee, and many other women who came up with Him to Jerusalem'. When the men were scared for their safety - where were they? Apart from John? They had all disappeared in fear! - the women risked all they had, even their lives, in devotion to Christ. You know it's the same today that's why, I still believe, today that most missionaries are women - and by the way, do you see going around meetings in the last couple of years? I find that the people with the most inquisitive spiritual questions - and, I have to say, spiritual thirst - are women, not the men but the women. It's lovely to think that women were the last at the cross and the first at the tomb.

In verses 42 to 47 we read of the burial of Jesus. Now we'll not go into this in detail, but let me say this: if the Spirit of God had not led Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea to do this with Jesus' body, to take it from Pilate and to bury it in the hewn tomb - probably Joseph's own tomb, for it seemed to be the tomb of a rich man - what they used to do with bodies of criminals, having been executed, is they would have dumped them on rubbish tips. God wouldn't have that, because God would not let His Holy Son see corruption.

Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, we don't read an awful lot about them in the scriptures. They are often called 'secret disciples' - I don't know whether it's a correct and accurate description of them or not, but there were many things that these two men did not do for the Lord Jesus Christ, but be encouraged: they served the Lord here in a way that no one else did. Isn't that lovely? You may not be able to do everything that everyone else does for the Lord, but they were able to do something that no one else did or could do.

But we cannot end there, can we? It's Friday, but Sunday is coming! Chapter 16, let's just read verses please, verse 1: "Now when the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, that they might come and anoint Him. Very early in the morning, on the first day of the week, they came to the tomb when the sun had risen. And they said among themselves, 'Who will roll away the stone from the door of the tomb for us?'. But when they looked up, they saw that the stone had been rolled away; for it was very large. And entering the tomb, they saw a young man clothed in a long white robe sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, 'Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He is risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid Him. But go, tell His disciples" - and I love this - "and Peter" - problematic Peter, the Lord wanted to single him out, that He wanted Peter to know that He was risen. Tell the disciples and Peter, and here's what He told them and it wouldn't sink in - you remember a couple of Sundays ago we were studying it: "That He is going before you into Galilee; there you will see Him, as He said to you" - they had forgot about it! "So they went out quickly and fled from the tomb, for they trembled and were amazed. And they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid".

Do you know something? A dead Saviour can't save anyone - but He lives! He is alive now in the power of an endless life. The resurrection of Jesus is as much a part of the Gospel as the cross. If we didn't have the resurrection the cross would be worthless - but both are the historical basis of our Christian message. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15: 'I delivered to you first
of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures'. The resurrection proves Christ is who He claimed to be - Romans 1 and verse 4: 'God declared Jesus to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead'. The resurrection was God's full stop, God's period, to the cross! That's why we see in the Acts of the Apostles that, as the early church went out to preach, they give primary place to the preaching of the resurrection: He's alive!

I hope you have seen Him, have you? If you haven't seen Him, if you haven't met Him in a fresh way in these meetings - do you know what? I've failed and wasted my time - now I know only God can truly make you see Him, only God can. You know, all this week I couldn't get a hymn out of my mind. I know I've shared several old hymns with you lately, but here's another one, and it's beautiful. It was written by a German man, Paul Gerhardt, and he translated it from someone else - we don't know who it was. It encapsulates everything that Christ has done for us, and everything He should mean to us. Listen carefully, even close your eyes please, there's only three verses and with this I close. Listen now, and with your mind's eye try to view Golgotha:

'O sacred Head, now wounded, with grief and shame weighed down, 
Now scornfully surrounded with thorns, Thine only crown;
How pale Thou art with anguish, with sore abuse and scorn!
How doth Thy visage languish which once was bright as morn!

What Thou, my Lord, hast suffered, was all for sinners' gain;
Mine, mine was the transgression, but Thine the deadly pain.
Lo, here I fall, my Saviour! 'Tis I deserve Thy place;
Look on me with Thy favour, vouchsafe to me Thy grace.

What language shall I borrow to thank Thee, dearest friend,
For this Thy dying sorrow, Thy pity without end?
O make me Thine forever, and should I fainting be,
Lord, let me never, never outlive my love for Thee'.

Let us pray. If you have never trusted Christ, it's time you did tonight. If you're far away from Him, it's time to get right close up to Him. Peter is an encouragement to you, and the resurrected Christ speaks to you and says: 'Tell' - put your name there - 'Tell... I'm risen, and if they meet Me at Galilee' - in other words, if they meet Me after their failure - 'I'll meet them' - but you've got to meet Him. I think you've met Him tonight. Deal with Him.

Father, Lord Jesus, what language shall I borrow to thank Thee, dearest Friend, for this Thy dying sorrow, Thy pity without end? Lord, we have a debt that we're not expected to pay back, except in thanks, in wonder and worship, in gratitude, in adoration and praise for what You have done. All You want us to do is accept it, and lavish in it, and enjoy it, and share it with others, and live it out. Oh God, it seems at times we can't even do that! We've been given the most unspeakable, immeasurable gift, and we thank You, Lord Jesus - Lord Jesus, I thank You for dying for me! I thank You for rising for me, and living for me, and ascending for me, and sending the Holy Spirit for me, and one day You're going to come for me! We can all say that: we thank You that we can make it personal, and we can say 'Twas for me, yes all for me'. Lord, if anybody here tonight can't say 'It was for me', may this be the evening, may this be the moment. Lord, if there are Your children here tonight who have lost the personableness of it, the intimacy of it all - may seeing the Lamb freshly slain tonight and
risen, now exalted and seated at Your right hand, Father, given a place that is higher than any other place in heaven; may they bow the knee tonight and say, like the doubter: 'My Lord and my God!'. Lord, we thank You for dwelling with us these days, and we thank You for drawing near again tonight. May the fragrance of Your sweet presence not leave us. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Transcribed by Andrew Watkins, Preach The Word – February 2011
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Good morning to you all. Turn with me to Mark's gospel, please, chapter 16 verse 1. Now, I want you to note something before we start reading: each gospel writer has a particular emphasis - you know how the life and ministry of our Lord, well, it was one life and it was one ministry - but it's a bit like, if you were going home and, God forbid, you came across a car accident. Maybe there were a couple of cars and a few witnesses standing about the Main Street - well, if a police constable was to come along and question them, he would probably get different angles of the incident that took place. Well, in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, you have different aspects of the life and ministry of the Lord, but it's not just men's take on it - it's the Holy Spirit's inspired commentary on the life and ministry of our Lord. So what you're getting is different aspects of the ministry and life of Jesus that the Holy Spirit wants to shine light on. Now, as we read Mark 16 we have an account of the resurrection in the Gospels - but as we read Mark 16 now, I want you to note every time that 'fear', or 'affrighted', or 'afraid' is mentioned in relation to the disciples. OK? So keep that at the forefront of your mind as we read it together, for that's the emphasis, I believe, of Mark as he records this incident.

Verse 1: "And when the sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, had bought sweet spices, that they might come and anoint him. And very early in the morning the first day of the week, they came unto the sepulchre at the rising of the sun. And they said among themselves, Who shall roll us away the stone from the door of the sepulchre? And when they looked, they saw that the stone was rolled away: for it was very great. And entering into the sepulchre, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, clothed in a long white garment; and they were affrighted" or 'afraid'. "And he saith unto them, Be not afraid: Ye seek Jesus of Nazareth, which was crucified: he is risen; he is not here: behold the place where they laid him. But go your way, tell his disciples and Peter that he goeth before you into Galilee: there shall ye see him, as he said unto you. And they went out quickly, and fled from the sepulchre; for they trembled and were amazed: neither said they any thing to any man; for they were afraid. Now when Jesus was risen early the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had cast seven devils. And she went and told them that had been with him, as they mourned and wept. And they, when they had heard that he was alive, and had been seen of her, believed not. After that he appeared in another form unto two of them, as they walked, and went into the country. And they went and told it unto the residue: neither believed they them. Afterward he appeared unto the eleven as they sat at meat, and upbraided them with their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they believed not them which had seen him after he was risen. And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned. And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover. So then after the Lord had spoken unto them, he was received up into heaven, and sat on the right hand of God. And they went forth, and preached every where, the Lord working with them, and confirming the word with signs following. Amen".
Let us pray: Risen Emmanuel, by the Holy Spirit whom You sent, having ascended unto Your Father's right hand, risen and glorified, we pray that by that Spirit, Risen Lord Jesus, that You will presence Yourself among us - God with us. As in Your risen power You came into that Upper Room where the disciples were so fearful, and You pronounced to them: 'Peace be unto you' - may You do the same to troubled hearts this morning. Indeed, Lord Jesus, may You breathe upon us that we might receive the Holy Spirit, for it is in Christ's name we pray, Amen.

Ann Landers was an agony aunt for a tabloid newspaper, and in the column that she wrote regularly she testified that she received each month about 10,000 letters from people who had particular problems and were looking to her for the solution. Asked on one occasion what subject predominated those letters she, without any hesitation, answered, without a second thought: 'Fear'. She went on to explain that in almost every letter she received the root problem was the problem of fear. Now, I can't verify what I'm about to say, but it has been estimated that upwards of 80% of medical cases that come into doctors' surgeries have their origination, their genesis, with fear. Now, what the people are suffering may be symptoms that are actual, not psychosomatic, there are real problems, real diseases, real ailments - but it is believed by many that anxiety and fear can be the source, the embryo of the problem in the beginning.

I wonder does that surprise you? It ought not to surprise you when you consider how, every week, we are party to a new revelation of a health scare, or a pollution scare, or a climate scare, or a security scare, or a food scare. I'm not against knowledge, I'm all for knowledge, but one of the drawbacks of the knowledge that we have - the increased knowledge - is that it has made us more aware of potential threats, and many have become preoccupied with those threats. We have now a society, generally speaking, that is obsessed by fears - that's why scaremongering sells newspapers. The result of a 24/7 diet of fear is a planet filled with hypochondriacs and the paranoid. We have, today, a population, particularly in the Western world, that is dominated by fear and its consequences.

Many people have become like Louis XV, the King of France, who was so terrified of death that he forbade the very mention of the subject in his presence, and in fact he attempted to remove from his environment every reminder of death. So he removed all the graves, the memorials and the cenotaphs that were around his immediate presence. Many live like Joseph Stalin, the great dictator of Russia, who was so afraid of assassination that he changed his bedroom every night, and he moved around a total of eight. Now, many people in our world are living like that, they are on the run because of fear - and, it has to be said, many Christians are paralysed by the same problem. Our Lord Jesus Christ, before He left this world He predicted and prophesied that in the end times men's hearts and women's hearts would fail them for fear. Their very lives would fail them because of the fear that gripped them.

Now, I want you to understand the fear that gripped the hearts of the disciples of the Lord Jesus around the Easter weekend. I want you to come with me now to picture the scene on that first Good Friday, Saturday, and first day of the week, the Lord's Day - and we'll not get into the intricate details of how many days there were from Good Friday to the first day of the week, that's a big debate and I'm not getting into it today, it's not important. Picture the scene, and ask yourselves how the disciples felt. Take Friday, on Friday the disciples find themselves in Gethsemane. The Lord Jesus has resorted there to pray, and He has asked the disciples to watch with Him just one hour - and, of course, you know they kept falling asleep.
Then into that Garden that evening came the soldiers, and along with them was Judas the betrayer, and he would go and kiss the cheek of the Lord Jesus Christ, and then the Lord Jesus would be led away to trial - and of course Peter tried to accost those who were taking Him away, and the Lord Jesus performed what is arguably His last miracle before His death. From that moment the truth of the ancient prophet was fulfilled, that being: when the Shepherd would be smitten, the sheep would scatter. The Lord Jesus is taken from Gethsemane, and the disciples flee.

Peter is the epitome of betrayal, of course. The next time we find him he's warming himself by the world's fire, and he is asked was he not one of the number that followed the Lord Jesus - and even a little girl frightens the living daylights out of him, and those who recognised his Galilean speech. He thought his cover was blown, and he resorts to the point of denying the Lord Jesus with oaths and curses - and your imagination can fill in the gaps there. But imagine that: a man who said that he would die for the Lord Jesus not many hours before that! But we're so hard on Peter, aren't we? The rest of the disciples were not much better - they all fled, the Bible says, every single one of them fled. Imagine how the disciples felt on Friday.

But come with me to Saturday, because here, I believe, is an oft neglected day. We concentrate on Good Friday and Easter Sunday, but how do you think the disciples felt on Saturday? If they had any sleep because of the guilt and the nightmare of what had happened the evening before, if they did wake in the morning, imagine what the first thoughts were in their minds - the awful realisation: the Lord is dead! And He was dead! What was coursing through their minds? Now, I imagine that they were thinking about His life, and how could they not have thought about the miracles that He performed? How could they not have remembered the parables that He spake, and the promises that He made to them - 'Going away to prepare place, and He would come again to receive them unto Himself'? But I think the predominant thought that was in their mind, with the backdrop of the wonderful life and ministry of Christ, was this: 'He's dead!'.

Now, the irony is that whatever they remembered about the Lord Jesus Christ, His life and His death, the irony is: they had forgotten the most important thing that He ever said! That was: that the Son of Man must die, and three days later must rise again. I wish I had time to show you this, but Mark's gospel is full of that - full of that. I'll give you one example, turn back with me to Mark chapter 8. Mark is the gospel of the cross, it's all leading to Calvary, and many times the Lord was telling them of how this must be, and He must die and rise again three days later, and the disciples just never seemed to get it. Here's one such incident in Mark 8 and verse 31: 'And he began to teach them, that the Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected of the elders, and of the chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again'. Now here's an example of how they just couldn't grasp this: 'And he spake that saying openly. And Peter took him, and began to rebuke him'. Peter was more or less saying: 'Lord, stop talking like that! That is nonsense! We cannot conceive that You should die!'. He didn't even, I think, conceive of the idea of resurrection - this idea of Christ dying was just anathema to Peter and the rest of the disciples. These disciples had heard the words of the Lord Jesus about death and resurrection and, better than that, on three occasions they had seen a demonstration of how Jesus Christ had power over death. One of them was Lazarus, they saw this man after Jesus cried: 'Lazarus, come forth!', they saw him come forth from the grave after four days, at which point decomposition would have set in - they saw it with their very eyes. They saw Jesus sitting down and eating with this man Lazarus, and yet they had forgotten.
Isn't it amazing? I'll tell you something more amazing than that: the supreme irony is that the
friends of Jesus had forgotten, but His enemies remembered. Matthew 27, turn with me
please, verse 62: 'Now the next day, that followed the day of the preparation, the chief
priests and Pharisees came together unto Pilate, Saying, Sir, we remember that that deceiver
said, while he was yet alive, After three days I will rise again. Command therefore that the
sepulchre be made sure until the third day, lest his disciples come by night, and steal him
away, and say unto the people, He is risen from the dead: so the last error shall be worse
than the first'. They believed, at least, what He said, in the sense that they could remember
Him saying it - but what about the friends of the Lord Jesus? Now, I want you to come with
me to several passages in the Gospels, first of all the one where we read from, Mark chapter
16. Now, be nimble with your fingers, because we want to see this in the word of God - Mark
chapter 16. We read these stories, and we're so familiar that we don't pick up the data that is
there - in verse 1 and verse 2, look at what is happening: 'The sabbath was past, Mary
Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, had bought sweet spices, that they
might come and anoint him'. They were going to the tomb to anoint what? A dead body. What
day is it? Verse 2: 'Very early in the morning the first day of the week, they came unto the
sepulchre at the rising of the sun'. On the third day, the Lord's Day, the two Marys bring
spices to anoint a dead body - they're not expecting a resurrection, are they?

Now, come with me to John chapter 20, for here we see Mary Magdalene and her reaction -
John chapter 20 verse 12, she's outside the sepulchre weeping, and she looks down into the
sepulchre and sees two angels, verse 12: 'in white sitting, the one at the head, and the other
at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain. And they say', the angels say, 'unto her,
Woman, why weepest thou? She saith unto them, Because they have taken away my Lord', in
other words, they have taken away the body, the corpse of my Lord, 'and I know not where
they have laid him'. She was more zealous in seeking a dead Christ than a living one! She
hadn't remembered - that's Mary Magdalene. Now look back please, same chapter verse 2,
and here we see Peter and John, verse 2: 'Then she', that is Mary Magdalene, 'cometh to
Simon Peter, and to the other disciple, whom Jesus loved, and saith unto them, They have
taken away the Lord out of the sepulchre, and we know not where they have laid him'. So she
has told the other disciples about this, and in verse 9 we see their reaction: 'as yet they knew
not', or they were not in the good of, 'the scripture, that he must rise again from the dead'.
Luke 24 gives us more of a commentary on this regarding Peter: 'Then arose Peter, and ran
unto the sepulchre; and stooping down, he beheld the linen clothes laid by themselves, and
departed' - now, listen to this - Peter departed, 'wondering in himself at that which was come
to pass'. Do you see him? He looks into an empty tomb, sees the grave clothes, and Peter
walks away - the man who heard about all this, was taught about it for three years - and he's
saying: 'I wonder what has happened?'.

Now, Luke 24, turn with me to Luke 24, for here we have the rest of the apostles. We've seen
Mary Magdalene, the two Marys, Peter and John, and now in Luke 24 we see the rest of the
apostles - verse 9: 'And they returned from the sepulchre, and told all these things unto the
eleven', this is the women told it to the eleven, 'and to all the rest. It was Mary Magdalene,
and Joanna, and Mary the mother of James, and other women that were with them, which
told these things unto the apostles. And their words seemed to them as idle tales, and they
believed them not'. What a bunch! What a bunch!

Now, come down the chapter again please to verses 21 and 22 - we see a dejected couple,
maybe a husband and wife, we're not sure. They are on the Road to Emmaus, and the Lord
appears to them in a form that they don't recognise Him. They engage in a conversation with
Him, verse 21, and they say: 'But we trusted that it had been he which should have redeemed
Israel: and beside all this, to day is the third day since these things were done. Yea, and certain women also of our company made us astonished, which were early at the sepulchre' - do you see the import of what they're saying? 'We thought that the third day all this would turn out for the best, and then these women came and told us that there was no body and they astonished us' - but these two were not expecting a resurrection! They didn't know what was wrong, they knew something was wrong but they didn't understand.

Of course, the epitome of unbelief is 'Doubting Thomas' - turn with me to John 20 please, John 20 and verse 25. Now the other disciples have got there, eventually, and they're starting to believe this. In verse 25: 'The other disciples therefore said unto him, We have seen the Lord. But he said unto them, Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe' - I will not believe! Now come back with me to Mark 16 - I would love you to go home and read that chapter again and note, as I've said, the times that 'fear', and 'affrighted', and 'unbelief' are mentioned, or related words. It was on Saturday, I believe, that the realisation dawned on them: 'Our Master is dead forever! Our dream is over!'. The disciples went through the greatest despair and, yes, we could say depression, of their earthly existence - and perhaps of anyone else's for that matter. There was not a glimmer of hope. They had entered into a tunnel with no light at the end of it. Saturday, the day of desolation, the day of gloom, the day of shattered dreams. For Mary, a sword had pierced her soul; John, he was heartbroken; Peter was paralysed by guilt; Magdalene had lost her loved One in despair - Saturday.

Do you ever think about Saturday? I'm sure you've heard the rhyme: 'Monday's child is fair of face, Tuesday's child is full of grace, Wednesday's child is full of woe, Thursday's child has far to go'. Someone has called the disciples 'Saturday's children' - now, I was born on a Saturday, and I hope that doesn't say too much about me - but Saturday's children were full of despair, Saturday's children were full of tragedy, Saturday's children were full of fear. Now let me ask you the question here today on this Easter Sunday morning: have you ever experienced despair? Have you ever experienced dejection? Have you ever been downcast? If you haven't, you will! Have you ever experienced shattered dreams? Have you ever experienced depression? I don't know why you've experienced it, you certainly haven't experienced what the disciples experienced, but maybe you have experienced this through death, through a broken relationship, through a failed business, through some family disaster, through a disease or an illness - I don't know - but so many in our world today are Saturday's children. Many are living in despair, many more are living in the darkness of Saturday than, someone said, ever lived in the drama of Friday or the victory of Sunday.

Our generation is full of Saturday's children! Cities are teeming with pools of human misery. People are living out their lives, one has said, as a ritual dance to death with hope as an allusion. Our world is full of people who are in the grip of despair. Everywhere hopelessness and meaninglessness crush people on every side. Are you one of Saturday's children? Now, if you are, I have good news for you today, and it's found in Romans chapter 1. Turn with me to Romans chapter 1 - and I love this - Romans chapter 1 verse 1: 'Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated unto the gospel of God, (Which he had promised afore by his prophets in the holy scriptures,) Concerning his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, which was made of the seed of David according to the flesh; And declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead'. Now, look at verse 4 please: He is 'declared to be the Son of God with power'. Now, do you see that word 'declared'? That is a verb in the Greek language - the New Testament, of course, originally written in Greek - it's a verb that has a root 'horizo' - so that's what it simply means:
'By the resurrection of the dead, the boundaries were determined that prove that Jesus was the Son of God'. It demonstrated who He was. Now, we derive in English, from this Greek verb 'horizo', the English word 'horizon'.

Now, what is a horizon? Well, it is a boundary, isn't it? It's something that determines an environment, or at least our sight. So this verse 4, it could be perhaps read like this, some could say: 'And He was horizoned to be Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead'. Our horizon is a boundary that says to us: 'Thus far, and no further' - it's as far as you can see, and it's as far as you can go. I'm led to believe that if you're six-foot tall - and I can only dream what that's like! - your horizon will be three miles away. It's as far as you can see, as far as your mind is concerned it's as far as you can go. Now, let me ask you now: what is your horizon? What is that thing, that person, that experience, that tragedy, that memory in your life that says to you: 'Thus far, no further'? You can't get beyond it, it's a boundary, it binds you in, it keeps you in, it inhibits you, it prevents you. Now listen: when you become born again, a child of God, Christ becomes your horizon! He defines your boundaries! Do you know better than that what He does? He pushes all the other horizons out of the way!

What was Christ's horizon? When He was hanging on the cross on Good Friday, it was death, wasn't it? Our sins were upon Him, and He triumphed, and He cried: 'It is finished!'. He bowed the head, and He gave up the ghost - and that's something you'll never do, for what you will do is: you will give up the ghost and bow the head. Your life will be taken from you, and then you'll bow your head - but He was in complete and utter control. He bowed His head, and He gave up the ghost - and He triumphed over sin! But He went into the grave, and as far as everyone was concerned - the devils of hell, the politicians of earth, and even His own disciples - He was dead, gone, and done for...but He rose again! He overcame the boundary of death - do you understand? He pushed that horizon out of the way!

I want you to really get this. The school I went to - I did go to school - the secondary school I went to had a swimming pool. I came from primary school, and I couldn't swim - and they just turfed you in the deep end, and you had to learn to swim. But I remember my goggles (I needed my goggles), so often when you were swimming the goggles came off and they would go down to the bottom of the deep end - it was always the deep end they seemed to drop off your head at. They would go to the bottom of the deep end, and I can remember distinctly having to go and get them. You've maybe done this, you dive down, you go deeper, and deeper, and deeper - down the feet of the depths - and you feel the weight of the water above you, and you feel the pressure even in your ears as they start to pop, and up your nose. You get to the bottom, and I can remember just scooping up the goggles, and then I would arch up - you know what happens, don't you? You arch up, you don't have to make any effort, and then the pressure of the water just pushes you right up, and you burst through the water's surface into the air - that's what happened the Lord Jesus on resurrection morning. Let me explain what I mean - it was a millionfold more: there was a spiritual law of action that came into being, that being that His humiliation at Calvary, His crucifixion, His sacrifice, His death and His burial, that humiliation set in motion His own law of exaltation - so that in a brilliant moment, on Sunday morning, He burst from the grave.

We read in Matthew's gospel: 'Behold, there was a great earthquake: for the angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat upon it. His countenance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow: And the guards shook for fear of him, and were like dead men'. Now think of this: this is the infinite compulsion of the law when Jesus humbled Himself. There He is, facing the ignominy of men, of devils, and the
wrath of God. He's stripped naked, and He's hanging there having been beaten by men and assaulted by hell, and there He is having borne the wrath of God and become the propitiation for our sins, and He was pushed down and down and down and down - and finally, in an explosive moment on Sunday morning, the grave could hold Him no longer! He had been pushed right down, and now the force of His own exaltation pushed Him right out!

'Death could not keep its prey, 
Jesus my Saviour!
He tore the bars away, 
Jesus my Lord!

Up from the grave He arose, 
With a mighty triumph o'er His foes!'.

Are you one of Saturday's children? Well, you need to see this resurrection morn. Look at verse 7 of Mark 16, go back to it please, Mark 16 verse 7, the angels told the women: 'Go your way, tell his disciples and Peter that he goeth before you into Galilee: there shall ye see him, as he said unto you'. I love that: 'Tell the disciples', who? The scaredy-custards, the women had more courage and more belief than the men - and that's often the way. It's not the way it should be, but it's the way it often is. Tell the disciples that had fled! Tell the disciples, and - isn't this wonderful? - and Peter! I love that, and I wasn't going to touch on it this morning, but I love John 14 when it says: 'Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me' - but we often miss at the end of chapter 13, the Lord was telling Peter that he would betray Him, and it's as good as the Lord saying: 'Peter, you're going to betray me, you're going to deny me with oaths and curses, but don't be troubled, don't worry about it!'. He has risen from the grave, and He says: 'Go and tell Peter!'.

Have you let the Lord down here today? You have? He doesn't hold it against you, He says: 'Don't let your heart be troubled, believe in me!'. You see, that's what He wants, He wants faith to believe He's able - boy, is He able! He says: 'Tell the disciples and Peter that I have lifted their horizon!', that's what He's saying. What did the empty tomb say to them all? It said simply this: if our Lord can overcome death and hell by His resurrection, what can we not overcome by that same supernatural resurrection power that is available to us? They were Saturday's children a few minutes before, depressed and despairing, but then they became Sunday's children, and they became the children that the Acts of the Apostles says turned the world upside down for Jesus Christ and His kingdom. Someone put it like this: 'Sunday's children are the arguments the world understands and needs'. What is your day? Saturday, with all its hopelessness and pessimism? Or Sunday, with its bounding life and irrepressible hope? Nothing else could have changed this motley crew of sad, failing, depressed disciples. Nothing could have changed them into the radiant, joyful disciples with flaming courage who went across the globe and died for a risen Christ. Nothing could do it only Sunday morning!

Where are you? Some are still at the cross on Friday night, and you can tell it around the Table - He isn't a risen Saviour, He's still hanging on the cross! Some are still on Saturday, they have never realised the wonderful power of the resurrection of Jesus! Listen: we are the children of the day, we are Sunday's children, and for us the resurrection changes everything, absolutely everything. Let me give you a couple of examples, and I'm almost finished: it changes everything for the Saviour. We read in Romans 1 how this is the mark of His own deity - this is the proof that He was who He said He was, and He did what He said He would come to do. God declared it, He horizoned it by His resurrection from the dead. It's also for the Saviour His springboard to exaltation. The apostle could say in his preaching: 'The God of
your fathers raised up Jesus, whom ye slew and hanged on a tree. Him hath God exalted with his right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour'. Because He is risen, God has exalted Him; He humbled Himself, and now He has been given a name that is above every name. For the Saviour, His resurrection marks the beginning of His headship over the church. Ephesians says God raised Him from the dead: 'and hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church' - He's the head of the church, the only head of the church.

It changed everything for the Saviour, but it changes everything for the sinner. Maybe you're here this morning, and you're not saved - you listen to what Acts chapter 17 says: 'God has appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead'. There is a judgement day coming, and do you know how you can be 110% sure? Because Jesus rose again, and He's the Judge, He's the Judge. It changes everything for sinners, and it changes everything for Satan! It speaks of his doom forever. We read in Hebrews that Jesus, through death, destroyed him who had the power over death - that is the devil. When He rose again, He put death to death forever!

It changes everything for the Saviour, for the sinner, for Satan, and for the saint. It is the guarantee of our justification. Child of God, listen to Romans 4: 'He was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification'. Nobody can point the finger at you, especially the devil, and say that you're a failure, you're a disaster, you've let God down - because you are justified in the eyes of a holy God, not just through the blood of Christ, but through the resurrection of Christ. It changes everything for the believer, because present-day power and strength is available for us. Paul prayed for the Ephesians that they might know 'the exceeding greatness of his power to us-ward who believe, according to the working of his mighty power, Which he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead' - that's available to us! It changes everything for the saint in fruitful labour: 'Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye stedfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord'. Our labour is not in vain for Christ, because He is alive! It would be a waste of time if He was dead!

I heard a man once preaching say: 'If I find out that Jesus never rose from the dead, and Christianity was all a farce, I would live this life all over again because it's the best of lives, and I would live it a thousand times over' - and I thought, 'You're a hypocrite, I wouldn't!'. I wouldn't! Paul says that if Jesus rose not from the dead, our faith is vain, and our preaching is vain - it's a waste of time! Why would you live as a Christian if He wasn't alive? But He is alive, and that's why the apostles could go and die at stakes and at crosses, and be beheaded, and be boiled in oil - because Jesus lives! Because He lives we will rise again, knowing that He is raised up, the Lord Jesus shall raise up also us by His own power, and corruption shall give way to incorruption. We will exchange dishonour for glory; we will exchange weakness for power; we will exchange our natural body for a spiritual body. Listen this morning: are you Saturday's child, or are you living in the shadow of the risen Christ who wants to be your horizon?

Now, listen to what I’m saying - this is not something that He's going to do for you, this is something He has already done for you. He has pushed your horizon, your restriction, your boundary, your confinement - He has already pushed it out of the way, and all He requires of you is that you believe it! Even death - and some folk, even Christian folk, are gripped with the fear of death - I want to finish with this story, listen to it: Dr W.B. Hinson was a preacher, and he was speaking from his pulpit a year after he was diagnosed with a terminal illness.
which would ultimately take him to heaven. He said these words, listen: 'I remember a year ago when a man in this city said, 'You have got to go to your death'". He says: 'I walked out to where I live, 5 miles out of this city, and I looked across at that mountain that I love, and I looked at the river in which I rejoice, and I looked at the stately trees that are always God's poetry to my soul. Then in the evening, I looked up into the great sky where God was lighting His lamps and I said, 'I may not see you many more times but, mountain, I shall be alive when you are gone. River, I shall be alive when you cease running towards the sea. Stars, I shall be alive when you have fallen from your sockets in the great down-pulling of the material universe" - that is what the resurrection means!

At times we only preach half a gospel, but He is risen. If the cross took the power out of sin, the resurrection puts God's power in us. Did you hear that now? If the cross takes the power out of sin, the resurrection puts God's power in us. Paul said: 'That I might know the power of His resurrection'. Listen: if you pitch your tent on Saturday, you'll never know it. If you realise that He has pushed your horizon out of the way, and He is your only boundary, the joy of the Lord will flood your soul.

Let us pray. I think I told this before, while all our heads are bowed, let me tell it again. There was a school in Texas that burned down, and all the children were burned along with it - it was a terrible tragedy in that vicinity, and they swore that that would never happen again. So what they did was, they spent a fortune on a state-of-the-art sprinkler system that would make sure that never took place again. It was the pride of the school, indeed of the village - what would happen was: people would call in to see it, and they would be taken by prefects and teachers around to view this wonderful state-of-the-art sprinkler system. Until one day the janitor of that school tragically discovered that in all the years since it had been fitted, it had never been connected to the water source. They had the equipment, and not the power.

Many believers are like that. I hear preaching constantly: 'You get everything when you're saved' - well, potentially you do, but you've to work out your salvation by fear and trembling, and you've to claim your possessions by faith. One of them that you need to claim is not just victory over sin through the cross, but the power of the resurrection in your life from the empty tomb - have you ever done that?

Father, I pray that people's horizons would be lifted, and Christ will become their horizon to push not only false boundaries away, but that they would see that He is their only boundary, and He is boundless, limitless! There's no telling what He can do in our lives when He becomes our boundary. Lord, bless Your word how You see fit, to the glory of Jesus we pray, Amen.

Transcribed by Andrew Watkins, Preach The Word – April 2010
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